



Draco Veritas

Part Three of the Draco Trilogy

By Cassandra Claire

Draco Veritas Chapter One: Through Silver and Glass

It was December, and it was freezing cold in the Potions dungeon, but Snape didn't care. "Can anyone tell me what this is?" he demanded, holding up a transparent phial of steaming green liquid and surveying the class critically. "Longbottom?"

Neville, who had been trying in vain to warm his blue-tipped fingers over his cauldron, looked horrified. "I don't know, Professor."

"Did you not complete your reading last night, Longbottom? The assignment was ten pages in the Lieber and Stoller book."

"I know, Professor, but my toad, Trevor, went missing, and I--"

"Ten points from Gryffindor!" barked Snape, who was in fine form. He didn't even look cold, Draco mused. Perhaps he'd mixed himself up a Warming Potion before class.

Snape's ink-black eyes darted over the students. "Potter?" he inquired.

Out of the corner of his eye, Draco saw Harry pale and look startled. Next to him, Hermione went red. Every time she knew an answer and Harry didn't, Draco had the feeling that she might actually implode with the effort of trying to will the knowledge in Harry's direction.

It's an Imperceptus Potion, Draco thought lazily at Harry. Makes you invisible. Harry sat up straight. "An Imperceptus Potion," he said. "It makes the drinker invisible." Snape looked disappointed. "And the ingredients?" he snapped. Mugwort, Draco thought. Crushed dragon bone, powdered asp's blood, tansy, peppermint... "Mugwort," said Harry. "Crushed dragon bone, powdered asp's blood, tansy, peppermint..."

And a pair of my very own boxer shorts, the ones with the little Snitches on them, Draco added.

"And a pair of..." Harry began, and choked. His face went red and then white as he succumbed to a prolonged coughing fit. Hermione gazed at him in alarm. Draco looked innocently at his quill, twirling it in his fingers.

"Yes, Potter?" Snape's eyebrows had shot up to his hairline. "A pair of what?"

Harry was still coughing. "Beetles?" he suggested weakly.

Snape looked annoyed. "No, Potter," he said. "The sixth ingredient is not a pair of beetles. However," he added, "five out of six is not disgraceful. I will not take points from Gryffindor." He set the phial down on the desk in front of him with a slight bang. "Now, does anyone wish to volunteer to come up here and be made invisible?" he demanded.

Draco looked over at Harry and grinned.

Never, and even Harry's telepathic voice sounded annoyed, ever, help me again.

Hey, Gryffindor didn't lose any points.

No, but I think I lost ten years off my life. Oh, shut up, Malfoy. Go be invisible or something. Then again, you'd probably drop dead if you had to spend ten minutes without your own reflection.

Draco shrugged modestly, then realized that Hermione was looking from him to Harry and back again. She bit her lip irritably and turned back to her notebook as Ron was called up to the front of the class to be made invisible. Ron looked suspiciously at the foaming green liquid, and drank it with the air of someone about to be murdered.

The sound of rustling paper caught Draco's attention. When he turned sideways he saw that Hermione was holding up a note, folded so that only he could read it. I TOLD YOU NOT TO TALK TO HARRY DURING CLASS!

Draco shrugged apologetically, but Hermione continued to glare at him until Ron distracted the entire class by glowing violently purple for a moment, and vanishing.

"That's the best Weasley's ever looked," said a silky voice at Draco's elbow. It was Blaise Zabini, looking at him from beneath her long dark eyelashes.

"Just what I was going to say," Draco replied quite truthfully.

She laid two fingers on his sleeve and smiled up at him, her beautiful face lighting up. Her eyes were huge and gray-green. "Aren't you clever."

Draco smiled at her and sat back in his chair. He was vaguely conscious, without actually looking at her, that Hermione had shot him a disgusted look. He was used to this.

Ron had popped back into visibility -- "Worse luck," Draco muttered towards Blaise, and she and Pansy Parkinson giggled - and was making his way back to his desk, looking green. Hermione pulled him down into his seat by the sleeve and patted his shoulder.

"And now we have another potion," said Snape. He indicated a stoppered vial of red liquid on his desk. "This one is called Soporosis, and it does what....? Yes, Granger?"

Hermione put her hand down. "If you drink it, it makes you remember your dreams."

Snape did not even bother telling the class that this was correct. "Very well." He cleared his throat. "Draco Malfoy, come up here."

Draco was surprised. The Potions Master rarely called on him for much of anything, preferring to torment the Gryffindors and slower Slytherins. He rose to his feet, however, and made his way up to the front of the room, where he stood looking inquiringly at Snape.

Snape unstopped the vial of scarlet liquid and handed it to Draco. It looked like blood. "This will make me remember my dreams?" Draco asked, looking at Snape suspiciously.

"Just the most recent ones," Snape said. His expression was quite blank. "Go on, then."

Draco gave him one last suspicious look, and drank the potion.

For a moment, nothing happened. Draco looked out at the class, who stared back at him expectantly. Hermione had her head to the side, looking curious, Ron looked as if he were hoping against hope that Draco might explode, and Harry had one eyebrow raised. Blaise and Pansy were staring with parted lips. Neville seemed sunk in gloomy ruminations about his toad. Draco was about to turn to the Potions Master and announce that nothing was happening when he noticed that the back wall of the classroom seemed to be curling in on itself and rushing towards him like a wave. Blackness hit him, and he fell into it as if he were drowning.

The dream rose like a fever, washed over him, blinding him. It carried him forward. Stone walls rose up around him and a floor of marble slid beneath his feet. He was somewhere, and nowhere.

He raised his head and glanced around. It was as if he looked through a pane of black glass. The world before him seemed smoky, distant, touched with darkness, as if its light had been smothered under heavy cloth. He looked around and saw that he was in a cylindrical stone room with narrow ancient windows, as if he stood at the top of a tower. A long oak-plank table ran across one wall. It was lined with bottles and silver phials studded with what looked like costly gems. There were other items scattered there: a key made of bones, a Hand of Glory, a wicked-looking dagger. A tapestry covered most of one wall: it depicted a circle, quartered by a cross, and in each quarter of the cross was a symbol Draco could not decipher. Underneath ran a motto in Latin that Draco couldn't quite decipher, though he thought he recognized the word for "worthy" or "honored."

In the center of the room was a square table, carved out of onyx. At each corner of the table was a golden disk. And next to the table stood two men.

The one on the right was immediately familiar. Tall and pale-haired, with narrow cold gray eyes, dressed in viridian robes, his black-gloved hands clasped across his front. Lucius Malfoy, his father.

The other man was dressed in a black cloak. His hood was up, hiding his face, although in its depths Draco imagined he could see the flicker of two

coal-like eyes. His right hand was bare, and Draco recognized it: the ghastly white skin and red nails. Once that hand had crushed his own until he screamed in agony. When he moved his left hand a dull sequin seemed to glitter there, catching the light, and then another, and another. He was wearing a scaled glove, like lizardskin, and in that hand he held something that wriggled and twisted. A serpent.

"I do miss my Nagini," the Dark Lord said. "There are none more like her."

"No," said Lucius quietly. "Master...the matter I came to speak with you about...it remains unresolved."

The Dark Lord let out a hissing breath. "The boy?"

Lucius nodded. "The boy is unreliable, Master."

"It was your task, Lucius," said the Dark Lord, "to see that he was not."

"We lost ground this summer," said Lucius. "It was unavoidable, considering the recent unpleasantness."

"Then regain that ground," said the Dark Lord tightly. "You have been in contact? Not just to tell him you are alive?"

"Yes. Almost constant contact. He is aware, although, of course, I have not told him everything."

"Do whatever you have to do, Lucius. He is your responsibility." The Dark Lord made a sudden movement, seizing the snake just below its head and squeezing tightly. When he released it, it lay limp, apparently dead. Lucius' expression darkened as Voldemort lifted the limp snake and dropped it into the cauldron. "You know what will happen if you do not succeed with this."

"He is a child, and children are unreliable," said Lucius. "A security risk. I told you that before when I did not want him involved."

There was a cold silence. Lucius paled slightly. At last the Dark Lord spoke. "Do not presume you know what is best, Lucius," he said softly. "I have taught you everything you know. But I have not taught you everything I know."

Lucius licked his dry lips. "Yes, Master. Of course."

There was a flicker of movement and the snake's head appeared at the lip of the cauldron. It was not, apparently, dead after all. Voldemort held out his gloved hand, and the snake crawled onto it, ringing his wrist like a bracelet. "And has Wormtail sent word?"

"He is still gathering the materials, Master," said Lucius, speaking suddenly very quietly, so that Draco had to strain to hear, "He has not yet returned from -"

But it was no use. The words vanished into nothingness, and the vision followed. The room shut like a flower, the cauldron and the jeweled phials and the two standing men whirling away from him on a current of darkness, and Draco started upright, his heart racing and his eyes flying open to fix on -

Snape's face. The Potions Master was staring at him in consternation. "Malfoy! What's the matter with you?"

The room slowly swam into focus. Draco realized that he must have reeled backward into the wall. His shoulder hurt as if he had struck it hard, and his eyes burned. He could see the entire class staring at him in shock. Harry had half-risen to his feet and Hermione and Ron were pulling him back into his chair. Hermione looked stricken with worry.

"Nothing." Draco pushed the professor's hands away. "I'm fine."

"Did something happen?" Snape pitched his voice low, so only Draco could hear it. "Did you see something?"

The serpent, the cauldron, the Dark Lord, the tower.

Draco shook his head. "No. I just got dizzy."

Snape's eyes narrowed. "You saw nothing?"

Too late, Draco realized that he should have made something up. I should have said I dreamed I was a lemon floating in a giant gin and tonic. Anything.

Silently, he shook his head. "No. Nothing."

"Very well." Draco could almost have sworn that Snape looked disappointed. Worried, even. "Go back to your seat, Mister Malfoy."

"Another letter from Monique?" Hermione said in a teasing voice, reaching over the table towards Ron who was looking expectantly up at the black owl perched on his left shoulder. Her name was Nefertiti and she had been a gift from his parents when they had learned that he had been made Head Boy.



(Pigwidgeon had gone to Ginny.) Now she pecked at his ear and dropped a letter into his hands: it was printed on lavish gold-and-white stationery and was heavily scented with jasmine.

"What can I say?" Ron unrolled the paper and examined it with a grin.
"Monique just can't get enough of me."

"Oh, you´re just stringing her along," said Ginny with a smile, reaching past Ron to get at the pumpkin juice. "You´re not serious about her."

"There are some aspects of this relationship I'm very serious about," Ron said gravely.

"And she's got quite a Wonderbra supporting those aspects," said Hermione, with a sideways evil grin.

"I think she´'s just after me for my money anyway," said Ron, who had set himself to the task of turning the unfortunate Monique´'s letter into a paper Firebolt.

Ginny raised an eyebrow. "Does she know there isn´t much?" she inquired. This was true. While the discovery of a cache of medieval magical treasures underneath the Burrow had made the Daily Prophet, the Weasleys had seen no profit from it, since the entire collection had been spirited away by the Auror´'s College for purposes of study and research. Of the whole treasure hoard, the only things they'd managed to keep were the Gryffindor Galleon that Ginny had given Harry for his birthday and a few pewter trinkets. And if they had expected an enormous windfall from Mr. Weasley´'s appointment as Minister of Magic, they were disappointed there as well: few Ministry officials made a great deal of money, and the Minister was no exception, especially when he had seven children. The Weasleys remained what they had been since Fred and George´'s joke shop had succeeded: pleasantly well off, but not by any means rich.

"Did you see this?" Hermione interrupted. Her owl had just delivered that day´'s Daily Prophet, and her head was bent over it, her mouth turned down in concern. "Inquiry into Lucius Malfoy´'s death has been closed," she read out. "The Ministry has ruled the cause to have been suicide."

Ron looked disgusted. "It took the Ministry six months to figure out that he topped himself? Geniuses."

Harry shook his head. "He didn´t kill himself. Sirius said so."

"So he summoned up something nasty," said Ron. "And it ate him. Maybe he did it on purpose. Who knows? Me, I feel sorry for the something nasty. Getting served a Malfoy for lunch would make anyone mad enough to blow things up."

"Ron, be nice," admonished Hermione.

Ron looked staggered. "About Lucius Malfoy?"

"Well, just - think how Draco must feel."

"Riiight," said Ron slowly. "Because he looks so upset."

Against her better judgement, Ginny looked over at the Slytherin table. As always, the action at that table revolved around Draco; he was inevitably its focal point. No longer flanked by Crabbe and Goyle (who had left school after pulling only one O.W.L. each) he was bookended instead by Dex Flint, the Slytherin Keeper, and Malcolm Baddock, a slender, dark-haired boy who had replaced Goyle as a Chaser. He was leaning over Blaise Zabini, his chin on her hair. On a ribbon around her throat glittered an amulet in the shape of a silver snake, a gift from Draco. Her brilliant red-gold hair spilled down over her shoulders.



It's the red hair, Ginny remembered Draco telling her at Harry's birthday party, I can't resist it.

Vaguely, Ginny heard Hermione say defensively, "Well, so, maybe he's hiding how unhappy he is."

Ron ignored her, and gently tugged at Ginny's sleeve. "Don't look over there," he said. "It'll just upset you."

"I'm not upset." She dragged her eyes away from Draco and grabbed up her fork. "I'm fine." She jabbed the fork blindly at the plate in front of her, hardly able to see anything.

"Maybe that's why he got like that in Potions class," Hermione added.

"No." Harry put his fork down. "I don't think that was it."

At the mention of Potions, Ginny glanced instinctively over at the staff table, but Snape was not there. Neither was Dumbledore. Her eyes fell instead on her brother Charlie, who was engaged in a lively conversation with Professor Lupin, using his fork to punctuate his remarks. The sight of Charlie made her smile. She had been thrilled that he had accepted the job as Care of Magical Creatures professor. As if he sensed her eyes on him, he looked up and waved.

"Are you eating off my plate, Ginny?" said a voice on her left. It was Neville. Ginny looked down and realized that she had, in fact, been jabbing her fork into Neville's roast turkey, and not her own.

"Oh dear - I'm so sorry -" she spluttered.

"If you wanted some, you could have just asked," said Neville, looking aggrieved.

"Not upset, eh?" said Ron into her ear.

Ginny let her fork fall. "Don't we have practice now?" she said hopefully, in Harry's direction, too embarrassed to look at Neville, and suspecting, irrationally, that somehow Draco was watching her from across the room.

Harry looked over at her and smiled. "Yeah, we do," he said, and Ginny got to her feet, grabbing up her broom, thankful for any excuse to get away. "I'll see you all down there," she said, and fled.

Harry, Ron and Hermione trooped down to where the rest of the team waited at the entrance to the Quidditch pitch. Seamus, who had been made a Chaser just that year, was already there, standing next to Ginny and the third Chaser, Elizabeth Thomas, Dean's younger sister. A little ways away stood the Creevey brothers, who, Hermione suspected, had been made Beaters primarily because they were brothers, and there was a certain superstition regarding the luckiness of having siblings team up as Beaters. They greeted Harry and the others with a cheerful waving of broomsticks.

Hermione dropped back towards the stands, content to watch, her copy of *Quidditch Through the Ages* on hand in case Harry needed it for reference material. Not that he ever did. He had been nervous about being made team captain, but he needn't have been; he turned out to be as good at strategizing as he was at flying. Hermione suspected he kept an elaborate mental map of the Quidditch field in his head and referred to it at will.

"All right," he was saying now, consulting some notes he had scribbled on a bit of parchment, "I think this time we should work on coordinating better, and telegraphing our moves less. Seamus, you need to be quicker on the turns. Elizabeth, I've got an idea -"

"Actually, I've got an idea," interrupted a drawling voice. "Why don't you all just bugger off, since you've got no business being here in the first place?"

It was Draco, of course, in green Quidditch robes, surrounded by the rest of his team. He was flanked by his Chasers: Blaise Zabini, Malcolm Baddock, and Graham Pritchard. Behind him, looking menacing, were the Beaters: Tess Hammond and Milicent Bulstrode, the largest and ugliest girls in school. Bringing up the rear was Dex Flint, a sharp-faced but handsome fifth-year who played as Keeper.

Draco reached out a lazy hand, took the parchment out of Harry's grip, looked at it with mild disinterest, and let it drop into the snow. "We have the Quidditch pitch booked for practice right now," he said, in a voice like syrup poured over broken glass. "I know you Gryffindors aren't the brightest lot, but I did at least think you could tell time properly."

Harry didn't change expression. "We signed up for this practice last week," he said flatly. "Go and check the book."

"Yes, I saw that," said Draco, lazily twirling his broomstick. If he'd had a moustache, Hermione was sure he would have twirled that too. "When Charlie handed me the book. See, Madam Hooch never would have trusted me to write in it myself, but your Weasley friend, well he just hasn't been around that long, he doesn't know. He didn't even notice when I wrote right over your name. You know, you've got a very girly signature, Potter. You should work on that."

"You dishonest creep," said Elizabeth, her two pigtails trembling with rage.

"I'm a Slytherin," said Draco, giving her a smile that would have melted solid steel, although it didn't have much effect on Elizabeth. "It's in the job description."

"This trick won't work more than once, Malfoy," said Harry, his green eyes narrowed. "Charlie won't trust you again."

"It only needs to work once." Draco shook his head. "Sometimes I wonder about you, Potter. Where were you when they were handing out brains?"

"I don't know," said Harry, his voice dripping acid. "I'm afraid I accidentally got in line for 'shred of moral decency' instead."

"It must have been quite a long line," said Draco. "Apparently you were also too late for 'good looks', 'fashion sense', and 'witty repartee'."

Ron started forward. Harry hauled him back by the collar of his robes. "I think you've been spending too much time in that dungeon, Malfoy," Ron spat, struggling to get free of Harry's grip. "The lack of natural light must have rotted your brain."

"Oh, right, because you lot live in a tower," said Draco, his voice filled with heavy sarcasm. "A great, big, pointy, thrusting tower. Just the right place for little boys who maybe feel a little....inadequate? Overcompensating, are we?"

Harry hit him. Draco staggered rather theatrically back into the arms of his teammates, then straightened up and started for Harry, rolling his sleeves up to his elbows as he went.

Hermione closed her book and sighed, bored and irritated. Oh for goodness' sake, she thought. Not this again.

The door to Dumbledore's office was closed. Charlie sighed. He had rushed over from lunch in an attempt to catch the Headmaster, but it appeared he had wasted his time. He had been trying to get to Dumbledore for several days in hopes of getting the Headmaster to agree to his suggestion that a small group of students, with parental permission of course, be allowed to study dragons. After all, Charlie thought irritably, what was the point of hiring someone with a specialty in dragons as a teacher if you weren't going to let him teach anything about dragons?

"Dragons are vicious," Snape had said at the last staff meeting. "They are capricious. They like to set things on fire."

"But that's what so great about them," Charlie had replied cheerfully.

"I see nothing 'great' about students being set on fire," McGonagall had said in a freezing tone.

"That would depend on the student," interjected Professor Sinistra, who taught Astronomy. Charlie privately rather thought that Professor Sinistra fancied him. She kept sidling up to him in corridors and admiring his dragonhide trousers.

Lupin had been on his side in the debate, but it hadn't helped much. Eventually McGonagall had agreed to allow Charlie to take the matter to the Headmaster. Which was easier said than done. It was very difficult to know where Dumbledore was going to be, except at mealtimes, when he flatly refused to discuss anything having to do with work.

Charlie was about to gather himself together and leave, when he heard voices emanating from the corridor that led to the Headmaster's office. He instantly recognized Snape's unpleasant tones. "I'm telling you, he had a reaction like nothing I've ever seen before," he was saying. "It was most alarming."

Dumbledore spoke next. "But he came around? And was coherent?"

"Yes, he was quite coherent, and claimed he had only been dizzy, and had seen nothing. Perhaps he did see nothing."

"Perhaps. But this is Draco Malfoy we're talking about. If he had seen something, he would be unlikely to announce it in front of the class."

Charlie took a step back into the shadows. Seven years of sneaking around the Hogwarts' professor's offices instantly overcame five months of being a Hogwarts Professor. He froze where he was, and listened.

"I think I should call him into my office," Dumbledore said.

"He won't like that."

"No. But the situation is worsening. The risk of betrayal -"

"We don't know that that risk exists!"

"It does exist, Severus. You, of all people -"

"Perhaps you should call Potter into your office instead."

"We've gone over this." Dumbledore sounded tired. "If we tell him, we are risking an unprecedented tragedy, possibly needlessly, and I -"

Dumbledore broke off as he and Snape rounded the corner of the corridor, and stepped into full view. His eyes met Charlie's, and for a moment, there was almost a flash of concern in them. Then he smiled. "Hallo, Charlie," he said.

"Oh. Hello, Weasley." Snape gave Charlie a very unpleasant look. Charlie had a feeling Snape knew he had been listening.

Dumbledore, however, only beamed at him. "Can I help you with something?"

Charlie looked down at the parchment in his hand: his proposal for the dragon class. It suddenly seemed very far away. He held the papers out towards the Headmaster, muttered something about "dragons", "permission", and "very unlikely to eat anybody," and left with his head still spinning.

Risk. Betrayal. Tragedy. What was going on?

"This is getting ridiculous," said Hermione disapprovingly. She was holding a damp sponge in one hand and applying it to the corner of Harry's left eye, which had stopped bleeding several minutes ago. "Is it really so important that you two keep pretending you hate each other?"

"Yes," said both Harry and Draco in unison. Then, in unison, they grinned, Draco slightly painfully due to the blue-black bruise rising on one cheekbone.

"I mean, it's gotten to the point where not only will Madam Pomfrey not fix your battle scars, but she's even forbidden me to do it!" Hermione threw up her hands in despair. "Can't you at least not hit each other so hard?"

Harry tried to hide his amusement. "Yeah, Malfoy, you're supposed to pull your punches."

"Me? What about you? You kicked me in the shin!"

"I slipped on the ice and my foot accidentally went into your shin."

"Twice?"

There was a rap on the door, and then it opened, admitting Ron's bright red head. He peered around the broom closet they were using as a temporary infirmary. It wouldn't do for anyone to see Hermione treating Harry and Draco's wounds. "Success," he said, slipping inside. "Everyone believed the fight, and they're all talking about it in hushed tones. That

whole 'signing up for the same time for practice' business worked really well." He jerked his chin at Harry. "You better get back to the pitch though, they're waiting for you."

"Urgh," said Harry, wincing and touching the edge of his wounded eye. "You don't want to captain, Ron, just this once?"

"No," said Ron firmly. "I don't want them thinking Malfoy did you any serious damage. Besides, the Slytherins are all still lurking around, looking like they want a fight."

Draco looked pleased. "As they should."

"Blaise Zabini looks particularly threatening," Ron added.

Everyone looked at Draco, who cocked his eyes towards the ceiling, his expression neutral. "Well, she is my girlfriend."

"Thanks for reminding us," said Harry. "I think I might have otherwise missed the point when she threw herself at me screaming 'You hit my boyfriend! I hate you!'"

"Yes," said Draco noncommittally. Everyone kept staring at him. He continued to look expressionless. Nobody understood how he and Blaise had started dating, how serious they were, or in fact, if he even liked her. Talking to Draco when he did not want to tell you something, Hermione reflected, was like trying to converse with a particularly uncommunicative wall.

"All right," said Harry finally, standing up. "I guess we'd better get back." He nodded over at Draco. "Next time, you win. We have to keep it even."

"Right." Draco touched the tips of his fingers to his temple in a mock salute, and Harry headed for the door.

"Wait a second," said Hermione, and he paused. "Aren't you forgetting something?" and she lifted up her face to be kissed.

"Oh, right," said Harry, and reached around her to grab his Firebolt from a peg on the wall. "Thanks."

He left, followed by Ron. Hermione stared after them in disbelief. "I--," she began, and then her face crumpled. "Argh!" she exclaimed, and she threw the bloodstained sponge she had been holding at the wall. "Honestly!"

Draco ducked the sponge and came up looking sympathetic, or at least as sympathetic as he ever did, which meant that he wasn't smirking. "He still doing it?"

"All the time," said Hermione, her face a mask of unhappiness. "He just acts like I don't exist. I can't remember the last time he walked me to class, or..." her voice trailed off. "And when I try to talk to him about it he just says I'm imagining things and that he's busy. I know he's busy...what with being Quidditch captain, and Auror classes, and that's why he turned down being Head Boy, but..."

"But you're not imagining things?" Draco finished for her.

"I don't think I am," she said.

"You're not," he said quietly.

She looked at him, and bit her lip. She knew he meant it. He didn't lie. "What is it?" she said in a tiny voice. "Is there somebody else?"

Draco said, "I don't know. I doubt it."

"Then what?" Her voice cracked. "Can't you ask him?"

Draco looked down at his hands, and then up at her, and she read the reply in his face. The odd sympathy of thought and feeling that had tied them together the summer remained with them, although it was harder to call up than it had been. She knew what he was feeling - desire to do this for her, the wish that she not be unhappy, the fear that whatever the answer was, it would hurt her, and the knowledge that however much she wanted it, he could no more extract information from an unsuspecting Harry only to betray that information to her than he could fly without a broomstick.

It was more complicated being Draco, she reflected, than he was often given credit for.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I shouldn't have asked."

"He loves you," said Draco. The look in his eyes was distant. The dark green of his Quidditch robes should have made him look sallow, but it didn't. It brought out the winter pallor of his skin, his eyelashes so black against it, eyes as clear and gray as mirrors. He looked like an angel, she thought, although one of the heavenly kind or one of the fallen sort, it was hard to be sure.

She remembered him at the Manor, reaching around her throat to fasten her necklace. I waited so long to hear you say that...if things were different...

She shook her head to clear it. She was thinking these thoughts because she was unhappy and because Harry seemed as cold and as remote from her these days as a Durmstrang glacier. "How do you know?" she asked.

"I think I would know if he stopped," said Draco simply. "He's always loved you...it would be a reversal of everything he is." He leaned forward then and touched her cheek with his fingertips. "You know as well as anyone what he's been through," he said. "Just try to talk to him..." He sighed and dropped his hand. "Forget it. It's not in my nature to give advice to the lovelorn. Ask someone with a more successful romantic life, that's my suggestion."

"You've got a girlfriend," Hermione pointed out.

"Right." Draco sat back, his mouth twisting into something that might have been a smile, or not. "So I do."

The late afternoon sunlight streamed in through the small window in Hermione's room, throwing a square of dark gold light onto the bedspread where Ginny sat, watching Hermione rearrange her books. Being Head Girl, Hermione had been given her own room this year. Being Hermione, she hadn't spent much time decorating it. There was the bed with a flowered coverlet, three full bookshelves, a writing desk, and a vanity table with a mirror attached; pictures of Harry, Ron and other friends were stuck into the frame. There was another picture of Harry and

Hermione together on the bedside table. There were no pictures of Draco. Perhaps, Ginny thought uncharitably, he didn't show up on film.

"Well, I think," said Ginny, resting her chin on her hand, "that it might be time for Desperate Measures."

Hermione, who was wearily moving around the books on her dresser, looked alarmed. "Desperate measures?" she faltered. They had been discussing the Harry Problem, and she had been growing increasingly more tense.

"Yes," said Ginny, assuming a serious expression. "Short skirt. Tight top. That sort of thing."

Hermione looked even more alarmed. "You think the problem is that he's not attracted to me?"

"No!" Ginny protested. "No, of course not." She got up and went to stand next to her friend. "I just think he's distracted and worried, and so it's harder getting his attention now than it might normally be. And you, you're busy too, you're Head Girl, and taking who knows how many extra classes, and when was the last time you and Harry did anything together just for fun?"

Hermione shut her eyes. The lids were tinged with blue. Ginny felt a stab of worry; Hermione really must be unhappy about this. The circles under her eyes were dark, too, and Ginny guessed that Hermione was more tired than she was letting on. "October," she said finally, hesitantly. "We went to the museum at Stonehenge together."

"So it's been a while," said Ginny quietly. Hermione just nodded, looking miserable. She was dressed today as she often was when out of her robes: in a pale blue cashmere sweater, a pleated blue-and-gray skirt, with her hair swept up into a ponytail. Despite the modernity of her dress, however, something about her reminded Ginny of the portraits of Rowena Ravenclaw in her History of the Founders book. There was a translucent beauty to Hermione that had nothing to do with the shape of her face or the regularity of her features. Her beauty was in the light and intelligence that showed through everything she did. That Harry appreciated it and loved her because of it, Ginny thought, said good things about him. Of course, Draco had been in love with Hermione too.



But she would not think about Draco.

"You really think..." Hermione said, looking down at her sensible lace-up shoes and gray tights, "I should...dress up?"

Ginny shrugged. "Well, he is a boy."

Hermione smiled wanly. "It's just that - well - he's Harry."

"I know," said Ginny, "and he's the hero of the wizarding world, and he's your best friend, and blah blah, but he's also a boy, and I think he'd like it if you wore this," and she pulled something out of Hermione's top drawer and tossed it to her.

Hermione nearly fell off the bed. "I am not wearing that!"

"He'd probably like that even better."

"It's a nightgown!"

"Oh. I thought it was a dress."

"Ginny! Be helpful!"

"Okay, okay."

Ginny eventually found a low-necked black sweater and a black pencil skirt in Hermione's trunk that passed her inspection, especially after she'd used several Shortening Charms on the skirt.

"I feel silly," said Hermione gloomily, surveying her outfit. "This so isn't me."

"You look adorable." Ginny got up off the bed and gave Hermione a quick hug. Outside the window, snow had begun to fall in thick white flakes. "Everything will be fine. Harry loves you."

"I know," said Hermione. Her voice was quiet. "But lately it seems like he's gone away somewhere and I can't follow him. He can be very...remote sometimes."

Ginny said nothing. She knew what Hermione meant. Sometimes Harry was just Harry, and then sometimes he seemed like something else again, something distant and powerful and frightening. She remembered waking up in the Chamber of Secrets to see Harry standing over her, drenched in blood, holding the ruby-studded silver sword in his right hand, scarlet to the hilt. And he had only been twelve then. Of course Harry was a hero, and heroes weren't like everyone else.

"Ginny," Hermione said softly. She was leaning against the wall next to the window; now she turned her head to look through the glass, and the gray winter light caught the edges of her hair. Without looking at Ginny, she said, "Did you ... love Draco?"

Taken aback, Ginny was silent for a moment. Then she reached for her bookbag, which was propped against the trunk. "I have to go," she said. "I´m supposed to meet Elizabeth in the library."

Hermione turned her head. Behind her, the snow continued to fall, silently, covering the windowpane with a white icing. "Ginny -"

"Good luck," Ginny said, hoisting her bookbag over her shoulder. "It´ll be fine, you´ll see."

Hermione nodded, and was silent for a long moment. "I just feel so guilty," she said at last, so quietly that Ginny almost didn´t catch the words. When she did, she stared at her friend in incomprehension.

"What on earth about?"

Hermione looked weary. "Nothing. Never mind."

There was no one else in the Slytherin common room; everyone was at dinner. Draco, not feeling hungry, had stayed behind, although the common area was hardly one of his favorite places. The long, low, underground room never seemed warm, not even in when there was a fire blazing in the ornate marble fireplace, as there was now. The low-hanging greenish lamps cast a sickly sort of pallor over everything. Draco slumped deep into the forest-green velvet armchair he had pulled up to the fire, lost in thought.

He was still disturbed by the vision of his father he had had earlier that day during Potions class. He was almost entirely sure it had not been an ordinary dream - he recalled the pain that had shot through his hand upon waking, and remembered Harry telling him of the prophetic dreams he had dreamed about Voldemort, how Harry had woken up with pains in

his scar. And he himself had dreamed bits of Slytherin's life, and sometimes still did. Ordinary dreams were one thing; this was something else. It had looked so real, as well. He tried to imagine where his father and the Dark Lord might be, but there had been nothing specifically identifiable about the stone room. It could have been anywhere.

And his father's voice had been so familiar. The careless drawl that he had inherited. The boy is unreliable, Master. Draco tipped his head back and looked at the ceiling, which was carved out of alternating strips of marble and green malachite. *Keep your head down, Draco, and let the Heir of Slytherin get on with it*, his father had said to him during his second year. *That school of yours needs ridding of its Mudblood filth.*

Of course he must have known that I was the Heir of Slytherin, Draco thought. He was just using that story as a convenient cover-up for what was really going on. He stretched and looked down at the Transfiguration book in his lap. They were learning how to transform various elements into each other. *Aqua ad pulvis transmuta. Saxum ad viscerum.* Turn water to dust, stone to flesh. But he was too tired to concentrate, and the words danced on the page.

He heard the sound of footsteps in the corridor then, and the dungeon door swung open as students began to stream in, returning from dinner. He tensed, before remembering that Blaise had a study date with Pansy Parkinson in the library. He wasn't up to dealing with her right now.

"Hey, Malfoy." It was Malcolm Baddock, the dark-haired Chaser who vaguely reminded Draco of Harry at that age. If Harry had been as cunning as a ferret and as mean as a snake, of course. "Letter came for you."

He tossed the sealed parchment into Draco's lap. It unrolled at the touch of Draco's hand, and Draco quickly moved his arm to block it from Malcolm's view. "Thanks, Baddock."

Malcolm nodded and moved away, and Draco had leisure to study the missive. He had already guessed what it was, and was not disappointed: a finely drawn map, showing the front door of the castle and the route he should take from it to a designated meeting place. At the bottom of the map were inked three words in bold lettering. *Meet me here.*

With a sigh, Draco crumpled the map into a ball in his fist, and went to get his cloak.

Hermione looked over at Harry where he sat in front of the fire in the Gryffindor common room, a copy of *The Defeat of the Wizard Grindelwald* open and unread on his lap. They had been sitting and 'studying' for about two hours, and Harry had yet to turn a page. His eyes were wide and unseeing, fixed on the fire, his head bent, his unruly mass of dark hair falling to hide his eyes. He hadn't said much of anything to her since she'd come down to the common room to study with him, and hadn't seemed to notice her new outfit at all. So much for Ginny's theory, she thought darkly. I could have come down here wearing a live badger and he wouldn't have noticed.

"Harry," she said finally, breaking the silence. "Are you even reading that book?"

"No." Harry looked up, impatiently pushing a lock of dark hair out of his eyes as he did so. The light caught and sparkled on the gold watch she had given him for his birthday - a pocket watch which he had had set into a band so he could wear it around his wrist as his father had done. "I can't seem to concentrate." He pushed his hair back again - it had grown down to the point where it almost touched his collar, and tumbled forward when he bent his head.

This gave Hermione an idea. "I know what you need," she announced.

Harry raised an eyebrow.

"A haircut," she said.

He almost smiled. "A haircut?"

"That's right." She got up and crossed the room to where he was sitting, put her hands on his face and tilted his head up to hers. Gently she smoothed the long locks of hair back from his eyes, letting the loose curling ends slip through her fingers. His hair was rougher than Draco's, more textured.

"This is just an excuse to play with my hair," he said. "Isn't it?" He was actually smiling now. She could feel his awareness of her suddenly snap into focus, of the place where her sweater dipped down into the V of her chest, of how close her bare legs were to him under her short skirt. He shifted in his chair. "Hermione...are these new clothes?"

It was her turn to smile. "Maybe." She held out her wand hand. "Accio scissors," she said, and in a moment was holding the embroidery scissors that she kept in her trunk. She picked Harry's book up off his lap and set it down on the table, with her wand on top of it. "Are you ready?" she asked.

"I don't -" Harry began, but snip went the scissors and he subsided into a meek silence. Hermione tried to cut the hair evenly, but she had to admit to herself she knew nothing about cutting hair, she just hoped she wouldn't lop off an ear or leave a bald spot anywhere. Harry was uncharacteristically quiet; either enjoying the attention or stupefied by boredom, she couldn't tell. She certainly wasn't bored. She was acutely aware of everywhere she was touching him. Her hand steadying him under the chin, her other hand in his hair, his leg between hers, her knee against his thigh. She could smell the faint scent that came off him, the clean soapy boy-smell that was Harry. His green eyes looked up at her, framed by the dark lashes she both envied and loved. "Here," he said suddenly, his voice a little hoarse, reached out, and put his hands on her waist, drawing her closer. Now she was straddling his legs and he was just about eye level with her chest. Oh dear. Is it working? I think it might be working.

Harry shifted in his chair again.

"Sit still," she said. Her voice came out on a squeak.

He released her waist and caught at her wrist with his right hand. The scissors fell out of her hand and bounced harmlessly on the carpet. "Hermione--" he said, and pulled her towards him.

And then she was kissing him. She leaned into the kiss with an urgency that was nearly painful, and to her surprise he opened his mouth under hers, welcoming the kiss, welcoming her touch. Her hands fell from his hair to his shoulders, and then slid to lock around his neck. She felt her knees give, and she sat down in his lap, looping her legs over his. She

could feel the pressure of her chest against his, his heartbeat through the thin cotton t-shirt he wore. "Hermione." His voice was rough in her ear, his hands rougher on her back. He set his mouth to her cheek, her ear, the smooth line of her jaw, the sensitive skin of her throat. His fingernails almost raking her skin, he slid his hands to her waist, and then roughly up under her shirt, finding and tracing the lacy edges of her bra. Hermione shivered with the feeling, and also with surprise - this wasn't like Harry, to be so aggressive. But he was here at last, really here, and as his fingertips traced circles of fire over her skin she gave up wondering what had gotten into him, and tumbled into the moment. There was only Harry, his fingers on her skin and his mouth on her mouth and she -

Overbalanced. With a tiny shriek, she grabbed at Harry, and succeeded in pulling him over with her as she toppled off the chair on to the floor. They landed on the carpet in a torrent of gasps and laughter and it was several moments of tangled legs and arms before Hermione realized that the only one laughing was her. Harry wasn't laughing at all. He was staring down at her with a look of frozen horror on his face, and such a blaze of pain in his eyes that it stopped her laughter dead in its tracks. "Harry?" she gasped, struggling to sit up. "Harry, what's wrong?"

He shook his head, pulling away from her. "What are we doing? What were you doing?"

"What was I doing?" Hermione stared at him. "I was kissing my boyfriend."

Harry put his hands over his face.

"My boyfriend," she said again, and this time there was anger in her voice. "Who barely talks to me any more, who won't look at me -"

"That's not true," said Harry sharply, taking his hands away from his eyes. He fumbled for his glasses on the table, and put them on. "I'm just busy, that's all."

"And I'm not busy? I'm Head Girl, Harry, and I've got extra classes and study groups, and I still have time for you. I have nothing but time for you, but you don't seem to want to spend any time with me."

"Hermione," Harry said tightly. His eyes behind his glasses were cold and removed, and his jaw was set in a hard angry line. He had never looked at

her before like that. Are we having a fight? she thought numbly. Is that what this is? But everybody fought. This seemed like something else.
"Hermione, let it go."

"Is this about this summer?" she asked, her voice cracking. "I know we went through hell, Harry, and I know how awful it was -"

"You don't know," he said, and his voice was like the ice that sparkled on the windowpanes.

"Then tell me."

Harry seemed to hesitate for a moment. He was sitting with his back against the armchair now, leaning away from her, hair wild and disarranged, flushed from kissing and from anger. His eyes met hers, and held and for a moment, just a moment, she felt the old connection spring to life between them, as vibrant as a living thing.

Then Harry looked away, and it was gone. "Just let it alone, Hermione," he said. "Please."

"No," she said. "I won't do that."

"Then we have nothing to say to each other," he said, and got to his feet. Hermione looked at him in disbelief.

"Harry--"

"Just leave me alone!" he shouted, and the shock of Harry shouting, actually shouting at her, stunned her into silence. She sat where she was, not moving, as Harry grabbed his red cloak up off the back of his chair and stalked out through the portrait hole.

Harry barely registered his surroundings as he flung himself down the stairs, through the darkened hallways, and through the front doors of the school. He was too full of unreasonable rage, born out of a pain so inarticulate and blinding that it might as well have been physical. His hands still tingled with the feeling of Hermione's skin under his, and his

mouth still tasted of hers, and he still saw the expression in her eyes when she had looked at him from the floor. Then tell me!

But I can't do that.

The cold air hit him like a Bludger as soon as he stepped outside. He pulled his cloak tightly around him, but it still stung his eyes, his mouth. He went down the stairs and his boots crunched on the snow that had piled there. He had no idea where he was going. The world was beautiful and cold and glittering silver and black, the sky a flawed diamond chased with iron. The edge of the Forbidden Forest loomed dark and jagged in the distance. Harry wanted to disappear into it, into the cold and the darkness. He wanted to be alone and not to have to think or talk to anyone.

He had never felt this way before. There had never been a problem that had not been eased by the presence of Hermione or Ron. He did not know when the subtle shift had taken place inside him, but it had, and while he could bear Ron's company, for Ron did not ask him questions, being with Hermione filled him with guilt and shame and pain.

He set off across the snow. More snow had fallen after dinner and the ground was white and trackless and empty, marked only by shadows. He might have been the only person left alive, making his way in solitude across the skin of a deserted world.

He reached the edge of the Forest, and remembered having been here as a first year, terrified, trailing an angry Draco Malfoy in his wake. They had been eleven. It seemed a hundred years ago. He raised his hand to push back a tree branch, and the moonlight caught and glimmered on the watch that banded his wrist.

He paused and stared at it. Its gold face, the black numbers, the watch his father had worn until the day he died, and Sirius had taken it off his dead wrist, and then Hermione had made it work again, for him. He knew by heart what was engraved on the base. For Harry, from Hermione, your best friend.

Hermione. An arrow of dismay shot through him. What have I done? He stopped dead in his tracks and turned to go back to the castle, but his foot caught in a bent tree root, and he fell forward into the snow.

The map led Draco to an old stone wall at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, in the center of a deserted clearing. A tree had grown up through the center of the wall, splitting the stones apart with its roots. Draco leaned back against its trunk in the shadow of its bare leafless branches, and looked out over the frozen landscape.

The sky had darkened to cobalt, marked here and there with the thumbprint of a black cloud. Everywhere the snow stretched white and cold and sparkling, coated with shimmering ice. The lake was an iced-over diamond, softened to a muted blue by the gathering darkness. And in the distance the castle rose, dark and shadowy and ancient, looking as it must have looked a thousand years ago when Salazar Slytherin and Godric Gryffindor had lived there as children.

Sometimes, looking out at the castle, memories of that other life came to him, as easily as the memory of a dream. They had been present here together for the building of the castle, the two young men, still almost children, riding horses side by side through the dry blue waters of the cornflower fields in summer. Just by touching his hands to the old stone wall, he could hear their boys' voices echo in his head.

Come down off the wall, Salazar, why break your neck?

Why not?

You know why not.

Do you love me so much as all that, Godric?

I love you well enough.

Draco opened his eyes. He wondered if Rowena were still alive, would she cry to know what had become of Slytherin, her first love, forever trapped in Hell? He wondered briefly what Hell was like. A burning place, as it was usually depicted? Or a frozen land of ice and snow, warmed by no fires, lit by no light at all?

While he was considering this, there was a loud snapping noise overhead, and a girl fell out of the tree and landed on top of on him.

He tried to get his hands out of his pockets to catch her, but the sound of the breaking branch had startled him and slowed his responses. He did take a step back, but it wasn't enough. She fell directly onto him and they rolled sideways down a slight incline into a snow bank. When they came to a stop, he found that she was half-lying on top of him, her knees almost pinning his arms to his sides, her familiar gray eyes sparkling with amusement.

"Hallo Draco," she said, sitting up. "Are you all right?"

Draco blinked up at her. She was dressed, as she always was, in what amounted almost to period costume. Today she wore a rich dark wool dress, low-necked, with slashed sleeves just visible beneath her violet cloak. The cloak fastened at her shoulder with a gold pin in the shape of a poppy. There were jewels caught in her hair, emeralds and garnets, and when she moved they caught the moonlight and glimmered like Christmas lights, an effect that was probably intentional.

He sighed. "Rhysenn. Yes. Fortunately I cleverly used my spine to break our fall."

"You don't sound pleased to see me."

"I'm surprised I sound anything. I can't breathe."

This was true. Instead of sitting on his stomach, Rhysenn was sitting squarely on his ribs. She was light, but his breathing was still constricted. Instead of shifting, she merely pouted. As always, she reminded him of a tightly wound musical instrument. A violin, maybe. She was that delicate-looking, and vibrated to that high a pitch.

"I had a really clever comment all worked out," said Draco wistfully.

"Then you fell on my head and I forgot what it was."

"Tell me anyway."

"I can't, the moment's past."

Rhysenn shook her head and the gems glittered in her hair. "You think too much," she said.

The snow was beginning to soak into the back of Draco's cloak. He shivered. "Such men are dangerous," he said.

Rhysenn didn't reply. Her eyes were glittering, flat gray and amused. "Do you want the message I have for you," she said at last, "or not?"

Draco yawned. Snow went into his mouth. He tried not to splutter. "Have I got a choice?"

"Not really." Rhysenn was smirking. This was her favorite part, when Draco had to play hide-and-seek to find the parchment concealed among her voluminous clothes. Usually Draco played along, but tonight he was feeling unaccountably irritable. He put one hand firmly on her waist, and slid the other up under her dress, along her outer thigh, and found the rolled-up parchment tucked neatly into the top of her stocking. He pulled it free, and held it up in front of her. "Got it."

She looked irritable. "How did you know...?"

"You're a woman, and therefore predictable."

"Oh!" Rhysenn emitted a very girly squeak of annoyance, and got up off Draco's chest. She stood over him, hands on her hips, a position which would have afforded him a good view up her skirt had he craned his head. He decided to be gentlemanly, and didn't. Instead, he stood up, brushing the snow off his cloak as he did. When he looked up, he found himself staring squarely into her eyes. There was nothing girly about her gaze - it was sharp, cold, calculating, ageless. He wondered again how old she was, something she had never been willing to tell him. "You're horrible."

"Don't," said Draco, standing up, and brushing the snow from his sleeves with the parchment, "pretend like you care what I do."

Rhysenn grinned then, showing sharp white teeth. "You're right. I don't." She darted forward then, and pressed her lips to his cheek; it was like the brush of hot ash against his skin. He shivered. "Merry Christmas," she said. "I'll see you again before your birthday."

"I don't doubt it. My birthday is in July."

"That's what you think," she said, and disappeared. Draco glared at the spot from which she had vanished. He had told her before that it was impossible to Apparate on and off Hogwarts grounds, but she didn't appear to care.

He looked down gloomily at the letter in his hand. He had become used to the look of these missives from his father. Fine vellum parchment, neatly rolled, tied with a black ribbon and stamped with a death's head seal. His father couldn't stamp it with the seal of the Malfoys, after all - that seal ring glittered now on Draco's left hand, against the fine black leather of his winter gloves. With a gloomy sigh, he prepared himself to open it, when the sound of crackling ice made him glance up in alarm, his gaze searching the half-lit glade. And lighting upon Harry, sprawled a little ways away from him, face-down in the snow.

"Lo, Potter." The voice emanating from above Harry's head was liquid with amusement. "Making snow angels, are we, or just very, very tired?"

"Shut up, Malfoy." Harry rolled over onto his back. He was looking up at Draco now, who seemed a black silhouette against the sapphire-blue evening sky. White ice crystals were caught in his silvery hair, and his gray eyes matched the color of the iced-over lake. "I fell over."

"That much," said Draco, "is evident." He held out a slender hand, gloved in sueded black leather. "Get up, then."

"I don't want to," said Harry, mutinously.

"You'll freeze," Draco pointed out.

"So what?"

"Right," said Draco. "Excellent point." With that, he flopped down in the snow next to Harry. Harry craned his neck to look at Draco with a feeling of great irritation. Why couldn't Draco simply leave him alone, wasn't it clear that he wanted to be miserable on his own?

"You'll ruin your fancy gloves," he said.

"Got six more like them at home," said Draco equably. "Now what's up with you? You look like someone set you up on a date with Snape."

Harry laughed bitterly.

"Ah, the bitter laugh," noted Draco. "That means girl trouble."

He spoke lightly. His voice was careful and even. Harry lifted his head and propped his chin on his hand, his eyes scanning Draco's expression, which was noncommittal. Even after all this time, the subject of Hermione was not one that was entirely comfortable between them. Draco was careful and respectful and reticent on the topic. This in itself was enough for Harry to know that whatever issues Draco had harbored in regards to Hermione, he still harbored them. Harry suspected that this was what lay behind Draco's estrangement from Ginny, but there was no way to be sure. Whatever it was, Blaise apparently didn't mind it, or had convinced herself that it didn't matter.

"Yeah," Harry heard himself say, with some surprise. "You could say that."

Draco's eyebrows went up, but he didn't say anything.

"We had a fight," Harry added.

Draco stayed silent.

"Hermione and I," Harry clarified.

"Right, well I didn't think you meant Hedwig."

Harry grinned despite himself. This seemed to solidify some resolve of Draco's. He stood up, and held out a hand to Harry again. "Get up," he said. "We're going for a walk."

This time, Harry took the proffered hand. "Where to?" he asked as he got to his feet.

"Hogsmeade."

"Hogsmeade?" Harry tried to pull his hand out of Draco's, but Draco was now yanking him determinedly towards the Forbidden Forest. "Why?"

"We´re going to get drunk."

"But - the Three Broomsticks only has butterbeer. I'm not a house-elf!"

"Just shut up, Potter, and trust me."

The sun swept down behind the mountains that framed Hogsmeade, lighting the picture-pretty little village with a rose-quartz glow. Snow was heaped and piled like icing sugar on the roofs of the houses, which were strung with magical Christmas lights, flashing emerald and garnet through the snow-spangled air. Smoke curled up in plumes from the chimneys below, tracing the darkening sky with faint dark markings like streaks of watercolor.

"Pretty," said Draco, pausing on the path that led into the village. The ornate gold *You are now entering Hogsmeade* sign that marked the village outskirts was wreathed, like the rest of the town, in dancing red-and-green lights. Draco stared at it. "No danger of forgetting it´s nearly Christmas in this place."

"Christmas," echoed Harry. His tone was hollow. He might as well have been talking about some ghastly recent tragedy. "I haven´t bought any gifts for anyone yet."

Draco looked sideways at him. "Do I take this to mean I will not be getting the model train set I asked for?"

"And the wedding," Harry continued gloomily. "That´s coming up at New Year´s and I haven´t gotten them anything, either."

Draco blinked snow from his eyelashes. "Have you heard from Sirius?"

Harry shook his head. "Not much. I think he´s busy with preparations."

"Any word on the bagpipe situation?"

A very faint smile touched the corner of Harry´s mouth. "I think that´s still a stalemate."

"Not for long, if I know my mother," said Draco, but he could tell Harry had stopped listening. He was staring off towards the town, his green eyes dark and remote. The weather suited him - the white snowy backdrop made his black hair and red cloak stand out dramatically, and the cold flushed his pale skin with a healthy glow. But his mouth was set in a tense unhappy line that spoiled what would have been an otherwise attractive picture. "Oh, bear up, Potter," said Draco. "You look like your owl just died."

"Hermione hates me," said Harry. His hands were working nervously at his belt. Not at the actual material, but at a circular reddish ornament, too small to be a bracelet, that was looped on like an extra buckle. Draco had noticed it before but had never asked Harry what it was. Whatever it was, he was very attached to it - Draco could not remember seeing him without it since September.

"Hates you?" Draco shook his head, but Harry didn't seem inclined to elaborate. "I doubt that."

"Who cares what you think," replied Harry, his voice without inflection.

"Another excellent point," Draco said. "Right. No more out of you." He came up to Harry and grabbed a fistful of the back of his cloak. "Come on."

He pulled, and Harry followed, without much resistance. They headed down the hard-packed snowy path into the village, passing warm lighted windows that smelled of gingerbread and cinnamon. Eventually they came out into Hogsmeade's small commercial district, bracketed by Zonko's joke shop on one end and the Three Broomsticks on the other. Zonko's was closed but the Broomsticks was open, and as they passed through its doors and into the noisy, warm, crowded space inside, Draco said a spell under his breath that melted the snow from their clothes without leaving a puddle. Always thoughtful, that's my motto.

Behind the bar, pretty Madam Rosmerta winked and smiled at the boys. "Hallo, Draco," she said. "Harry."

Draco nodded at her. "We're just passing through," he said significantly.

She arched an eyebrow. "Well, have fun then."

Harry looked at Draco in confusion. "Malfoy, what--?"

"Just come on." Draco transferred his grip from the scruff of Harry's neck to his wrist, and pulled him along in his wake. They crossed the room, half-full of witches and wizards sitting and drinking quietly at the long oak tables, then passed by the huge decorated Christmas tree and under the stairwell, until they fetched up at - a wall. Which was entirely blank except for a gold-framed painting of a very attractive young girl, bearing a not-passing resemblance to Madam Rosmerta herself, perched on a swing. When she caught sight of Harry and Draco she gave them a coquettish wink. "Well, aren't you two pretty," she said. "Come to visit with me for a while?"

Draco shook his head, smiling slightly. "Buttercup," he said.

"Oh, not another one," said the girl in the picture, looking annoyed, but the portrait swung forward anyway, revealing a blank black entryway through the wall. Draco started off, and Harry, looking bewildered, followed Draco into the passageway.

A huge space opened up before them. It was an elegant room, all sparkling teak wood and dark oak and polished brass. A long bar ran across one wall, and behind it were shelves lined with row after row of liquor bottles: red Dragon's Blood gin, black Giant wine, viscous green Troll beer. A tall glass vodka bottle the height of a man stood to one side of the bar; inside it tiny broomsticks whizzed around in circles. The words ABSOLUT QUIDDITCH wound in scrollwork across the top.

A tall witch stood behind the bar counter, wearing a shimmering silver top, and pouring a thin stream of pink liquid into a glass held by a fat wizard in an orange robe who sat cross-legged at the bar. As Harry's eyes adjusted to the dimness he realized two things. One: that the bar was, aside from the bartender and a few waitresses, inhabited solely by wizards; there was not a witch to be seen. Two: that the girl behind the bar was not wearing a shimmering silver top after all; in fact, she was not wearing any top. She was clothed solely in her long glimmering hair and a pair of gold hotpants.

"Welcome to the Sleazy Weasel," said Draco indicating the bar with a sweep of his arm.

"Gah," said Harry, taking a step back. "I - I never - I've never seen--"

"Now you have," said Draco. He grabbed hold of the back of Harry's robes again and steered him firmly towards the bar. Finding an empty pair of stools next to the plump wizard with the pink cocktail, he plonked Harry down into a seat and leaned over the counter. "Oi!" he said. "Drinks, over here."

The topless waitress turned around. "Draco!" she said, obviously pleased to see him. She hurried over and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "I haven't seen you in ages."

Harry made a gurgling sound. "You come here a lot?" he said to Draco.

"Believe it or not, my father used to conduct business deals here," said Draco, accepting the barmaid's kiss with the air of one to whom all homage is due. His eyes flicked expertly down the bar. "Right, then. One Mai Tai," he said. "With an umbrella. Green. And one..." He glanced over at Harry. "One Bloody Mary, double shot of Dragon's Blood."

The bartending witch grinned. "Umbrella?"

"Sure. A red one."

She winked at him. "Anything you want. And clever you, you got here before the show this time."

Draco just smiled. The show? thought Harry. His eyes darted to the side and lit upon a small stage towards the shadowy end of the room. There were several tall poles set up on it, and far behind them was a small group of wizard musicians. All men, as well. The one with the clarinet looked disturbingly like Snape.

Harry had seen enough bad movies to know what the poles were for. He slowly, disbelievingly turned his head towards Draco, who was rummaging in the pockets of his cloak with an air of great unconcern. "Malfoy," he said, a bit creakily. "Did you just take me to a wizard strip club?"

"Yup," said Draco, and tossed a handful of Galleons on the counter. "That should hold us for a few rounds."

Harry shook his head. "I´ll see you toast on the fires of hell for this, Malfoy."

"Did you say a toast?" The silver-haired barmaid was back (obviously a veela, Harry thought) with a smoking red drink in one hand and a swirling green drink in the other. She set them down in front of Harry and Draco and smiled. "How about a toast to the two best-looking boys at Hogwarts?"

Despite himself, Harry felt a blush creeping up from his collar. He was not immune to veela charms, even now. Draco, however, just grinned. "Angelique," he said, "you´ve never even seen any of the other boys at Hogwarts."

The veela girl grinned back. "I´m just in it for the tips, love," she said.

Draco handed her a galleon. She tucked it carefully away in a place that nearly made Harry fall off his stool. When he righted himself, he made a grab for his drink, and drained it handily. It went down about as easily as a pint of gasoline, but even as he choked and sputtered he could feel the liquid spreading its alert and burning energy through his veins.

He gestured weakly with his hand. "Another," he said, between coughs. "Another of the same, please."

They had each downed four drinks and the "show´ still hadn´t started. Not that Harry seemed to care. He was sitting hunched over his fourth Dragon´s Blood cocktail, staring down into it as if it held the secrets of the universe.

Gently, Draco poked him in the shoulder. "Buck up, Potter. The night is young and we have umbrellas in our drinks."

Harry turned unfocused green eyes on him. "What is it with you and drink umbrellas?"

"Well, there´s a good story there. Actually it´s not a good story, it´s just a long one. Let´s talk about you instead. How did you come to be lying face-down in the snow outside the Forbidden Forest?"

"I told you. I had a fight with Hermione."

"And she banged you over the head with a shovel, dragged you out to the Forbidden Forest, and left you there?"

Harry blew out an exasperated breath. "No. I sort of - ran off. Things were getting to intense and - don't you and Blaise ever fight?"

Draco snorted. "Not exactly."

"What does that mean?"

Draco shook his head, "I don't want to talk about her."

"But she's your girlfriend."

Draco was unable to restrain a shudder. "Don't remind me."

Harry looked at him with his mouth open. "Don't you like her?"

"Nobody likes Blaise," said Draco, with finality.

"Why not?"

"Ha!" Draco sat back, his eyes sparking. "'Where to start? 'Get me a present.' 'Take me to Hogsmeade.' 'Buy me that bracelet.' 'Make love to me right here on the floor.' 'No, not like that, like this.' 'Stop wasting time and get your trousers off.'"

"Which do you want me to do first?" asked Harry, poking his fourth - fifth? - drink with the tip of the red umbrella.

Draco snorted. "No, that's what she's like. She's got the worst personality in the whole House, and as you can imagine that's up against some pretty stiff competition."

Harry looked at him curiously. "Then why are you dating her?"

Draco knocked back his drink so fast that Harry was worried for a moment that he was going to topple off his barstool. He slammed the empty glass down on the counter. "What are you talking about, Potter? She's fantastic."

"Er," Harry said, bewildered. "All right. It's just...whatever happened with you and Ginny? I thought you were going to...you know. Date. Maybe."

"We were what? Okay, Maudlin Man, this encounter session wasn't supposed to be about me. It was supposed to be about *you*."

Harry drew himself upright with a fair bit of difficulty. He took a moment to focus his eyes on Draco. Then his green gaze sharpened, and hardened, and he no longer looked drunk at all. "Fine," he said. "Let's talk about me."

Draco idly ran a finger around the cold rim of his glass. "What did you and Hermione fight about?" he asked, making his voice neutral.

"Why don't you tell me?" said Harry.

Draco blinked. "Eh?"

"She talks to you," said Harry, in a cool voice. "I know she does."

Draco met Harry's gaze with his own. "Do you care?"

"If it helps her, I guess I don't."

Draco abandoned the cagey approach. "She says you've been ignoring her," he said. "She says you barely speak to her any more."

A slow flush spread upward from Harry's collarbone, across his face. "That's not true," he said.

Draco didn't say anything.

"It's not bloody true," Harry said again, the tops of his cheekbones dark red with rage.

"Right," said Draco. "Tell me, what classes is she taking?"

Harry blinked and opened his mouth. "What?"

"What classes is Hermione taking this year?"

Harry's mouth remained open. "Potions," he said slowly. "Advanced DaDA with Lupin...."

"And the classes she doesn't have with you?"

Harry looked down at the bartop. "Arithmancy," he said. His voice was unsure. "Medical Magic. Wards and Protection..."

"She dropped that," said Draco. His voice was hard. "In October. She's taking Runic Studies instead."

Harry looked away from him. His jaw muscles were set. "What's your point?"

"You have been ignoring her. Why?"

"I have not--"

"Oh, give it up, Harry," yelled Draco in exasperation. "Is there somebody else?"

Harry banged his fist down so hard on the bar that the glasses rattled. Draco was conscious of the fat wizard on his right giving them a peculiar look. He was also conscious that his last question to Harry might easily be misunderstood if one hadn't carefully listened to the conversation previously. Oh well.

"There is nobody else!" Harry shouted. "There never will be anybody else, not for me, not ever!"

The fat wizard nudged Draco in the ribs with his wand. "I think he really means it," he hissed in Draco's ear. "Come on, give him another chance."

"Oh, shut up," said Draco, not turning around. He was looking at Harry. The dark red color had faded from Harry's skin and now he was very white.

"Sorry," he said. "It's not your fault."

"Damn right it isn't," said Draco. "And don't think I like being go-between for you and Hermione either, because I don't."

"So why...?"

"I don't like seeing her unhappy," said Draco, with finality.

At that, Harry was silent. He stared off at the row of bottles lined up against the wall behind the bar. The magical liquors inside swirled with different colors: shades of lavender, turquoise and lemony gold. "Maybe I'm being selfish," he said finally. "But it's because I love her and I don't want to lose her even if I don't...even if I can't..." he paused, and Draco waited, knowing this was no time to interrupt. "Even if I can't give her anything right now," Harry finished.

"You'll drive her away," said Draco.

Harry was looking down into his empty glass now. The torchlight fringed his black hair with gold and lit a bright spark of fire at his throat. The Epicyclical Charm. "Might be the best thing for her," he said.

"Bollocks," said Draco firmly. "She loves you."

"Love," said Harry flatly. His voice held no intonation. "Maybe."

"Don't be a daft bugger. Of course she does."

The bartender set another drink down in front of Harry, who looked at it out of bleary green eyes. Draco tried to recall the number of glasses of alcohol Harry had now consumed. He had a feeling it was out of the single digits. "Voldemort's coming for me," Harry said. "You know that."

Draco leaned back. "I don't know any such thing," he said, although in the back of his head was the memory of a burning pain lancing through his palm, and a man's voice saying, The boy is unreliable, Master.

"Of course he is," said Harry. "He'll try for me again. Why would he stop now? Slytherin's out of the way, and the younger I am and the less experienced the better his chances."

"Potter..." Draco let his voice trail away. "You don't know."

"I know." Harry's voice was certain.

"Then....are you afraid?"

"No. I´m glad."

Draco blinked. "Come again?"

"I´m glad," said Harry, and his voice held something, something savage and primal. His hand was tight around the stem of his glass. "I´m glad. I think about it all the time, Malfoy, about confronting him, my chance for vengeance this time, my chance to free my parents... I dream about killing him. I wake up with bruises on my hands and I know I´ve been hitting the wall with my fists while I sleep. I´ve been angry before but I´ve never known hatred like this, this fierce and constant, it never leaves me, and how can I be around Hermione when I feel like that? If she knew how I really was, how full of poison and hate...she thinks I´m above those things, better than that, and I wish I was, but --" He shook his head as if clearing it of cobwebs, and his black hair flew around his face. Hermione had been right. It wanted cutting. "But I´m not."

Draco was staring at him. "I didn´t know..."

Harry´s breathing was ragged. "I keep thinking about my parents down there... in that place..."

Draco spoke through a tightened throat: "Did you use the Pensieve I gave you?"

"No." Harry shook his head. "I can´t..." The alcohol had roughened the usually smooth edges of his voice, and given it a wild desperation. "I can´t bear it, I can´t..." and he leaned forward, and buried his face in his hands.

Draco stayed frozen, his heart beating painfully against his ribs. This was his fault, his fault, he was the one who had told Harry about his parents in the land of the dead, giving him a tool with which to sharpen all his feelings of loss and rage and despair into a now-unbearable point. He had thought the gift of the Pensieve would help, but it hadn´t, since Harry couldn´t bear to use it. He was a fool to have thought of it in the first place.

He reached out, and gently touched the now-dry shoulder of Harry´s dark cloak. "Potter." Harry didn´t move. "Potter, I´m sorry. I -"

Harry fell off the chair and slid bonelessly to the ground.

"Oh, hell." Draco was off his chair and kneeling down next to Harry in a flash. He put a hand on Harry's shoulder and rolled him over. He seemed unharmed, and blinked up at Draco with sleepy half-open emerald eyes. "Harry? Harry, are you all right?"

"Fine, thank you, Professor," said Harry, smiled, and shut his eyes.

"And one day I will remember why I let you drink so much." Draco sighed and sat back on his heels. Only then did he realize that the whole bar was staring at them. Even the scantily clad waitresses were looking at them curiously. "Come on, Harry, get up. No, don't fall back down again. Yes, I know, gravity is a harsh mistress. But we have to learn to work with her. Now come along..."

"Look, he'll come back." Ginny gave Hermione's hand a comforting squeeze. The two girls sat together just outside Hogwarts' great oak front doors, which stood at the top of a flight of stone steps. Both were warmly wrapped in fur-lined cloaks: Hermione's dark blue, Ginny's pale gold. A few flakes of silvery snow were caught in Ginny's scarlet curls, and her dark eyes were wide and anxious as they fixed on her friend. "You two hardly ever fight."

"I know," said Hermione, through a tight throat. "That's what makes it so awful."

"Fighting all the time is worse by far, believe me," said Ginny, and rolled her eyes. "Draco and I -" She broke off. Despite her miserable state, Hermione found her ears pricking with interest.

"Draco and you what?"

"Nothing," said Ginny with an elegant shrug. Hermione studied Ginny out of the corner of her eye. Ginny's scarlet hair and gold cloak stood out like beacons against the snow. When students argued over who was the prettiest girl in school, it usually came down to an close choice between Blaise Zabini and Ginny. Ginny, in Hermione's opinion, was easily as pretty, but she didn't try as hard as Blaise did. Hermione wondered for

the hundredth time what had caused her rift with Draco. They had been quite close when they'd all returned to school in September, and then, quite suddenly and with no explanation, they were no longer speaking. In fact, unless it was at a Quidditch match, they seemed to try never to be within a hundred yards of each other.

Ron had been ecstatic. Hermione, although she tried to hide it, had also been pleased. And Harry had barely noticed that anything was happening at all.

Harry. Hermione's heart turned over, and she against raised her eyes to the dark tree line in the distance, searching for a familiar dark head and scarlet cloak...

Ginny saw them first. "Look," she said, and rose to her feet, her gold cloak swirling around her. Hermione squinted where Ginny was looking, but her eyesight wasn't as sharp as the other girls: she saw only a vague dark approaching shape. Ginny sniffed. "They're back...might have known who he'd go running to." She turned. "I'm going back inside."

Hermione caught at her hand. "No. Wait."

Ginny waited, reluctantly. The dark approaching shape resolved itself into a clearer figure. Hermione could now see that it was Draco, bareheaded, his silvery hair bright against the dark horizon. But he was not alone; he was carrying Harry, whose scarlet cloak stood out against the snow like a splash of blood.

Hermione was down the stairs in seconds. In the icy silence of the night the sound of her feet crushing the iced-over snow was like the sound of breaking glass. She reached Draco's side and almost barreled into him in her haste to get near Harry, "What happened? Is he all right?"

"He's fine." Draco's eyes were shadowed, his lids touched with silver in the moonlight. "He just drank too much, that's all."

"Oh." Hermione let her hands drop to her sides. She couldn't look at Harry's sleeping face, he looked so vulnerable and so childlike in the icy light. She looked up at Draco instead. "So he passed out?"

"Well, he woke up briefly, but he called me Professor, and then he demanded to be taken to Buckingham Palace because he was late for high tea with the Queen. When I didn't let him run for the train he became abusive, so I knocked him out and here we are."

Hermione shook her head. "With friends like you, who needs severe head injuries? I cannot believe you let him drink that much."

Draco looked at her with big eyes.

She sighed. "On the other hand, you did carry him all the way here."

Draco shrugged. "I couldn't leave him on the floor of the .. ah... Three Broomsticks. I did a Legerus spell to make him lighter."

"Did you now?" It was Ginny, who had come to stand behind Hermione. She pointed her wand at the unconscious Harry. "*Finite incantatem*," she said.

There was a brief flash of light, and Draco stumbled forward and nearly lost his balance as his burden assumed its normal weight. Hermione reached forward and caught at Harry, and together with Draco she helped lower him to the snow-covered ground, where he made a faint sleepy noise, rolled over, and put his head on his arms.

Draco straightened up and looked at Ginny. His light eyes were flashing with rage. "That was stupid, Weasley," he said. "I might have dropped him."

"Like you care," said Ginny, tossing her thick red curls. "You could have done a Mobilicorpus spell on him and gotten him here. You didn't need to carry him. You were just showing off to impress Hermione."

Hermione stiffened in surprise. What had gotten into Ginny? She looked at Draco, almost afraid what she might see. His eyes were narrowed as he looked at Ginny, his mouth a thin hard line. "What a rich and inventive fantasy life you lead, Weasley," he said coldly. "I can only assume that it's because your ordinary life is so colorless and boring."

"At least I have a life," snapped Ginny.

"Right and it consists of waiting around outside school at two in the morning for other people's boyfriends to show up, because you haven't got your own."

"You don't have to prove how hateful you are," Ginny said icily. "I already know it." And she turned on her heel and walked back up the stairs, yanking the heavy front doors open with venomous force before disappearing inside.

Hermione turned and looked at Draco. The angry look had disappeared from his face, and there was an odd light in his eyes. Without looking at her, he said, "If you start asking me what happened between me and Ginny and telling me what a great couple we were, I will bury you up to your ears in snow."

"Can I ask you how you can possibly stand dating Blaise Zabini instead?"

"Have I ever answered you when you asked me that?"

"No, but I thought tonight might be different."

"It might, in fact, be the night your boyfriend freezes to death, unless you get him inside." Draco looked pointedly down at Harry, who was still lying on the ground with head pillowed on his arm. Hermione doubted he was in any danger of freezing, since he was lying on his cloak, which she had charmed with a Warming Spell back in October.

"He looks so cute," she said.

"Debatable," said Draco, and stepped back. "But he's all yours now. Have a good night, and don't let him throw up on you."

"Aren't you going to help me get him inside?" she asked.

"No," said Draco. "Get Weasley to help you." She knew he meant Ron; even when he called Ginny "Weasley" there was a notable difference in tone when he was referring to her than when he was referring to her brother.

"I don't know where he is," she wailed.

"I'm sure you can find him," said Draco, and walked past her, taking the stairs up to the front door two at a time, the moonlight flashing off the silver embroidery on his cloak. She wondered if he were going after Ginny. Ginny hadn't looked like she wanted to be gone after. Still, with those two, you never knew.

Ginny was halfway up the stairs to Gryffindor Tower when she heard his voice behind her. "Weasley. Wait."

Despite herself, she turned around. Draco stood at the foot of the stairs, wrapped in his black cloak. The snow in his hair had melted and made little rivulets down the sides of his face, running into his collar. Behind him, through the window, she could see the night sky printed with a thousand silver stars the color of his eyes.

She said, "What do you want?"

"I think it would be best if you didn't mention tonight to anyone," he said. "At least in regards to Harry."

Ginny narrowed her eyes. "I already promised along with everyone else that I wouldn't mention that you two were friends."

"I know," Draco said. The unspoken comment hung between them: But that was before. "I meant about his drinking too much. The teachers won't like it and it could affect whether they let him play. He's had trouble already with his marks this year. You know that."

"Do you care about anyone besides Harry?" She heard the ice in her own voice, and was surprised. Where did I learn to talk like that? The answer was immediate: From him, of course. "And Hermione, I suppose. But then, we agreed not to talk about that."

"I'm not asking you to promise anything for me," Draco said. "But Harry is your friend as well."

Ginny felt the muscles in her shoulders and back tighten. "You don't keep your promises," she said in a low voice. "Why should I?"

"I never promised you anything," said Draco. His voice was calm. He pushed his hair back from his forehead and the torchlight caught on the seal ring he wore, and glittered.

"You implied that -"

"You chose to read an implication into my behavior," said Draco. His eyes were narrowed slits of silver light. "That's not my fault."

Ginny felt a painful band of cold tighten around her heart. She knew this was not true. Draco had not pretended his feelings for her. But they had already had this conversation, and it was no use trying to get him to say anything different or new. But when she thought back to Harry's birthday party, Draco's hand on her hand as they descended the stairs, and his eyes when he looked at her, and all the letters she had written him over the summer, rage boiled up in her, so violent and so tragic that it was almost pain.

"You're a bastard," she spat, without thinking. "Just like your father."

Draco stiffened. A brief flicker of emotion darkened his eyes: it could have been hurt or rage, or simple surprise. Then it was gone. "Actually," he said, and his voice was bitter, "I'm a bastard in a way that's entirely my own."

Ginny had nothing to say to that. She turned around and went up the stairs, and Draco did not follow her.

It was near dawn, and the room had begun to fill with light. "The sun's coming up," she said, rolling over in the darkness until her bare shoulder touched his. "We should be getting back."

"No." His voice was distant, sleepy. "Let's stay here. Let them find us. Who cares?"

"Oh, Ron." She propped herself up on her elbow and looked down at him. He lay with the sheets tangled around him, red hair pasted against his forehead with sweat. This room was one of the few at Hogwarts that wasn't drafty in the winter. In the pale gray dawn light that streamed

through the high window, the mark on Ron's forehead where Rowena Ravenclaw had kissed him stood out pale and silver. "You know we can't do that."

"I know." He pulled her down so that she lay crosswise on top of him, and kissed her mouth.

"Nobody can know about this," she said urgently. "About us."

"Yeah. I know that too." His lips found her throat. "I don't like the lying, though."

"It's just for now," she said, her voice a little hoarse. Her resolve had begun to weaken and she found herself leaning into his kisses. When he stopped she made a disappointed noise and looked down at him beseechingly.

His blue eyes laughed up at hers. "I thought we had to get back?" he said.

"Well," she whispered, "maybe not quite yet," and she let him pull her down into his arms.

Author notes: NB: Elizabeth Thomas is named in honor of our beloved Ebony. Malcolm Baddock, Milicent Bulstrode, Blaise Zabini, and Graham Pritchard are all Slytherins in canon, and Dex Flint is obviously Marcus's younger brother. The unpleasant Tess Hammond is a creature of my own imagination.

References:

"I don't know," said Harry, his voice dripping acid. "I'm afraid I accidentally got in line for 'shred of moral decency' instead." **Buffy.**

Fortunately I cleverly used my spine to break our fall." **Blackadder.**

The night is young and we have umbrellas in our drinks." **The Tick.**

'Where to start? 'Get me a present.' 'Take me to Hogsmeade.' 'Buy me that bracelet.' 'Make love to me right here on the floor.' 'No, not like that, like this.' 'Stop wasting time and get your trousers off'."

"Which do you want me to do first?" **Blackadder.**

"You think too much, such men are dangerous." **Julius Caesar,**
Shakespeare.

Draco Veritas Chapter Two: New Skin for the Old Ceremony

Draco sat in the embrasure of the window in his small bedroom, watching the sun rise over the Forbidden Forest. The sky was a pale wash of mother-of-pearl, scorched with fire just over the treetops; the crystalline winter air was without any clouds. Dawn light poured in through the arch-shaped window, the shade of blood and roses, touching his pale face with a color it would otherwise not have had.

It was light enough now to read without a torch or candle lit. In his hand was the parchment that Rhysenn had delivered to him the night before. It was a sheet of clean white parchment bearing a single word in stark black unfamiliar writing.

Venio.

Slowly he let the letter fall from his hands, and as it fell it burst into flames, so only ashes landed on the bare stone floor, and settled into the gaps between the stones. In a few moments, the letter might never have existed at all.



Hermione jerked awake with a start. Her lids felt heavy and her eyes were dry with exhaustion. She turned over, careful not to wake Harry, who was asleep beside her on top of the coverlet. He had fallen asleep with his red cloak wrapped around him and she had given up trying to get him to

loosen his death grip on it: she figured it was warm enough in the room, he wouldn't freeze.

She turned so that she was lying on her side, and looked at him. He was sleeping, a heavy drugged sort of sleep. One arm was flung wide, the hand resting on her pillow and half-open, the fingers curled in. It made her think of a baby sleeping: a trusting, undefended sort of gesture. His other arm was curled in against his stomach, his fist shut tight over the lightning scar that bisected his right palm. His black hair rayed out over her pillow; the shut lids of his eyes were bluish with tiredness and his jaw and chin were also bluish, where he had not shaved.

A lancing pain went through Hermione as she looked at him: fear mixed with protectiveness mixed with love. Through the clear pane of his unconscious face, she could see through to the child he had been, the little boy with the too-big clothes and the uncooperative hair, tough and stubborn and trusting and brave. She remembered the first time she had ever put her arms around him. *Harry, you're a great wizard, you know.*

He had shaken his head. *I'm not as good as you.*

Me? Books! And cleverness! There are more important things -- friendship and bravery - and, oh Harry - be careful --

She remembered seeing him after that, in the infirmary. She had been quite sure he was dead, and when she had seen him alive again a sort of terror had possessed her and kept her from embracing him - a terror perhaps that having not lost him in that instance, she was once more vulnerable to losing him again. She carefully moved closer towards where he lay on the bed, so that her hand rested on his side and rose and fell with his breathing as he breathed. He seemed to tense under her touch, and very slowly his eyelids fluttered and rose, and he opened his eyes. Without the glasses, they were clear windows of green glass, fringed with black lashes.

She held her breath, waiting. Would he be angry - would he remember their fight - would he remember last night, after she had brought him upstairs to her room? Although all he had done was fall asleep immediately, pushing away her hands as she tried to help him off with his boots, his wet jacket.

But his green eyes were still foggy with sleep, and he smiled at her tiredly but without surprise, as if he had expected to see her there when he woke up. He turned so that he could hold his arms out, and she went into them and let him clasp her tightly, feeling the residual dampness of his cloak under her hands, his soft breath stirring the hairs at the nape of her neck. They lay like that for several minutes without speaking before she felt his grip on her slacken, and he released her, moving his right hand up to touch her face.

Very softly, she said, "How are you feeling?"

He cleared his throat, and winced. "I'm in bed with my shoes on and I feel as if someone took a lemon wedge, taped it to a two-ton weight, and dropped it on my head. Other than that, I'm fine." He smiled at her. "And you're here, which cancels out the bad stuff." The smile turned into a puzzled look. "Did we.... do anything last night?" Hermione smiled at him sweetly. "What, you don't remember our first time?"

Harry sat up like a shot, and then clutched his head. "Owwwww," he moaned, and looked at her imploringly. "We didn't! Tell me we didn't."

Hermione crossed her arms and looked at him with narrowed eyes. "Why, would that be a bad thing?"

"If I didn't remember it, it would be a *very* bad thing," he replied.

Hermione flipped her curls back and shrugged. "You were far too out of it to do anything other than collapse on the bed after being sick all over some books in the common room - I think you owe Neville an apology."

"I wasn't sick on you, was I?"

Hermione smiled. "How romantic. No, you weren't sick on me. You weren't sick on Draco either, which is disappointing. I wonder how he would have handled that."

"Badly, I suspect." Harry put his hands up to his temples. "I barely remember anything from last night after..." He went suddenly very pale. "After..." She watched as awareness flooded into his expression, followed by shock, followed by horror. "Oh, God," he said, sounding numb. "Oh,

God. Last night. What you must think of me. I don't know what got into me--"

"About a quart of vodka, from the look of things."

"I think it was gin," he replied distractedly. He looked at her, pale and remorseful. "Hermione, I -"

"Went to a strip club. I know."

Harry looked as if he might fall off the bed. "You know? How do you know?"

"You," she said, and poked him with a finger, "talk in your sleep."

"Oh." Harry looked very embarrassed, which she had always thought was rather cute - his ears turned red and he bit his lip. "I, uh -"

"Who's Angelique?"

"Angelique?" Harry floundered. "She was, um, the bartender."

"The *topless* bartender?"

"Y-yes. Well, she had a lot of hair."

"Really." Hermione's voice dripped scorn. "And was Snape really there playing the clarinet?"

"Hermione!" Harry cast aside the pillow he had been holding with a gesture of despair. "I don't know how I ended up at the *Sleazy Weasel*, it just happened, and I'll make it up to you, I'll buy you and Ginny copies of the *Playwitch* swimsuit calendar -"

"I heard Charlie was February," said Hermione, intrigued.

"-Just forgive me."

Hermione blew out a breath of exasperation. "Oh, Harry, for God's sake, I don't care about that. So you went drinking, so you went to the - uh, *Sleazy Weasel*, what a ridiculous name, I don't care, I know exactly where to lay the blame for all that, and that's on Draco. But I don't even blame

him, he was just trying to cheer you up and if it had worked, for Heaven's sake, I'd be the first person thanking him. I've been so worried -"

"I'm not just sorry about that." He stood up and took her by the wrists, lifting her to her feet. She rose along with him, and stood, tilting her head back to look up at him. She remembered when she had been taller than he was. No longer. "There's also what happened in the common room. I'm sorry about that. I was a total git, and - forgive me, please."

Hermione hesitated.

Harry's hands tightened. She could feel his grip braceleting her wrists and looked up to search his face. Behind the sheer green color of his eyes was concern, and even a rising panic. He was afraid she wouldn't forgive him, and why? *Because he knows that whatever it is he's hiding from me is something serious, and if I knew what it was, I would be angry. Very angry.*

"Of course I forgive you," she said. She heard her own voice as if at a distance: remote and a little cold. "There's almost nothing you could do that I wouldn't forgive you for and you know that."

A little of the fear went out of his expression, but some anxiety remained, like the afterimage of sun against closed eyelids. There was always that darkness there in his eyes. Hermione thought of it sometimes as the darkness of that broom closet under the stairs, the shadow that could never quite leave him. "Then what..."

"I don't know what's bothering you, Harry," she said. "But something is. You think I can't tell?" She pulled her wrists out of his grasp, took his hands and turned them over. Along the side of his right hand was an ugly bruise and on both palms were the faded half-moon imprints where nails had been dug into the skin. "You're beating yourself up about something, literally as well as figuratively. And if you don't tell me what it is that's tearing you apart, then you put a gulf between us. And if one day I can't reach you across it, then you have no one to blame but yourself."

She raised her eyes to his face, and for a moment saw the shutters drop from his expression, exposing for a moment the Harry she knew - vulnerable, bewildered, fiercely loving. Then his eyes slid away from her face. He said, "Just give me a little more time."

She sighed. She felt very tired, but then again, she had hardly slept the night before. "Do what you need to do, Harry."

"I love you," he said. His tone was hopeful, a little defensive. But she reacted to the declaration anyway, as she always had. She raised her face and he kissed her gently, the light stubble along his jaw and chin brushing her skin. She put her arms around him then, and he held her, his face bowed down into her hair, his hands clasped across her back. But even as they stood locked together, seemingly as close as two people could be, Hermione felt the distance between them and knew that it had not been breached.

Breakfast. Ginny poked morosely at her plate of eggs and toast. She wasn't sure why she was in such a low mood - perhaps it was nervousness over the match that afternoon, or perhaps it was the fact that she hadn't slept well the night before. She had lain awake in her bed, thinking of Draco's face when he said, "I never promised you anything." His expression so blank, those gray eyes so illegible. She thought the blankness was worse than the coldness he sometimes showed. At least coldness was a feeling. The blankness was just - nothing at all. And it was exasperating. Sometimes she wondered if people fell in love with him so easily because he could be so unreadable - like a beautiful, empty house. You could dream anything into it.

She wondered if Blaise knew how to read him, or if anyone did. Harry, maybe. When he tried.

Argh. Ginny ate another bite of eggs, and refrained from looking at the Slytherin table, which she had gotten good at. Draco was impossible. Totally impossible. There were lots of other attractive boys at school. Seamus Finnegan for instance. There he was across from her, eating porridge with a fork. With his dark blond hair, blue eyes, and Irish accent, Seamus was certainly appealing. Not a bad Quidditch player either. So why wasn't she interested in *him*?



"Ginny?" Seamus was giving her a peculiar look. "Have I got something on my face?"

Ginny realized she'd been staring. "Oh. Uh. No."

"Yes you have got," said Dean, looking around. "A bloody great lot of freckles."

"Have not," said Seamus amicably. This was true - Ginny, being a Weasley, knew a lot of freckles when she saw them. Seamus had only a few, on the bridge of his nose.

"Have to."

"Have not."

Ginny abandoned Seamus and Dean to it. They were capable of going on like this for ages. She looked hopefully around the table once again, as if Harry, Hermione or Ron might have spontaneously appeared there since she'd last looked, but no - they were all still late to breakfast. Next to her, Lavender and Parvati burst into a fresh spate of giggling. Ginny was able to catch, amidst the giggles, the words *Draco*, *so* and *cute*. She threw her fork down and looked up to see that they were indeed staring over at the Slytherin table, where Draco was engaged in conversation with Malcolm Baddock.

Ginny sighed. Ever since Hermione had, probably unwisely, told Lavender and Parvati that Draco Malfoy wasn't so bad when you got to know him, they'd felt free to express the crushes on him that they'd probably had all along. Just watching him get up and down from the Slytherin table at mealtimes had become something of a spectator sport for them.

"You know, in a way it's lucky he's in Slytherin," said Parvati a bit mistily. "Green really suits him."

"Oh, for goodness sake." Ginny rolled her eyes. "Listen to you two. 'Here comes Draco Malfoy, let's all pitch our knickers at him in a mad fit of passion.' I mean, really. Whatever happened to Gryffindor pride and --"

"There's no point pitching our knickers at him," interrupted Lavender severely. "He's dating Blaise."

Ginny put her milk glass down with a thump. "Sarcasm is just lost on you, isn't it?" She wondered, not for the first time, what they would say if she told them that she'd shared several passionate lip-locks with Draco over the summer and that he wasn't anything special. She dismissed the idea:

firstly, because they wouldn't believe her anyway, and secondly because it wasn't exactly true. "Anyway, since when are you two close with Blaise?"

Parvati shrugged. "You can't infringe on another girl's territory, even if she is a Slytherin. It's the Girl Code of Conduct."

Ginny raised an eyebrow. "The Girl Code of Conduct?"

"It's like the Wizard Code of Conduct," said a familiar voice in her ear, "only with more corsets."

Ginny turned around to see her brother in the process of taking the seat beside her. "Ron!" she said, astonished. "You look awful."

He did look awful, or at least as if he hadn't slept all night - his hair was a mess and there were nearly-black circles of exhaustion under his blue eyes. But his grin radiated good humor. "Thanks, Gin. I know I can always count on you to fluff up the old ego." He held out a hand. "Eggs," he added.

Ginny handed him the plate of eggs. "Did you not get any sleep, or what?"

Shoveling food into his mouth, Ron did not answer. A moment later Harry and Hermione had joined them at the table. Neither of them looked particularly rested either, although this surprised Ginny less. Last time she'd seen Harry he'd been unconscious in the snow, and she surmised that Hermione had probably been up taking care of him all night. "Hallo!" she sang cheerfully. Harry winced. Hermione, whose skin seemed nearly translucent with tiredness, smiled at her wanly. "I'm so glad we have a match against Slytherin today," added Ginny breezily. "Harry and Ron just look ready to mop the field with them. I've got a suggestion, Harry. When it looks like Draco's just about to catch the Snitch, why don't you throw up on him?"

"Eurgh," said Harry, looking green.

"We'll do fine," said Ron, discreetly shoving the water pitcher in Harry's direction. "Rehydrate, Harry."

While Harry dutifully drank the water, Hermione looked at him anxiously. "Oh, go to Madam Pomfrey, would you?" she said finally. "I just know she

must have Hangover potions around somewhere, and I haven't got time to make you one before the game. They take at least a day to prepare."

"All right." Harry waved his hand feebly. "I'll go. I'll go before History of Magic."

"That's good," said Ginny. "Because right now you look like you couldn't fly if they shot you out of a cannon."

"You're just annoyed because I went drinking with Draco, and you don't like him," said Harry, irritability making him forthright.

"*Shhh*," hissed Ginny, almost upsetting her milk glass. "His fan club will hear you."

"Draco has a fan club?" said Harry with frank amazement.

Ginny jerked her chin down the table towards Lavender and Parvati, who were now giggling with a few of the sixth-year girls. "Yes, and they're having a meeting right now."

Ron snorted. "Is there some problem with the bridge they normally meet under?"

Hermione choked on her pumpkin juice, then giggled. "Ron..."

"Yes?"

Hermione gave him an innocent look. "Nothing." She put her glass down and smiled. "I was just about to say that I've got some Pepperup Potion in my trunk if you need it. You look a little tired."

"I'm not tired," said Ron, and yawned hugely. "I'm fine."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "You do remember we have a prefects' meeting at two o'clock don't you?"

"Good point," said Ron. "No Pepperup potion for me. It'd be too cruel to deprive me of the opportunity to sleep through one of those meetings."

"And the mystery of why they ever let you be Head Boy deepens," said Hermione, shaking her head. "What'd you do - take a leaf out of Fred and George's book and blackmail them?"

Harry reached over and thumped Ron on the back. "Ron here happens to have many fine leadership qualities," he said.

"Yes," agreed Hermione. "He's currently leading the House in least amount of homework done, most amount of butterbeer consumed, and most number of letters received from suspicious French tarts with silly names."

"Right," said Ron, "because *Hermione* isn't a silly name at all."

"This isn't about my name -" Hermione began indignantly, then jumped. "Ow! Ron!" She glared at him. "I cannot believe you kicked me under the table. That is so immature."

Ron smiled at her pleasantly. Ginny remembered the time that someone - Draco, she privately suspected - had changed the lettering on his Head Boy badge so that instead of reading "Ron Weasley, Head Boy" it read "Ron Weasley, Smug Bastard." Ron had not been amused, despite the fact that years ago, when Fred and George had done much the same thing to Percy, he had thought it was hilarious.

Perhaps, she mused, Harry hadn't been at all thick to turn down the Head Boy job after all.



The roof of the Prefects' Hall disappeared into raftered darkness overhead. The round table that sat in the middle of the room, around which generations of school prefects had sat, was scarred with the marks of years - the incisions of quills, sliced initials, stains of spilled ink. In the center of the table was a slightly raised silver ring, about ten inches in diameter.

The north wall of the room held two stained-glass windows, one gold, one blue; the south wall's windows were green and scarlet. Ron stood at the head of the table, his back to the east wall. There was a long white finger of clear window behind him, mazed with frost, and through it, more whiteness was visible - snow, caught in the bare branches of trees, the colorless spark of sunlight off icicles. In front of all the whiteness, Ron's bright hair and scarlet jumper stood out like burning banners.

"This meeting will come to order." He rapped on the table with a hand, and grinned. "All right, everybody, sit down." He jerked his chin towards Draco, who was still standing by the door. "Malfoy, get over here and sit down. You're late."

The other prefects - each house was granted two prefects a year, from fifth year on up, making twenty-four in total - turned and looked at him. Pansy Parkinson, the other Slytherin prefect, rolled her eyes and pushed the chair next to her out so that he could sit down.

The back of each of the Slytherin prefects' chairs was embossed with a curling silver snake. "Sit," she said.

He didn't. His eyes scanned up and down the table and came to rest on Ron. "Where's Hermione?"

Ron looked irritable. "She couldn't make it. This is going to be a short meeting and she's empowered me to act on both our behalves."

"Really." Draco came around the table slowly and flopped into the chair next to Pansy. This put him directly on Ron's left side. He pitched his voice low, "You don't know where she is, do you?"

Ron, shuffling parchments, pretended to ignore him.

"She wouldn't just miss a meeting for no reason. She loves meetings even more than she loves me."

"She loves syphilis more than she loves you, Malfoy," hissed Ron.

Justin Finch-Fletchley, sitting farther down the table, raised an eyebrow. "Did someone say something about syphilis?"

"I was just telling Ron that with a little ointment, his symptoms should clear right up," said Draco blandly.

"I hardly think syphilis is an appropriate topic for a prefects' meeting," said Pansy, shaking her head so that her earrings jangled.



"That's true," said Draco. "I think we should discuss more important issues, like this conspiracy of silence that pretends that the Astronomy Tower is actually used for astronomy, when we all really know that people only ever go up there to snog each other senseless."

"I have used the Astronomy Tower for astronomy," said Justin irritably.

"Yes, well, you're just a sad no-hoper, aren't you, Finch-Fletchley?"

"Congratulations, Malfoy," said Ron loudly, speaking over the chorus of irritated whispers that had followed Draco's last remark. "Five minutes into the meeting, and you're already disruptive. And you wonder why everyone takes an instant dislike to you."

"I just figured it saved time," said Draco, but he raised his hands up, and shrugged, smiling peaceably. It was a polite, bland smile that didn't reach his eyes. "I'm ready to talk business."

"No, you're ready to shut up and listen. Say one more thing and it's twenty points from Slytherin." Ron raised his wand, and waved it towards the center of the table, where the Hogwarts emblem was emblazoned inside an etched silver circle. "*Ascensus orbis*," he said, and the silver circle detached itself and rose into the air, spinning lazily. Ron watched it until it hung, spinning, about a foot above the table. Then he spoke. "This meeting is now in progress. All right then, first order of business... Motion to have all school prefects engage in search for Trevor the Toad --- unanimous vote of nay. Sorry, Neville."

Neville, who was not a prefect but had been allowed to sit in on the meeting to hear the result of his request, looked resigned.

"All right, then, the Seventh Year Pub Crawl," said Ron, shuffling more papers. "Last year it was a disaster, with at least six underclassmen having taken Aging Potions to try to fool the security barriers, and two sixth-years drinking an entire bottle of Giant wine and hexing each other. One of them still has vestigial antennae sticking out of his head. We can't allow this kind of thing to happen again this year."

"Well, what can we do about it?" asked Padma Patil. As she spoke, the spinning circle turned blue for Ravenclaw.

"I think we need some more specific rules," said Justin, and the sphere turned gold. "Like, that Fizzy Lifting Drinks can only be consumed *inside*."

Everyone chuckled. Nobody at the table had been at the previous year's Pub Crawl, but they'd all been told about Eric Sorenson, the seventh-year who had floated almost to the height of the Hogsmeade church spire and had to be retrieved by townspeople on broomsticks.

"Well, which establishments are involved this year?" asked Padma.

"Fred and George are turning Weasley's Wizard Wheezes into a winery..." said Ron.

"Weasley's Wizard Winery?" asked Draco as the sphere turned green.

"Uh-huh," said Ron shortly. "The Three Broomsticks, of course, the Hog's Head and the Shifty Lemur, plus Florean Fortescue is bringing his ice cream cart up with Butterbeer sorbet, Honeyduke's will be providing free candy, the Book Nook will have herbal teas for those who wish to enjoy the event in an unintoxicated manner -"

"Wimps," commented Draco quietly.

"-and the chip shop will be open as well. Now, it's really a pretty simple event. Everyone gets a parchment as they leave, explaining when each establishment will be offering refreshments, and of course the events will be staggered. Who wants to hand out the parchments?"

Everyone looked shifty, but eventually Pansy volunteered, mostly, Draco suspected, because she didn't have a date for the event.

"All right, now the main question is keeping the younger students from trying to sneak along. Sixth years especially think they're too old for the Yule Ball," he added, shooting a look at the sixth-year prefects, who grumbled quietly. "Now, in terms of solving that problem..."

Ron's voice slowly faded from Draco's consciousness as the exhaustion of not having slept much the night before had begun to press in on him. He was having a difficult time keeping his eyelids from drooping. Shading his eyes with his hands, Draco looked down at the table, hoping it would seem as if he was lost in thought, and shut his eyes. The sound of the other voices in the room receded like a wave drawing back, and the darkness of sleep gathered him in.

"Where is my servant?"

"He is in the other room, my Lord. He has brought what we sought with him, and asks again your forgiveness."

A sharp, indrawn hissing breath. "Let him in."

It was the same tower room, although the furnishings had multiplied. Atop the long table against the wall were piled a dizzying array of magical objects. Silver flasks and phials, mortars of jade, clear alembics. Cauldrons

whose cold contents glowed an eerie bluish green. He viewed the room at a new angle now, facing the two men who stood side by side looking down at the etched pentagram on the floor. Behind it he could see a wall lined with shelves. The shelves held all manner of things: jars of mummified parchment, charts of the heavens, crucibles, miniature braziers and urns, several stands of candles and what looked like an athanorum - an alchemist's oven. A tapestry depended from the south wall, almost brushing the long table: it depicted a skull with flowers growing from its empty eye sockets, and words embroidered beneath it:

I am the assassin against whom no lock can hold.

"It might not be the right mirror, my Lord," said Lucius Malfoy anxiously, looking sideways at his master. He was wearing dark crimson robes today, banded with black. He had often worn red into the woods when he and Draco had gone hunting together years ago. "It hides the blood," he would say.

"It will be," said Voldemort, "the right mirror."

A tall slotted door in the wall slid open, and Wormtail entered, carrying in his hand a medium-sized mirror. It was a beautiful thing: the reflecting surface made of polished silver and the body and the handle made of bronze. The handle was twisted like a tress, the border full of stylised engravings of whirlwinds and birds. It reminded Draco vaguely of the workmanship done on the scabbard of Harry's Gryffindor sword.

Wormtail went down on his knees in front of the Dark Lord, his head bowed. Voldemort stretched out a pale, long-fingered hand, and took the mirror from his servant. From his vantage point behind the Dark Lord, Draco could see Voldemort raise the mirror in his hand and glance thoughtfully at his own malevolent expression.

Then he opened his hand. The mirror slowly rose about a foot into the air and hovered there, directly in front of the Dark Lord, as if it was caught in a strong magnetic field.

The Dark Lord's voice was amused. "Find the Heir," he said.

His reflected face vanished as the surface of the mirror clouded over, as if a storm of blue smoke swirled up from its depths. When the blue shadows

cleared, Draco saw with a jolt a narrow corridor, and walking along it - himself. It was strange to see himself from this angle. The Draco-who-was-not turned a corner and stepped through a set of unfamiliar doors onto a barren battlement, adorned with carvings that looked familiar but he couldn't place just how.

"My Lord," said Lucius finally, breaking the silence, "What do you see?"

"I see your son." Voldemort's voice was cold, and sinuous as a snake. "I am watching your son in the mirror. It has been tuned to find him. I see him now. He bears the Weapon of Real Death. Did you know that?"

"I knew that, yes. Terminus Est. He has had it since the summer."

Voldemort lifted the mirror higher. "He is handsome, your son."

Lucius looked uneasy. "You asked for him to be made that way, Master."

"Yes. People of great beauty and charisma make excellent leaders. People wish to follow them. I was handsome myself, once."

Lucius looked even more uneasy. "Yes, of course."

"And Lucifer himself was God's most beautiful angel."

Lucius was silent. Wormtail seemed pale and distracted. His gaze was on the floor.

Very slowly, Voldemort lowered the mirror. "Have you read the Bible, Lucius?"

Lucius unclasped his hands, which had been resting against his black robes. "Master, I would -- "

"Perhaps you haven't. It was a staple in the Muggle orphanage in which I was raised." The Dark Lord put his hand against the mirror in which Draco's face was clearly reflected, his outspread fingers touching the boy's face. "And God so hated his only son," he said softly, "that he gave him to the world, that the world might have him."

"Loved," said Wormtail, breaking the silence unexpectedly.

"What's that?"

"The quotation," said Wormtail. His voice was nervous and uneven. "And God so loved the world -- "

"Do you presume to correct me, Wormtail?"

"N-no. No, my lord."

"I didn't think so."

"Malfoy! Hey! *Malfoy!*"

At the sound of his own name, consciousness came back to Draco like a dash of cold water in the face. With a start, he focused his eyes, seeing the room reel around him before it settled into stillness. The first thing that came into focus was Ron's face: vexed and irritable, his blue eyes sparking like gas flames turned low. "Malfoy, are you not *listening?*"

"You told me if I said anything it would be twenty points from Slytherin," said Draco meekly.

"Yes, well, obviously not when I'm *addressing you directly!*" Ron looked ready to lunge across the table and shake Draco senseless. "So are you willing to, or not?"

"Of course I am," said Draco, without the slightest idea what he had just agreed to do. The room was still spinning slightly and his head was full of echoing voices. There was a sharp pain behind his eyes.

Ron looked surprised. "That's settled, then." He put down the parchments he had been holding, and grinned. "All right, well, we look well on our way to having the best Seventh Year Pub Crawl ever. And if the new chaperon system works, we may be well on our way to being the first class ever to achieve immortality through *not* having to cope with a bunch of drunken fifth-years getting us all in trouble." Ron grinned. "Even Malfoy can't argue with that."

"Well, it does interfere with my plan to achieve immortality through not actually dying," said Draco, and then, at Ron's expression, added hastily, "But ... I can rethink that."

"Anything else?" Ron asked. When everyone was silent, he waved his wand again and murmured, "*Orbus deceleratus*," and the whirling silver circle returned to its place in the center of the table, and was still. "Meeting adjourned," announced Ron, and set down his wand.

As the prefects filed out the doors, Draco felt a tap on his shoulder. It was Pansy Parkinson, her pug nose wiggling with curiosity. "I can't believe you agreed to stay back from the pub crawl and make sure no low-formers try to sneak along to Hogsmeade," she said, shaking her head. "Whatever possessed you, Draco?"

Draco stopped in his tracks. "I did *what* - I mean, I'm not exactly sure."

"Blaise thought you were going to go with her - she'll be furious!" Pansy walked off, shaking her head, the bright pink ribbons in her hair trembling. Draco looked after her thoughtfully.

"Furious, eh?" he said to himself. "Ah, well. Always a silver lining, I suppose."

"Hey, Weasley! Wait up."

Ron turned at the sound of the familiar voice, a dull sense of foreboding settling over him. Draco was walking towards him along the corridor, having ditched the other prefects some ways back. Ron stood where he was, eyebrows raised, as the Slytherin boy approached him. Whatever Draco wanted, he was sure it wasn't going to be anything good. Even short conversations with Draco were usually sarcasm rallies. No matter what their shared history, Ron just couldn't seem to muster up the warmth towards Malfoy that Harry could, not even a shadow of the easy camaraderie those two shared when they weren't in public.

Ron cocked his head, trying to define what it was about Malfoy that so annoyed him, even now - perhaps it was the way he wore his school robes, as if they weren't ordinary black school robes but something much finer.

As usual, and against regulations, the buckles on his robes were undone, showing the expensive clothes underneath - a dark gray sweater today, and black trousers, and the ubiquitous green-and-silver tie. Draco was shorter than Ron, but his slenderness and something about his bearing made him seem taller than he was.

"You're not wearing your prefect badge," said Ron wearily. "Technically, I could take points from Slytherin."

"Technically, I *am* wearing my badge. Just not where you can see it."

Draco smiled his most charming smile, and Ron resisted the urge to kick him. "What do you want, Malfoy? I haven't got all day."

"I want to know where Hermione is," said Draco with admirable directness.

"I don't know," said Ron tightly. "Why don't you ask Harry? Or don't you know where he is either?"

Draco's eyes went unfocused for a moment. "He's in the north fifth floor stairwell, going upstairs."

Ron shook his head. "Don't do that, it's creepy." He stared as the other boy's eyes came back into focus and Draco looked at him inquiringly. "Right, I forgot. You don't need to find Harry to talk to him, so why don't you just ask him..."

"Because he doesn't know either," said Draco. "These days he doesn't know where *he* is most of the time. Anyway, he doesn't need the extra worry."

"Whereas I do?"

"*You* can handle it," said Draco, once again demonstrating his spectacular ability to make a compliment sound like an insult.

Ron sighed. "I do not know where Hermione is," he said, enunciating clearly. "She didn't tell me she wasn't coming to the meeting, she just didn't show up, and when and if you find her, you can tell her for me that I don't appreciate her sticking me with you lot on my own. Got that?"

"I shall make some very strongly worded statements on your behalf," Draco promised solemnly.

Ron stared at him. "Do you ever say anything that isn't sarcastic?"

"No," said Draco cheerfully. "Not really."

"Why do you want to know where Hermione is, anyway?"

"I'm worried about her." Draco's voice was uninflected, giving away nothing. "I wanted to talk to her."

"She'll be at the match this afternoon, she goes to all Harry's matches, you know that."

"I won't have a chance to talk to her then, I'll be too busy winning the game."

"Fat chance, Malfoy," said Ron, with some satisfaction. "You can't win against us. Harry's developed some new strategies that will knock you off your Firebolt."

"Really?" Draco looked politely interested. "Well, then you'll get to give me mouth-to-mouth resuscitation again, and we know how much you like that."

"*Shhhh!*" Ron hissed frantically, whipping around to see if anyone had overheard. "Okay, now, in what universe is that 'never talking about it again *ever*'?"

"Oh yeah," said Draco, with great unconcern. "Oops."

Ron threw his hands up into the air. "Oh, go away, Malfoy. And if you want to find Hermione so badly, look where we always bloody look. She's probably in the library."

The library was nearly deserted: of the few students who sat studying at the long tables, Ginny recognized only Slytherin Chaser Malcolm Baddock, Hannah Abbott, engrossed in a tome entitled *The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch*, and Parvati Patil, sound asleep in a

corner. Even the vulture-like Madam Pince was nowhere to be seen. Probably lurking in a corner of the stacks, waiting to catch unsuspecting students who dared dog-ear their textbook pages. Ginny leaned back, her eyes flicking to the clock on the south wall above the door. The face of it changed daily, depending on what school activities were scheduled. Today, in the four-o'clock spot, the words *Slytherin vs. Gryffindor Quidditch Match* glowed red and green, matching the decorations on the Christmas tree in the corner. Ginny was pleased to see that she had at least another hour and a half before she needed to start getting ready for the match; plenty of time to read another chapter in the latest tale from *Witch Weekly's* Dragon Heartstrings romance novel series. She had become hooked on them after finding a secret stash of the novels under her mother's collection of kitchen towels. She knew they were trash but she couldn't help herself; this newest one was entitled *Passionate Trousers*, and so far she was enjoying it very much.

The heaving waves on the vast, black ocean beneath the castle sent a salty spray flying up over the rocks, leaving beads of water to form on the exposed alabaster skin of the tall, flame-haired witch who stood on the high balcony. Her salty tears mixed with the sea spray as she faced Tristan de Malcourt, the wizard who had loved her in every way it was possible for a woman to be loved, and then abandoned her to a cruel fate.

Rhiannon laughed mirthlessly as she faced him now. "Tristan," she said. "I suppose you thought I would not find you."

"On the contrary." His firm gray eyes flashed. "Thou art a very determined witch."

She raised her chin. "Yes, I am."

He turned to walk away. "It will do thee no good, Rhiannon. Thou must find another, I cannot love thee."

"No!" She flung herself at him, and almost bounced off his broad, muscular chest, so broad and muscular was it. "It is you, and only you, that I must be with!"

"What art thou saying?" He spun to face her, his robes swirling around his sturdy, muscular calves. "Thou knowest I need my space!"

"It is too late, Tristan! For - I am with child!"

He goggled at her.

"Yes," she repeated. "With child!"

The words hung in the salty air like overripe peaches. She gazed at him, her huge dark eyes filling with tears - and then he had lunged towards her and gathered her to his broad, manly chest, raining fiery kisses on her full, flowerlike lips. "Rhiannon!" he cried. "This changes everything! My darling! My angel! My light! My life!"

Heedlessly she abandoned herself to his caresses as his long, elegant masculine fingers dispensed with her bodice buttons more swiftly than a practiced Summoning Spell. She leaned back against the balustrade and let him do with her as he wished, her breathing becoming a hungry panting as he shoved her skirts up around her thighs, his hands stroking her creamy skin, and she tried to banish the worrying thought that perhaps she should tell him that the child she carried was not his after all, but the child of the evil Dark Wizard Morgan, Tristan's most hated enemy...

"She should probably tell him," said a voice behind her. "Otherwise, I envision things getting very rocky for them farther down the road."

Ginny spun around with such suddenness that *Passionate Trousers* was knocked to the floor at her feet. She felt herself go scarlet. She had never quite realized before how garish the cover actually was - "From the Dragon Heartstrings series! Where bosoms actually heave!" it proclaimed in glittering letters, just above the illustration of a swooning witch being given what looked like CPR by a shirtless blond wizard in alarming velvet trousers. As she watched, the wizard looked up from what he was doing, winked, and blew her a kiss. This would have been embarrassing in any case, but was doubly so with Draco Malfoy standing next to her, looking tall, blond, and immaculately composed. As she looked from the book to him his mouth twitched into a slow smile, his gray eyes lighting up.

"Oh," she said awkwardly. "You."

He bent down and picked up *Passionate Trousers*, whether to glance at it or hand it to her she didn't know or care. She reached out and yanked the book out of his grip, shoving it under her Astronomy textbook.

"I was enjoying that," he said, looking injured. "Especially the part where she could feel the proof of his rampant passion pressing against her -"

"Pig," she hissed at him, under her breath.

"No, I'm pretty sure that wasn't it. Rhiannon doesn't seem like the sort of witch who'd have a pig, or much interaction with barnyard animals of any sort."

"Unless you count Tristan," said Ginny irritably.

"Now, I rather like Tristan," said Draco. He shifted the book he was holding from his right hand to his left, and gestured expansively with it. "He seems like a wizard with the right sort of ideas."

Ginny sniffed. "He heartlessly *abandoned* Rhiannon and left her in the clutches of her evil uncle Rodrigo!"

"Well," Draco pointed out, "he didn't *know* Rodrigo was evil. He thought he was doing what was best for her, since he couldn't tell her he was on the run from the Council of Wizards."

"It was *not* what was best for her!" Ginny said heatedly. She could feel the blood rushing into her face and knew she was probably scarlet with annoyance. "She loved him and without him her life was meaningless."

"Better than having no life," said Draco rather coldly. "Better than having your soul sucked out by minions of evil."

"And what do *you* know about it, Draco Malfoy?"

"Listen, Weasley-"

"How long were you standing there reading over my shoulder, anyway?"

"I-"

A sharp voice interrupted them. "Miss Weasley! Mister Malfoy! What is this disturbance?" It was Madam Pince, looking poisonous. "I cannot believe you are shouting in my library."

Ginny blushed. "I'm sorry, Madam Pince."

"What could be of such urgent importance that you have to shriek about it?"

"It was just a private argument," said Draco, widening his eyes and looking angelic. Madam Pince was unmoved. "Well, take your little lover's spats elsewhere from now on."

Ginny gasped. "*Lover's spats?*"

Madam Pince raised her eyes. "Yes, Miss Weasley?"

"This wasn't a lover' spat," Ginny protested firmly. "It was a completely love-free spat."

Madam Pince shook her head.

Draco looked amused.

"I don't even like him," Ginny added, indicating Draco with a gesture.

"I really don't care," said Madam Pince. "Ten points from Gryffindor, ten points from Slytherin." She shot a look at Draco. "And you a prefect, too," she said, sniffed, and walked away.

"Blaise will be so disappointed in you," said Ginny, with heavy sarcasm, turning back to Draco. But he was already gone - halfway across the library on his way to the door. She watched in mingled exasperation and disappointment as he vanished through the door, and it was only when he was quite gone and she turned back to her books that she realized he had taken her copy of *Passionate Trousers* with him.

Entering the small room that served as the NEWT-Level Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, Draco was surprised to see Hermione already there, sitting at the table, apparently absorbed in a book entitled *A Runic*

Alphabet. Since it was such a small class, boasting only seven students (Harry, Hermione, Eloise Midgen, Terry Boot, Neville Longbottom, Padma Patil, and Draco himself) it was conducted around a battered old wooden table, with Professor Lupin chatting and consulting with them as if they were all old friends.

Draco slid into the seat next to Hermione and spoke under his breath. "I cannot believe you skived off the prefects' meeting."

She didn't look at him, but her cheeks turned dark red. "I know. I forgot."

"You forgot? How could you forget? You live for that kind of thing."

"I just forgot."

"I was worried about you."

Now she did look up. "Worried? What did you think had happened to me?"

Her eyes were very dark and curious. She had her hair pulled back into a messy bun stuck through with a quill that held it in place. He hesitated for a moment, unsure how to explain that what had struck him was a vague and terrible sense of apprehension, sourceless and inexplicable. She seemed to see the hesitation in his eyes, or maybe she saw something else there, because when she spoke, it was rapidly and with some nervousness. "Why were you looking for me?"

"Because you speak Latin," said Draco.

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "So do all the professors."

"I know." Draco leaned back and put his feet up on the table. He could tell that Hermione was struggling to restrain herself from telling him not to do that, although he couldn't see the problem himself -- his shoes were lovely, dark brown leather boots in suede so soft you could have taken a nap on it. Hermione just did not appreciate the finer things in life.

"Hermione, what would you say if I said '*Venio*' to you?"

"I'd ask if you wanted me to make up the spare bedroom."

"What?"

Hermione smiled. "It means 'I come,' or 'I am coming' with the implication being that whoever it is, is going to arrive soon."

Oh." Draco studied the tips of his boots. "That's all it means?"

"Yes."

"How ostentatious."

Hermione blinked at him. "What are you going on about?"

Draco waved a dismissive hand. "Nothing."

"Come on, tell me."

"Not until you tell me why you skived off the meeting."

Hermione looked guilty. "Was Ron *very* angry?"

"Angry? Not so much, really. More...annoyed and distracted." Draco shrugged. "Weasley's been acting odd lately, if you ask me."

Hermione set her book down on the table. "Yeah. I know what you mean. Sometimes I wonder if..."

"If what?"

"If he's seeing a girl."

"Only if he closes his eyes and concentrates, I'd imagine," said Draco.

Hermione looked at him irritably. "I know *you* think that, but Ron is really..."

A voice spoke from behind them. "Ron is really what?"

Draco looked up, knowing already who it was; if he'd not been paying so much attention to Hermione, he would have heard Harry come into the room. He was looking down at Hermione, and there was that oddness between them that had become so pronounced of late. Draco knew now

what was making Harry withdraw from Hermione, and suspected he could imagine that she would withdraw herself in response. But it was a difficult thing to watch happen without being able to do anything about it.

Hermione dropped her eyes. "Really busy," she said. "Ron is really busy."

"Oh." Harry sat down next to Hermione, so that he was facing Draco across the table. "Well, he is Head Boy."

"I know." Hermione looked at Harry more closely. "You look better. Did you go to the infirmary?"

Harry nodded but was prevented from saying anything by Lupin walking in, followed by Padma and Eloise. A moment later Terry and Neville had joined them and the class was complete.

Lupin sat down. "The time has come for us to talk about your end-of-year projects," he said, shuffling quickly through his books and selecting a stack of parchments. A soft little groan ran around the table, and Lupin looked up with a smile in his dark gray eyes. "It won't be that bad. First off, I'll be dividing you up into teams." He consulted a parchment, his eyes flicking quickly down the list. "Neville and Terry, Padma and Eloise. Harry and Draco. Hermione, you're on your own."

Hermione nodded and Draco wondered if she had worked this out with Lupin ahead of time. He was mildly surprised that he had been put with Harry but suspected that this was because Lupin knew that he was unlikely to get along with anyone else.

"Each team will have the rest of the year to work on their projects," Lupin continued. "Now, I've tried to make these projects flexible to allow you to use your own inventiveness - a great part of being a successful Auror requires quick and adaptable thinking. It also requires creativity-"

"I plan to make a diorama," said Draco solemnly.

"No," said Lupin patiently, "not that kind of creativity."

"But it'll be an evil diorama. And then Harry can destroy it."

Lupin's voice held a warning tone. "*Draco.*"

Draco subsided, although next to him, Harry's shoulders were shaking with silent laughter. Hermione rolled her eyes.

"The tasks," Lupin went on, "are divided into three categories: pure research, curse-breaking, and Dark creatures." He began handing out parchments, which the students passed along the table. Draco took his and glanced at it quickly. *Describe a method you might use for breaking the Medusa curse. Successfully train yourself to resist the Imperius Curse. (Not you, Harry.) Research the history of Azkaban. Describe how you might elude a Tracking Curse. Write a history of the Founders of Hogwarts; please include the Ten Years' War and the founding of the Auror's Guild.* The next one made Draco smile. *Conceive a plan by which a Manticore might be defeated. (Not you, Harry, or Draco either!)*

"There are thirty in total," Lupin added. "Each set of two students please select three projects to do, one from each category - Hermione, since you're alone, you need do only two. On the first of May, we'll start presentations of final projects, on which your final marks will depend. Any questions?"

Neville raised his hand slowly. "What if we want to research a curse that isn't on this list?"

Lupin's eyes darkened. "Then talk to me after class."

"Will we be able to get books out of the Restricted Section?" asked Padma.

Lupin nodded. "Just give me a list of what you need and I'll sign it out for you."

Draco only half-heard this, his attention had begun to wander. He looked out from under the fringe of his lowered lashes, first at Harry, who had regained his seriousness and was busy studying the project list. He looked severe, and not a little tired. Which was probably good, Draco thought, since that afternoon he would be flying against Harry, they might as well both be exhausted or it would be an uneven match. Harry exhausted was still a just-about-unbeatable Seeker. Nothing broke his concentration: not pain, not fear, not anger, not tiredness. Not anything.

Draco moved his gaze to Hermione. She was taking notes. Typical. She had her lower lip caught between her teeth as she often did when she was

thinking. He looked away. His glance slid over Padma (pretty enough but not his type) to Neville (looking very tense) to Terry (utterly boring; Draco had never spoken to him) to Eloise (she had briefly dated Crabbe in fifth year, and by all accounts even kissed him, which had always struck Draco as a biological impossibility) to Lupin, who to his surprise was looking back at him. "Draco," he said. "You seem elsewhere."

"Just excited about my upcoming project, Professor," said Draco innocently.

Lupin gave him a nice-try-kid look. "See me after class, Mr. Malfoy."

Busted! Harry's voice sang out in Draco's head. He shot his soon-to-be-stepbrother an annoyed look, but Harry's expression was quite innocent. He remembered when it would have been a near impossibility for Harry to hide anything he was feeling. No longer. He resolved to try to prevent Harry from picking up any more of his bad habits in future.

Class ended five minutes early to allow the students time to get down to the Quidditch pitch. Harry left with Hermione, his arm around her, the parchment with their assignment on it shoved into his bookbag. *I'll see you on the pitch*, he said, half turning around.

Draco nodded slightly in response. When he turned back to Lupin, he found the DaDA professor folding his parchments into a leather carrying case with gold buckles that Draco didn't care for - gold was so affected. Then again, they wouldn't very well be silver, would they? "It was very reassuring to hear that you're looking forward to your assignment, Draco, especially since outlines of your project choices will be due after Christmas vacation." He smiled. "Which is why I put you and Harry on the same team, since I know you'll be spending your holiday break together."

"He'll be with Hermione too. You didn't need to put him with me."

"She can work alone. You can't."

"I can -"

"You'll work better with Harry," said Lupin, with finality. "Is this a problem?"

"No...uh, no." Draco was a bit taken a back at his own behavior. He *wanted* to work with Harry. He rather suspected he had just been fishing for information about Hermione's private project. *Bad Draco*, he told himself experimentally, but nothing happened -- self-criticism was not his forte. "I don't mind working with Harry."

"Good, because Dumbledore and I discussed it and we want you together."

"You talked about us?"

"We often do." Lupin smiled and picked up his case. "Surprised?"

"I suppose not." Draco held the door open for Lupin to walk out of the room and they started down the corridor together. "I don't imagine it'd do any good to ask what you say?"

"None," said Lupin pleasantly.

"Any reason you kept me after class?"

Lupin stopped walking and faced him, his eyes thoughtful. "Just to tell you that if you and Harry run into any problems, I want you to come directly to me. I'll also be at the Manor over Christmas, and available to you then as well."

"Oh. Okay." Draco didn't know what else to say -- he had never in his life gone to a teacher for extra assistance, and he knew exactly how Harry felt about going to teachers for anything at all. It was a bit of a mania with Harry, doing things on his own; then again, Draco supposed he himself was much the same way. "Will do."

"And you have a good idea what kinds of materials you might need?"

Draco nodded. "We're sorted, thanks."

Lupin nodded. "All right. Good luck on the game, then," he added, and surprised Draco by shaking his hand. "May the best team win."

"I thought you were a Gryffindor fan, professor," said Draco curiously. "I thought you were all in Gryffindor, you and Harry's dad and Sirius and..."

"Is that what you thought?" said Lupin mildly, and turned away. Draco looked for a moment after him with great curiosity -- what did he mean by that? -- before he turned and bolted for the Quidditch pitch, anxious not to be late.

Ginny tried to stifle a yawn. She was sitting between Elizabeth and Seamus on the uncomfortable wooden benches in the Gryffindor Quidditch changing room, listening to Harry give his pre-game pep talk. Everyone seemed to be paying rapt attention, even Ron, who was fiddling with the fastenings on his knee guards. Harry was excellent at pep talks, which had always surprised Ginny since he was so unenthusiastic in general about public speaking. But Quidditch, like Hermione, was a subject that brought out the passion in him - he gestured with his hands while he talked, his black hair dancing, green eyes sparking animatedly. He also, she thought, looked his best in his Quidditch uniform - the burgundy-and-gold striped sweater, light corduroys, and knee-high leather knee protectors suited him. Harry tended not to wear the regulation elbow protectors, as he claimed they slowed down his reach and made him less effective at catching the Snitch, but he did wear the fingerless black leather gloves, at least in winter. Back when she had had a crush on him, the outfit had tended to reduce her to speechlessness; even now, it made her stomach do a friendly little flip. Of course, he wasn't the only boy she knew who looked good in his Quidditch uniform, but still. There was no harm in silent appreciation.

She blinked as everyone around her started to their feet - apparently the pep talk was over and she hadn't heard a word of it. Seamus, Colin, Elizabeth and Dennis filed past her; Ron half-stood, then cursed quietly as the strap on his knee guard broke. Harry glanced back, but Ron waved him away. "You go on," he said, and grabbed for his wand. Harry nodded and reached for his Firebolt; Ginny followed suit, and went after him down the corridor that led out to the Quidditch pitch. They joined the rest of the team there, and a moment later Ron caught up with them.

It was a bright, brisk winter afternoon, so sharply chilly that Ginny's eyes stung. She raised her head, feeling the cold air touch the tip of her nose, her uncovered ears. Her hair was bundled under a black woolly hat, and

the fingerless gloves on her hands were tipped with mini Warming Charms, but the chill still seeped into her skin.

She glanced around. The ground below the pitch was scraped clean, as flat and icy as a skating rink. The diminishing sunlight striped it with bars of gold. Behind the pitch rose the Forbidden Forest, the trees immense and winter-black. Stripped of leaves and outlined by the snow, they had a thorny, medieval symmetry.

The crowds whooped and cheered from the stands, many of them clutching orange-glowing Hot Potatoes, a new product from Weasley's Wizard Wheezes that exploded in House colors after the game ended. Ginny saw Hermione sitting towards the front of the stands, a white knitted cap covering her curly brown hair. She was flanked on her left by George and his girlfriend Jana, who came in from Hogsmeade for the game. Both the twins liked to watch their little sister and brother fly, and were trading off coming in for the matches when the joke shop wasn't too busy.

Ginny raised her hand and waved, and Hermione waved back. Her cheeks were scarlet with cold and, together with the white cap and her curling dark hair, made her look very pretty. Next to her, George made a rude gesture. Ginny was surprised, until she realized that he was looking past her at the Slytherin team, who had just come out onto the pitch opposite them.

She felt herself tense. Gryffindor-Slytherin matches were always the worst, for a multitude of reasons. She hated how fierce and embattled they always were, and how tense they made Harry - she knew, since he had told her back in September, that he and Draco had made a pact never to use their telepathy during a game, as it was both too distracting and could be considered cheating. She knew that Draco was the best flier in the school, after Harry, and the only one who could really challenge Harry on his own ground; she also knew that Harry didn't like having to fly against him, although he never let it get in the way of the game. Harry was nothing if not consummately professional where Quidditch was concerned.

As if he knew Ginny was thinking about him, at that moment Harry tapped her on the shoulder. "You all right?" he asked.

She knew what he meant; they were all always asking her if she was all right when Draco was around. She looked over at the unmentioned subject of the question, who stood as he always did before a game, arms crossed, broomstick at his feet, his team ranged out behind him as if they were arrayed on a stage. Everything was drama to him, she thought irritably. Everything was about staging. He had probably calculated for hours where to stand so that the sunlight struck him just so, lightening his fair hair to silver and making both it and the silver stripes along his green-striped sweater shine like new metal.



His forest-green Quidditch cloak hung just so, making a perfectly even line from his shoulders down to his polished black boots. Like Harry, he eschewed the elbow protectors and wore the fingerless leather gloves, although his were cleaner and gleamed as if they were new. In fact, the

whole Slytherin Quidditch team gleamed as if they had just been polished, from Malcolm Baddock's new Asteroid 2000 broom to Blaise's red-gold hair, which was not, like Ginny's, stuffed under a woolly hat, but instead poured like a river of fire down her back to her waist. They had made some non-regulation alterations to their uniforms - they wore black instead of the usual light-colored corduroys, and all of them wore lace-up leather boots instead of trainers. Polished silver buckles held their emerald robes in place over their shoulders. The general overall effect reminded Ginny of the team of horses who drew the Beauxbatons carriage: sleek, matching, purebred, mean as hell.

"I'm fine," Ginny said to Harry, who nodded. It was almost entirely true.

Madam Hooch blew her whistle. "*Captains greet each other!*" she called out, and the two captains stepped out onto the pitch, Draco first and then Harry. They met in the middle and each held out their hand to be shaken. Harry's cheeks were scarlet with cold, Draco looked pale and composed and untouched by the weather, and Ginny was struck as always by the similarity in their bearing and build, despite the superficial differences of coloring and uniform. Both were tall and slender without being thin, with the light build that made for exceptional Seekers. Each bent his head as their hands touched, and as the dying sunlight flared and faded behind them, she marveled at the incongruity of it -- Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy, shaking hands. A year ago she would have thought that would be impossible; now she wondered that they managed to keep their manner towards each other so cold and reserved in public. They had faced death before shoulder to shoulder, yet as they broke off the handshake, turned, and repaired to their respective teams, they might never have known each other at all.

As the crowd above them roared and cheered, Blaise stood on her tiptoes and kissed Draco lightly on the mouth, as she always did before games, "for luck." He barely moved or acknowledged the gesture, seeming to accept it as his due, which annoyed Ginny despite the fact that she knew he was in some measure acting. But then he was always in some measure acting. "Some people make scenes," Harry had said to her once. "Draco makes three-act plays."

Madam Hooch's whistle blew, snapping Ginny out of her reverie. She seized her broom and kicked off with the rest of the team. Fourteen players rose up towards the darkening silver sky.

Harry immediately rose high above the rest of them, casting about for the Snitch. Draco flashed upward as well, a blur of green and silver at the corner of Ginny's eye. She pulled her attention away from the boys as something huge and black shot towards her - a Bludger, hit by Tess Hammond. Ginny ducked it as Colin flew in front of her, knocking the Bludger back towards Blaise with a mighty heave.

Blaise elegantly swerved around the Bludger, shooting Colin a vicious look as she did so. Colin looked taken aback and slightly frightened - Blaise was an expert at nasty looks.

"Ginny! Over here!" It was Elizabeth Thomas, the Quaffle in her grasp. She hurled the ball towards Ginny, who caught it, turned, and streaked towards the other end of the pitch. The cold air cut at her face, making her eyes sting. As she neared the Slytherin goalposts three dark figures shot in front of her -- Blaise, Graham, and Malcolm. As Chasers, they couldn't touch her, but they could certainly block her way. Colin drove them off with a well-directed Bludger, but precious seconds had elapsed, and as Ginny started forward Tess and Milicent swooped in, furiously hitting Bludgers towards her, and she was forced to toss the Quaffle towards Seamus. Blaise intercepted the throw, passed to Malcolm, and the Slytherins scored, Malcolm swatting the ball through the posts so hard it nearly took Ron's head off when he tried to block it.

There was a discontented rumble from the stands. Nobody liked a Slytherin victory except, of course, the other Slytherins.

Ginny bit her lip, and when the Quaffle came back into play, this time she dove after it fiercely. She swatted it away from Blaise (which gave her no small amount of pleasure) and sped across the pitch, casting the ball towards Seamus. He caught it and headed away with it, and as she looked after him she saw something glint below her --

The Snitch.

It shot by beneath her feet, and Harry and Draco rocketed after it, neck and neck, two blurs of green and scarlet. As Ginny turned to look down at

the flying golden ball and its pursuers, something flashed out at her from across the pitch. It was like a sudden flash of light stabbing into her eyes, but it was not light, it was darkness - a hard and agonizing and painful darkness, sharpened to a point and driven right between her eyes. She felt her limbs stiffen, cold tearing at her insides like knives. Her fingers gone frozen and lifeless, she could no longer hold the broom. The world turned upside down, the sky at her feet, the glittering ice-covered world racing up to meet her. She screamed once before everything went black.

Racing Harry towards the Snitch, Draco's world had narrowed itself down to just himself and his goal - the tiny golden object only feet away. He heard the rushing of wind in his ears, the pounding of his heart - and then, cutting through everything else, a scream.

Ginny's scream.

He whirled his broom around in midair, almost dislocating his shoulder as the Firebolt jerked sideways. Vaguely somewhere off to his left he heard Harry swear fiercely, but he wasn't paying attention. His eyes were fixed on the scarlet-robed figure on the drunkenly swaying broom - he saw Ginny fight for control of her Nimbus 2000, lose it, and tumble sideways. She fell without another cry, struck the ground, and lay motionless.

Screams rose from the crowds in the stands. Charlie and George were on their feet, shoving their way through the packed mass of people. Somewhere Professor McGonagall was shouting. The Gryffindor and Slytherin teams were in disarray; Harry was shouting and Draco supposed he should rally his own team as well, but it seemed a very small thing and anyway it was too late - he had pointed his broom towards the ground at a near-vertical angle, causing him to shoot downward with a speed that would have made even Wronski jealous.

The cold wind sang in his ears like music. He imagined he had never flown so fast, or so hard. He hit the ground on his hands and knees with bone-breaking force, and scrambled to his feet. All around him the other Quidditch players were flying down like a shower of falling stars, red and green. He ran towards the splash of crimson against white snow that was Ginny. He was somewhat conscious of chaotic milling up in the stands, of the sound of yelling voices, and then he reached her and went down on

his knees in the snow next to her, and he could see that not all the scarlet that she lay against was Quidditch robes. *Blood.*

As he reached for her, her dark eyes fluttered open, and she looked up at him. There was a blank sort of wondering in her gaze, as if she were both surprised to see him there and had accepted it as inevitable. "Draco?" she said, her voice surprisingly steady.

"Yeah." His voice came out in a whisper. "It's me."

He reached his hand towards her and then something grabbed him violently by the back of his robes and hauled him into a standing position and he whirled around and saw that it was Seamus Finnegan.

The Gryffindor Chaser was white with fury. "What do you think you're doing, *Slytherin?*" he spat, as if it were the worst insult he could think of. "Stay away from her."

The rest of the Gryffindor team had landed. Draco saw the Creevey brothers approaching, backing up Seamus, Elizabeth running forward, and Ron, white and stricken-looking, pushing past the others to get to his sister. Tess and Dex were still in the air, but the other Slytherins were on the ground, standing at a distance, staring in surprise. He could feel Blaise's eyes on him, but he didn't care.

He turned back to Seamus. "Get out," he said, enunciating each word clearly, "of my way."

"Why? So you can gloat? What's your problem, Malfoy? We don't want you here."

"Get out of my way," Draco repeated. He heard his own voice as if it came from very far away. "Get out of my way, or I will kill you. I'll break every bone in your fucking body, Finnegan. Don't think I won't."

Seamus paled markedly but held his ground. "I'm not going anywhere."

Draco drew his left arm back. He was never sure later what he meant to do - hit Seamus, or hurl a spell at him. It didn't matter. As his arm went back a firm hand grabbed his wrist and held it, hard.

He turned around, already knowing whose hand held his wrist. Harry. He was pale but composed, his green eyes dark and serious.

I can't let you do this, Malfoy.

Draco looked as if Harry had hit him. *What?*

Harry tightened his grip on Draco's wrist until he could feel the pulse pounding there, swift and even. He knew it must be hurting him but the other boy showed no sign of pain, no sign that he even really knew what was going on around him. Vaguely, out of the corner of his eye, Harry could see Seamus turning away, looking rattled but relieved, and going to kneel with the rest of the team next to Ginny. Behind the tight knot of Gryffindors Harry could see Madam Pomfrey approaching quickly, a magical stretcher at her side. At the edge of the pitch stood Charlie and George, being held back by several professors, including Snape.

Let me go, Potter. There was an evenness to Draco's tone that was almost frightening. *You've got no right --*

I have every right. It's my team, my teammate. Look to your own team.

Something flashed behind Draco's eyes for a moment, something wild and furious. *You can't tell me what to do, Potter.*

Oh, yes I can. We made a promise, Malfoy. Every second we stand here is another second that will make everyone suspicious. And for what - you can't do anything for her-

You don't know that!

If you go near her the rest of my team will try to kill you.

Not if you stop them.

If you don't listen to me, I won't help you. I won't hold them off.

Harry -

No. I can't help you if you don't help yourself.

Draco whitened further. *Let me go* -- His next thought came with the sharp force of a blow, cracking like a whip inside Harry's head. *Let me go, Potter. Let me go!*

With misgivings, Harry released his grip on Draco's wrist, and the other boy took a stumbling step back, and then another. He faced Harry, his chest rising and fell as swiftly as if he had been running; his eyes were nearly black with fury and something else. Harry had seen him look like that before and it hit him like a blow and hurt him as it always did, but there was nothing he could do.

I'll tell you what happens, Harry thought. *Just - go. Please go.*

Draco's eyes narrowed into slits and he looked as if he were about to speak; then, as suddenly as he had whipped around in midair, he spun on his heel and ran off the pitch, up the hard-packed snowy path to the school, his boots cracking the ice underfoot with the sound of breaking bones.

Harry watched him go, then turned, and out of habit searched for Hermione in the stands. He saw her immediately - she was on her feet, her hands over her mouth. As he looked at her, she took a step back, turned, and dashed away from the pitch, up the path towards school, after Draco.

Hermione's feet slipped and slid on the ice as she raced up the stone front stairs of Hogwarts. She ran without really looking where she was going, and without thinking why she was running. She had seen the look on Draco's face before he fled the pitch - fierce, furious, desperate - and it had frightened her. She ran after and towards him, without thinking why.

The entrance hall was cold and deserted. She darted left, down the hallway that led to the Slytherin dungeons. The tapestries on these walls were green, just like the tapestries that led up the stairs to the Gryffindor Tower were red. They were threaded through with gold and silver, faded from many years of maltreatment by students. Ghosts seemed to reach out of the walls and touch her as she ran. She passed a tapestry that bore the Hogwarts motto and paused for a moment to look at it, transfixed by the bold colors and the symbols. It almost seemed to her that the Slytherin snake looked about to lunge at the Gryffindor lion, the

Ravenclaw raven poised to hurl herself between them. Hermione paused — was that a voice? It was coming from farther down the hall, and so was another, deeper voice. She slowed down and turned the corner. A flight of stone stairs led down, and the voices were coming from below. She was halfway down the stairs before she recognized one voice: Draco's. And the other was a girl's.

She leaned forward over the carved stone banister. Below, in a patch of torchlight, she could see Draco standing, and facing him, looking furious, was Blaise Zabini. "Don't you walk away from me, Draco Malfoy," she was saying in a freezing voice. "Don't even think about it." The wavering light glittered on the jewelry she wore - more than most girls at Hogwarts. She had multiple rings in her ears and on her slender fingers, and jeweled clips glittered in her strawberry hair. Her eyes looked huge in the dim light, as dark and glossy green as leaves under water. "I want an explanation."

"An explanation?" Draco's voice was a thin steel dagger. Hermione could see the dark patches on the knees of his jeans, the elbows of his Quidditch robes, where he had landed in the snow. The melting snow in his hair washed pale strands into his eyes; he pushed them back with an impatient hand on which the Malfoy seal ring glittered like a malevolent eye. "Blaise, *darling*," He spit the word out as if it were an insult. "You came running after me to demand an explanation?" He put his hands on her shoulders and pushed her gently back against the wall, pinioning her there with his arms. "You should know better."

Hermione had to give Blaise credit, she didn't back down. She raised her chin, poised and furious-looking. "As if it's not bad enough that you're always goggling at Harry Potter's girlfriend, now *this*," she spat. "What is it with you and the Gryffindors?"

"You're jealous," said Draco. "Isn't that cute." He didn't look as if he thought it was cute. His expression was calm, even disinterested, but his eyes were thunderous. His hands where they rested on the wall were clenched into fists. Hermione wondered how much that had to do with Blaise, and how much that had to do with his summary ejection from the Quidditch pitch.

"It's my prerogative to be jealous," said Blaise icily. "I'm your girlfriend. Don't you *dare* try to tell me I can't be jealous." She reached up and

pushed his arms away, matching him glare for glare. "What's going on with you, Draco?" Her voice was icy silk. "I want to know."

"There is nothing going on with me," Draco said flatly.

"Then *what* were you doing?"

"What did it look like?"

"It looked like you were having a - a fit, over some *Gryffindor*, just because the little idiot couldn't hang on to her broom. And you let Harry Potter throw you off the pitch. Since when do we listen to him?"

Draco shrugged. "So I was being sportsmanlike. We can't keep on playing when the opposing team is falling off their broomsticks."

"Draco, we're Slytherins. We keep playing even if the other team gets struck by lightning and turned into a brave little pile of ashes."

"Yes, and how well has that strategy worked for us in the past? Blaise, we've lost the past five Quidditch cups to Gryffindor, and you know it. And half the reason is that the professors and the other teams can't stand us, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff will lose matches *deliberately* to Gryffindor just to make sure we don't get the cup-

"And you think if you play all nice-nice that might change?"

Draco folded his arms and leaned back against the wall, looking fed up. "Yes, I do."

Blaise stopped to ponder this for a moment. There was a sharp scarlet flush in her pale cheeks, but Hermione could sense that her anger was fading. She was, after all, a Slytherin, cold-blooded at the core and driven by practicality over passion. "You've changed," she said finally, raising her green eyes to Draco. "I don't know if I like it."

"We all change," he said. He unfolded his arms, and stood looking at her, his head cocked to the side. Every line of his body expressed tension and a just-under-the-surface anger, but his mouth was smiling. It was a cool, tense smile, radiating the promise of things which might or might not be

pleasant, but which one couldn't help wanting anyway. "You've changed since we played together when we were five. Haven't you?"

"Maybe." The Slytherin girl arched her head back, a small smile playing on her mouth. Her hands were on her hips, her shoulders back, her chest thrust forward. The provocative pose could have been copied from the pages of *Teen Witch Weekly*, but on Blaise it didn't look silly. "Do you like it?"

"That depends." Draco reached out and gently touched her hair. "Are you still angry at me?"

Blaise lowered her eyelashes. "I don't know."

"It's pretty simple really," said Draco, and lightly touched her face, running his knuckles along the curve of her cheek, over her lips, down to her collarbone. "Either you are," he said, and dropped his hands to her waist, pulling her closer, "or you aren't."

In answer, she raised her face, eyes closed and lips parted, and he kissed her. It was a slow, controlled, unhurried kiss; plainly he had kissed her this way before. Just as plainly she liked it; she went pliant under his hands, and her arms slid around his waist.

Hermione felt herself flush scarlet. Now she felt as if she were spying on something that was none of her business; even worse, she *remembered* what it was like to be kissed by Draco like that. She had never much minded his relationship with Blaise before, now she found that she did mind it, very much, and was ashamed of herself for minding.

She screwed her eyes shut. When she opened them again Blaise and Draco had separated, although not by far; Blaise was smiling up at him, and in the darkness of the corridor, his pale hair and her scarlet shone out like beacons. They could have been Ginny and Draco. But Ginny would never have smiled at him like that.

"I guess you aren't," Draco said, in a voice that made even Hermione feel a little wobbly around the knees. Oh *dear*. "Angry any more, that is."

"Not now, but if I ever catch you so much as kissing another girl, Draco Malfoy-" Blaise said, her voice breathy.

Draco cut her off with a laugh, short and mirthless. "*That won't happen.*"

Blaise looked at him languidly. Under her dark lashes, her eyes showed green as a cat's. Somehow she had managed to allow her Quidditch robes to slip off one shoulder, showing the strap of her lavender camisole beneath. Hermione had no idea how she'd done that without even seeming to move. It was a feat of engineering. "Sometimes I think I don't know you at all," she said.

"Sometimes I think the same thing."

He let Blaise go, and she stepped away from him, straightening her clothes. "I think we're done here, Draco," she said, and added: "I'll be in the common room if you want me," managing to make even that sound like an invitation to a round of unsavory but pleasurable activities. Drat the girl. Hermione watched her as she walked away, the sway of her hips mesmerizing under the dark green robes she wore. How did she *walk* like that? It wasn't at all fair. Blaise disappeared down the corridor in a swirl of green and scarlet, and as she did so Hermione glanced back down and saw Draco looking up at her.

Their eyes met, and she felt herself flush again. He stood where he was, not moving, the torchlight flaring and fading on his fair hair. Under his eyes were dark bruised shadows, and his mouth looked bruised as well, possibly from kissing. He had lost the thinness he had acquired over the summer, and she could see the slender musculature of shoulders and arms outlined under his clothes as he took another step back, tipping his head up to look at her, and the unsteady light played its shadows over his face and hair. For a moment, she saw another face superimposed over his.

"Draco," she said.

He smiled. The smile did not translate to his eyes. There was something else in them, something shadowy and despairing and primal. "What?"

"Do you love her?" she said. It wasn't what she had meant to say at all.

"What do you think?"

"I think you don't know."

"Then you give me too much credit," he said. "In the meantime - if I give you something, will you give it to Ginny for me?"

She shook her head. "Give it to her yourself."

"You don't have to tell her it came from me."

"*Draco.*" The word came out as half a wail, half an accusation. "Why are you acting like this?"

"I'm not acting," he said. "This is the way I am."

He raised his chin further, as arrogant and proud as she had ever seen him, and the torchlight flared on his bright hair and then vanished, as if a shadow had come between them and the light. In the half-darkness she saw his cool-water eyes on her, his chest still rising and falling quickly from rage and perhaps kissing, and she knew what had gone into that kiss: all the fierceness and the fury and the passion that he felt for someone, someone other than Blaise.

"You can love more than one person, you know," she said.

His eyes flashed. "Don't feed me platitudes, Hermione," he said. "You think I don't know that?"

"You don't love her," said Hermione, now certain of it. "You kiss her like you're trying to get revenge."

"Revenge on who?" Draco said, his voice tight with exasperation, or maybe it was something else.

Hermione shook her head. "I don't know."

"Well," said Draco, and shrugged. "Owl me when you find out, all right? Maybe there's a book in the library on it."

"If you think -"

"Just leave me alone," Draco said, and turned on his heel, and walked away. Hermione watched him go, the tension in her chest almost unbearable. It was getting worse - all of it. And there was no one she could talk to about it. Not Harry. Not Draco. Not Ron. Not anyone. Everyone, it

seemed, was at a loss. And she suspected that Hermione Granger, smartest witch at Hogwarts, was the most lost of them all.

Exhausted, Harry walked slowly down the long corridor that led to the abandoned armory. Once a week, on Fridays, he made this journey, always at six-o'-clock, the hour before supper. On the first day of school, Dumbledore had shown him the way. Him, and Draco.

The walls here were dusty and bare of decorations and tapestries. Harry's feet echoed on the stone floor and the sound made him feel strangely lonely. He had been in the infirmary for a half hour before Madam Pomfrey had shooed him and the rest of the Gryffindor team out the door. He had made a cursory search of the castle but had not been able to find Hermione, and then it had been time for his appointment with Draco and he'd had to go. He felt the ache of not having been able to find her like a dull pain in his side. He did not want to be without her, especially not after the traumatic events of the game. But he also knew he had no right to require her company, not after the way he'd been acting lately. He wanted to do something to show her what she meant to him, but he couldn't. He felt her being torn from him and there was nothing, it seemed, that he would or could do about it. A dull sense of inevitable loss immobilized him.

He had reached the end of the corridor. The door in front of him was old, scarred, dark-red wood banded with bronze. He pushed the handle down and the door swung open. He went in, and shut it carefully behind him.

He stood in a large oval-shaped room with high windows, at least twenty feet above Harry's head, that were barred with iron grilles. The room was empty of furniture save a long table that ran along one wall; the walls were bare of ornamentation. Instead they were lined with empty glass-fronted cases that had once held swords and shields, axes and lances, enchanted weapons of all types. Now, it was never used. Dust motes floated in the weak rays of winter twilight that lanced down through the grilled windows.

In one bluish ray of light, Draco was standing, his back against the table, his head down as if he were either thinking very hard or was very tired. Terminus Est lay in all her steel-silver glory on the table behind him, the

non-light catching the etchings all along the shaft and making them glow like fire-letters. The fragile light also lit his pale hair to a colorless sort of radiance, like mother-of-pearl. He was still wearing his emerald-colored Quidditch robes, although in the darkness they looked nearly black.

"Hallo, Malfoy," said Harry, by way of greeting.

Draco raised his head. There were etched shadows along the sides of his mouth, his darkly polished eyes. "Hey there, Potter."

Harry took another step into the room. "She's all right," he said, "since you wanted to know."

"Is she awake?"

"No. Not yet." Harry was in the center of the room now. "Look, about what happened on the Quidditch pitch -"

"Yeah," said Draco tonelessly. "I'm sorry about that."

Harry sighed. "Malfoy..." He put out a hand and his fingertips grazed the other boy's shoulder. "I've been thinking we should stop."

"What?" Harry felt Draco's eyes dart towards the sword lying on the table behind him. "Stop fencing practice? Why?"

"No, not that." Harry dropped his hand and rested it for a moment on the hilt of the sword at his waist. It had, as always, a comforting weight. "Stop the feud. Pretending that we hate each other. If it had come down to it on the field, if I'd had to throw you off and you'd refused to go on your own, I don't know if I could have done it."

"We can't," said Draco, "stop the feud - remember what Dumbledore said."

"I know, but we could go to him, explain -"

"Explain what? That it's not fun any more?" Draco's voice was bitter. "That's doesn't matter to what we're supposed to do. *Of those to whom much is given, much is expected.* Or whatever it was he said."

"I don't feel like I've been given that much," said Harry, with a rare flash of bitterness, and Draco looked up at him for the first time. His eyes seemed very dark, panes of steel-gray glass leaded with black lashes. He looked almost angry.

Harry checked himself. "I know, it's not true. I've got a lot. Hermione and Ron and Sirius -"

"I was thinking wealth, fame, and glory."

"You would be."

Draco smiled. It was a thin smile, but genuine. "Oh, good, insults. You always know where you stand with those."

Harry shrugged. "Did you want to practice or do you want to do that homework assignment Lupin gave us? It's your choice."

"I want to practice." Draco reached behind him and lifted his sword off the table. The weak light rayed down the blade and over the gilded hilt, set with its black-glass stones. The light picked out the words etched along the hilt: *Terminus Est*.

This is the Line of Division.

Dividing what from what? Harry wondered, not for the first time. Dividing good from evil, light from dark, choice from destiny? Or perhaps he was overanalyzing and it merely meant that the sword had an unusually sharp cutting edge. Which flashed down towards him now, and he raised his own blade to block the thrust, stepping forward as Draco had taught him. *Walk into the thrust, not away; this will cut off your opponent's reach.*

The swords clanged against each other and rang like bells in the silent room. Harry cut at Draco; Draco returned, and they moved in the slow unrehearsed dance of fencing around the room, neither rushing nor slowing their movements. Harry liked the practice times; it allowed him a space in which he didn't have to think; he merely let his body follow the movements it seemed to know by instinct. He cut, parried, riposted, and fell back as the blades spun against each other like sparking silver wheels. He let Draco drive him back, six steps, seven, until his back was against the wall. He let the next thrust come and ducked up under it, pushing off

the wall to get extra force. His blade clanged against Draco's hard, striking a haze of sparks that lit the air between them.

Draco fell back. "Good," he said. "Good use of the wall."

Harry didn't reply, only swung his sword again, attacking. Draco parried and riposted; Harry feinted and attacked again. He took a long step back, moving out of range, then ducked under Draco's guard and attacked. His sword rode high off of Draco's parrying blow, and struck the other boy's shoulder. There was the whisper of parting fabric, and a slice opened in the sleeve of Draco's shirt.

Harry froze immediately. "I'm sorry," he said quickly.

Draco, who had also paused, looked surprised. "It's fine."

Harry felt his fingers whiten as he gripped the hilt of the Gryffindor sword. "I could have hurt you."

Draco shook his head. "Not unless I let you. That was a good trick, but you're still telegraphing your moves. What's the problem, Potter?"

"I guess my mind is elsewhere."

"Hermione?" Draco said, and Harry felt himself nod. "Look, why can't you just tell her what you told me last night? She'll understand."

Harry looked down at his hand which, sheened with a light sweat, gripped the hilt of the Gryffindor sword. "There's one problem there."

"What?"

"I don't remember what I told you last night."

Draco's mouth twitched. "I don't suppose you'd believe it if I reminded you that you told me you're actually carrying on a mad secret affair with Professor Sprout and you've been exchanging photographs with her that involve you dressed like a giant woodchuck?"

"Nonsense," said Harry.

"Of course not."

"I would never dress like a woodchuck."

"Naturally."

"Now, a lemur maybe. A marmoset even. But a woodchuck? With those teeth?"

"Now you're scaring me."

Harry laughed. It was the first time he had laughed aloud that day. "Anyway, this is Hogwarts. Everyone knows everyone else's business. Who could carry on a mad secret affair here?"

"I thought I heard someone coming," she said. She twisted out of Ron's grasp and stood up. He tilted his head back and she could feel his blue gaze on her back as she crossed the room and looked anxiously out through the high grilled window set in the door. Outside, she could see an expanse of empty corridor stretching in two directions. There was no one there.

"You worry too much," said Ron. He was seated on the floor, shirtless, in jeans and trainers. His Gryffindor Quidditch robes were tangled in a heap beside him, where the two of them had been lying. His eyes were shadowed. "Maybe I should go," he said. "Ginny -"

"You told me they wouldn't even let you into the infirmary," she said. "I thought she was going to be fine?"

"I know. But I feel responsible."

"Well, you aren't." She came back across the room and sat down beside him, putting her arms around him. "And you say I worry too much."

He twisted around in her embrace and looked at her. "If we did get caught," he said tightly. "If someone did find us - what would you do?"

"Ron, I-"

"What would you choose?"

"It would be just as bad for you if we were caught," she said in measured tones, "as it would be for me."

"Worse," he said. His voice was a little hard. She sensed he was probably trying to hurt her, feeling hurt himself.

She reached up and cupped his face in her hands. "I love you," she said.

He blinked. She had never said this to him before. "You do?"

She nodded. "I thought you should know."

For a moment, he still looked startled; then his face lit up and he reached for her, pulling her close. "I thought you'd never -"

"Shh." She kissed him.

"I-"

"I know." She put her fingers over his lips. "You don't have to say it. I know you do."

"Hmm," said Draco. "I suppose you're right. Unless you're willing to stand in line for the Astronomy Tower every Saturday night, there really is nowhere for would-be snoggers to go here that's private."

"What are you complaining about, Malfoy? You've got your own room, don't you? You're a prefect."

"And spacious it is, too. I only call it a room because I'm too lazy to call it 'the broom closet with sconces.'"

"We could sell tickets to *this* place," said Harry, glancing around the nearly-empty chamber. He grinned. "Especially considering the soundproofed walls."

"Nice thinking, Potter. Glad to see Hermione hasn't got all the brains in that relationship." Draco cocked his head to the side. "On that note, you seem cheerier."

"Yeah." Harry lifted his sword, and made a half-salute towards Draco.
"Thanks for the workout. It helped."

"Good." Draco paused, and looked at Harry seriously. "Potter, I've never asked you this before, but..."

"But what?"

Draco hesitated, then asked his next question in the manner of one taking a step into the abyss: "Where are your parents buried?"

Harry stood for a moment, very still. There was a strange sort of painful buzzing behind his eyes. Finally he said, slowly, "I have no idea."

Draco blinked but otherwise showed no surprise. His voice was careful. This was obviously something he'd thought about asking Harry before, but hadn't done it. "Well, someone must know."

Harry nodded, distantly. "Someone must..." *Why has no one ever mentioned it to me, ever offered to take me there? Dumbledore, Sirius, Lupin, they've never - and I - why didn't I ask?*

"Potter." Draco's voice was sharp. "Steady on. You all right?"

"Uh-huh." Harry's vision snapped back into focus; he saw Draco standing in front of him, looking worried. "Sirius would know."

"Or Lupin," said Draco.

"I'd rather ask Sirius. I was supposed to talk to him tonight anyway."

"Okay." Draco shrugged elegantly. "I just thought... it might help. You know. Closure. Maybe help you feel, uh, a little closer to them."

"Closer?"

"Sometimes you have to see things," Draco said quietly. "See them yourself - to know that they're real."

"I know they're dead," replied Harry flatly. "I've always known they're dead."

"I know," Draco said. "But lately sometimes I wonder if you know you're still alive."

Harry looked down. He felt disconnected, as he often did these days: disconnected from the room around him, disconnected from Draco, disconnected even from his own self, as if the body he looked down at, slender and clad in jeans and blue sweater, was somebody else's and not his own. One of the laces on his left shoe was broken; he had no memory of having retied it. "I used to be able to go to the Mirror of Erised and see my parents," he said. "I can't do that any more."

A slight line of confusion appeared between Draco's eyes. "Because you don't know where it is?"

"Because I don't want to look in it," said Harry. "I'm afraid of what I might see."

The fluttering pink numbers on the clock beside the bed told Ginny that it was two in the morning. She lay where she was, letting her eyes adjust to the half-lit darkness of the room. Her body ached all over, but her arm, which she had heard Madam Pomfrey describe as "snapped in half," seemed to be functioning again, and was not particularly painful.

There had been people in the room earlier, a lot of people. She remembered Madam Pomfrey shooing the Gryffindor team out the door, Harry putting his arm around Ron's shoulder as they went - Ron had looked quite shattered, Ginny would have been touched if she hadn't been so far gone on Anti-Pain Charms. She remembered Charlie coming in later, sitting by the bed and holding her hand, and bits of snow dropping off him and melting on her wrist. There had been other people in the room, but she remembered mainly Charlie. "What happened?" he had said. "What happened to her up there?"

And another voice had replied:

"We don't know. We're looking into it. No one has had a broom accident like that in years, not since Harry Potter fell off his broom his third year -"

"But that was Dementors. Ginny's a good flier, she always has been. She wouldn't just lose control of her broom like that."

"The broom is being checked for curses and hexes, Professor Weasley. Please do not overexcite yourself."

"She's my sister," said Charlie tightly. Something in his voice had reminded Ginny of her very early childhood, when Charlie had been her absolute favorite brother. She remembered him coming home from Hogwarts at Christmas, picking her up as he ran in the door in his black school robes, lifting her into the air and dangling her upside down until she screamed with laughter. Charlie had been her favorite then, although more recently she had realized that her allegiances had switched a bit, and she was now much closer to Ron. She supposed it wasn't possible to go through what they had both been through together over the summer and not become closer. "My *only* sister," Charlie added, for emphasis.

"Yes, I know she is your sister. We're all very fond of her, Charlie. We'll find out what happened...and you, you should get some rest."

The dizziness of the pain relieving charms had taken over then, and Ginny had slipped into a dazed state where the room seemed full of shifting forms. She cast her mind back: she had thought she heard George and Fred talking above her, and then she thought she heard Ron, or it might have been Harry, and she even thought she heard Snape and Dumbledore, and she definitely heard Madam Pomfrey shouting at someone, but not before whoever it was bent over her and kissed her on the cheek.

She did hope it hadn't been Snape.

She rolled over now and looked at the clock again. The number marching across its face now said that it was half past two, and she didn't feel sleepy at all. There were a number of books stacked on the tabletop - Hermione had undoubtedly left them so that she wouldn't miss out on her schoolwork. She wondered if there was anything in *A Short History of Cursing* (Harry had been very excited about that book second year, she recalled, until he had found out it contained nothing more than hexes and the like) that would explain why she had fallen off her broom. She reached out her uninjured arm and felt amongst the stacked books, then

jumped in surprise as a lighter-weight paperback fell out and onto her lap. It was her copy of *Passionate Trousers*.

Hermione walked slowly down the corridor, wrapped in Harry's Invisibility Cloak, trying to muffle her footsteps by slowing her pace. She was well aware of the irony of the whole situation - herself, Head Girl, in charge of making sure other students didn't break rules, sneaking around the school long after curfew. She was aware of it, but she didn't care. She had gone beyond that.

She found the door in the wall where the floor plans had told her it would be. She put her hand to the door and pushed; it swung wide, and she walked inside.

The room was dark. There was one window set like a cold jewel in the north wall, looking out over the grounds. She could see the snowcapped ridge of the Forbidden Forest, and a diamond half-moon shedding its milky light over the ice-black world below.

On the wall facing her, across from the window, there was a visible shimmer, like sunlight on water. She turned and walked towards the shimmer, which coalesced as she approached into what she knew it really was: a gold-framed mirror.

I show you your heart's desire.

Your heart's desire.

I guess, Harry's voice said in the back of her mind, a person's heart's desire can change.

She recalled his voice when he had told her that, the look on his face - hope and horror mixed.

No, she said back to him fiercely. I have never changed towards you. I have always been the same. I will always love you. I will always want you. Whatever I have ever done, or said, it was always and will always be you.

In a single motion she dropped the cloak, and raised her head, and looked into the mirror. One heartbeat's time passed as she stared, and then a second, and a third. On the fifth beat, her knees gave out. She sat down very suddenly in the middle of the room, on the cold marble floor, and put her face in her hands.

REFERENCES: “Is there some problem with the bridge they normally meet under?” – Frasier

“I love syphilis more than I love you” - Buffy

Draco Veritas Chapter Three: Darkness and Flood

Too early for the rainbow,

Too early for the dove.

These are the final days,

This is the darkness, this is the flood.

-LC

The worst part of being in the hospital wing, Ginny soon determined, was the flood of people who came along to "cheer you up." It wasn't bad seeing Hermione, Harry and Ron, and she didn't mind Elizabeth's visits, but when the whole Gryffindor team descended upon her at once it gave her a headache, and Charlie's fretting over her made her nervous. She felt perfectly fine and wished Madam Pomfrey would let her out of the infirmary, but she insisted on keeping Ginny there "for observation" - doubtless, Ginny assumed, because she was worried that the fainting fit that had struck her while she was flying would resurface unexpectedly.

Lavender and Parvati came to visit her on the second day she was in the hospital wing. Ginny pretending to be partly asleep while they giggled about gossip (Eloise Midgen had broken up with Justin Finch-Fletchley, declaring him to be "not enthusiastic enough about their relationship"), fashion (Pansy Parkinson had showed up to History of Magic class wearing "very dodgy-looking barrettes") and the Pub Crawl (Parvati was going with Dean Thomas, Lavender with Mark Nott.)

"But Mark's a Slytherin," Ginny protested, momentarily surprised out of her reverie.

Lavender looked unmoved. "So what? Being anti-Slytherin is *so* last year, Ginny."



"Unless you're Seamus," said Parvati, and giggled.

Ginny blinked. "What do you mean?"

Parvati was only too happy to explain. "When you fell off your broom Seamus practically *killed* Draco Malfoy to keep him from getting anywhere near you. It was so cute."

Dumbfounded, Ginny stared. "Did Malfoy look like he was - I mean was he trying to --why would he...?"

Lavender shook her head. "I don't know. We couldn't hear any of it, you know. We just saw everyone sort of go bolting towards you, and then Seamus stepped in front of Malfoy and blocked him long enough for Harry to come up and toss him off the pitch."

"Harry tossed Malfoy off the pitch?"

"I think so," said Parvati, looking thoughtful, "He just sort of grabbed him by the wrist, and then Draco stared at him for a minute and bolted off like a wild animal. It was a bit hard to tell what was really happening, maybe

Draco just ran off because Dumbledore was coming. And your older brother was with Dumbledore -- he looked angry enough to spit nails, too."

"I wish Professor Weasley would go to the Pub Crawl with me," announced Lavender, looking wistful.

"Lavender, that's ridiculous, he's a teacher and he's horribly old," said Parvati sternly, while Ginny tried not to laugh. "Anyway, we're getting off the point."

"There was a point?" said Ginny.

"The point was that we think Seamus fancies you," said Parvati.

"He does not," protested Ginny, astonished.

"He does," said Lavender, who had dated Seamus briefly herself during fifth year, although this did not inspire in Ginny any confidence that Lavender knew what she was talking about. "Why would we make this up?"

"Because you're brainless gits who like to make trouble" was on the tip of Ginny's tongue, but she bit it back. Whatever else Lavender and Parvati might be, they were not malicious, and being cranky and nervous was no excuse to be nasty to them. "Look, I'm awfully tired," she began, but it was too late - Lavender and Parvati had launched into their favorite game, a repellent exercise entitled "What Would You Rather?" which involved nominating various pairs of Hogwarts boys and determining which one you would rather sleep with.

"Terry Boot or Ernie MacMillan?" Parvati demanded of her friend.

"Terry," said Lavender.

"Draco Malfoy or Malcolm Baddock?"

Lavender thought for a moment, then giggled. "Draco Malfoy."

"Justin Finch-Fletchley or Ron Weasley?"

"Ron."

"Harry or Ron?"

"Um....still Ron, I think."

Ginny watched this with a jaundiced eye, and was alarmed when Lavender rounded on her, announcing that it was her turn. "Justin Finch-Fletchley or Ernie MacMillan?"

"Justin, I guess," said Ginny, who was interested in neither of them.

"Seamus or Dean?"

"Seamus."

"Draco or Malcolm?"

"Malcolm," Ginny lied.

"Harry or Ron?"

Ginny looked at Lavender in horrified repulsion. "Lavender, that is just...sick."

"What?" said Lavender blankly. Then comprehension dawned. "Oh, right. You had that whole....Harry thing. Sorry."

"Argh," said Ginny, as she put a pillow over her face, refusing to remove it until Lavender and Parvati finally went away.

The Gryffindor common room was a constant, Sirius thought, never changing. It had not changed since he was a student there. Glancing around from his perch in the fireplace, he cast a fond gaze over the heavy overstuffed sofas and chairs, their thick velvet coverings dulled to a shine by years of use, the throw pillows with their gold tassels, the scratched low tables, the gilded portraits on the walls. Harry was there as he had said he would be, sitting on the floor near the fire, cross-legged. He was wearing black trousers and a dark blue jumper, trainers and no socks. He looked about twelve, and very thin and tired - so thin and tired that Sirius had to bite back an exclamation of surprise.

"Lo, Sirius," said Harry quietly. "Glad you came."

It had been about a month since they had last spoken like this. Sirius recalled thinking that Harry looked a bit peaked last time he had seen him, but he had dismissed it as nerves over an upcoming Quidditch game.

Sirius tried to keep his voice neutral. "Harry. You look ... so thin. And exhausted."

"It's late," said Harry flatly. He leaned back against the side of the stuffed armchair. He had lost enough weight, Sirius noted, that the collar of his shirt was loose, falling free of the sharp "v" of his clavicles. The shadows beneath his eyes were blue against his winter-pale skin. Sirius recalled Harry stepping on to the train on the first day of school, tanned and healthy from two weeks at the Burrow. What had happened? "We had a game today. I am exhausted."

Sirius didn't feel any less disquieted. "I know. Lupin told me what happened. I'm glad Ginny's all right...Harry, are you eating properly?"

Harry looked as if he were trying to remember the last thing he'd eaten. Then he shrugged. "I'm eating fine, Sirius. How are the wedding plans coming?"

"Fine. And the adoption has almost gone through," Sirius added conversationally. "There's just a little more paperwork to be cleared up when you get here at Christmas. And Narcissa's looking forward to having you all here. Are Ginny and Ron coming down with you on the train?"

"No, next day," said Harry absently. Sirius could see he was thinking about something else.

"Have you got your dress clothes sorted out?"

"Uh-huh."

"Did you know I've changed my mind about marrying Narcissa? I think I'll be marrying Remus instead."

"That's nice."

"Harry," said Sirius darkly. "*What* is on your mind?"

"Nothing," said Harry hastily. Then he seemed to shake himself, as if brushing off cobwebs. "Actually...there is something I was wondering."

"That much is obvious."

Harry locked his hands across his knees. "It's about my parents."

Sirius looked at his godson, but his expression was hidden by his falling dark hair. "Yes?"

"Where are they buried, Sirius?"

Sirius felt his heart skip a beat. "Why do you want to know?"

"Don't answer questions with a question."

"I'm sorry, Harry, but I need to know why you want that information. What are you planning?"

Harry snorted. "Just some necromancy. A little raising of the dead, some human sacrifice."

"Harry--"

"Look, it was Draco's suggestion. He thought it might help me get closure."

"That doesn't sound much like something Draco would say."

"Well, he did, all right?" Harry's face was flushed with annoyance. "What, you don't believe me now?"

The annoying thing about teenagers, Sirius thought without being able to help himself, was that they took everything so *personally*. "I believe you, Harry. I'm just worried about you."

"They're my *parents*." Harry seemed to be working himself into a state. "I have a right to know where they're buried."

Sirius squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them slowly. "Doon's Hill," he said, and in his mind's eye saw gray-green grass stretching all around

him, a hillside blown by wind and studded with tombstones faded by years of rain. He saw a group of robed figures huddled around two joined headstones, a wizard standing by and murmuring the words of a prayer. *"Venite, benedicti patris mei, percipite regnum, quod paratum est vobis ab origine mundi..."* He saw it so clearly, although he knew that this was a fantasy - he had, himself, obviously not been able to attend James and Lily's funeral. But he had been to other funerals, he had been to many, many others. "In a wizarding cemetery."

"Have you ever been there?" Harry's voice was calm and steady.

"Once," said Sirius.

"What's it like?"

Sirius wondered what to say. It was very pretty? It was pleasant? I never want to go there again? "It's a graveyard, Harry."

"Where is it?"

"Near Godric's Hollow....if you want to go, I'll take you. After your N.E.W.T.s."

"But that's months away!"

"Harry...I understand why you want to go, and I also understand why you're upset, but closure isn't a simple, easy thing. And there's a reason why no one has brought you there yet..."

"What?" Harry's eyes were bright in the dark room, his black hair fading into the shadows around him. His face was pale, marked like a ghostly fingerprint against the darkness.

"Because it isn't safe. As far as I'm concerned, it's safe for you to be at school, and here at home with me, and that's it. I don't even know about the Burrow anymore. I love you very much, Harry, but I'm not a blood relation of yours, and unless a blood relation is with you, Dumbledore's magic can't protect you. If we go, we're going to have to bring the Dursleys -"

"No! No!" Harry exclaimed, leaping to his feet. "That's like - I won't go with them. How can you even -"

"But, Harry --"

"You don't understand," said Harry, and the wretchedness in his voice made Sirius pause. He sounded not just angry, but as if he had made a bleak realization. "You don't understand and you don't want to. You don't care - I thought things would be better if I lived with you, but you're no different than the Dursleys, you lie to me about *everything*."

"What are you saying, Harry? You want to go back and live with the Dursleys? Is that it?"

Harry made a little gasping sound, as if Sirius had hit him. Immediately, Sirius regretted what he had said - he hadn't meant it to sound as it had, but before he could apologize or even speak, Harry turned around and raced out of the room. Sirius heard the sound of his boots clattering on the stairs, the door to the boys' dormitory being flung open, and then silence. He waited there for several minutes afterward, sure that Harry would come back.

But he didn't.



Her heart broke as she thought of Tristan, who she had last seen being borne away unconscious, draped over the saddle of the beautiful but wicked Lady Stacia, cousin to the Dark Wizard Morgan, who was rumored to have an entire closet full of enchanted leather corsets with which she bent unfortunate wizards to her evil will. When she had drained them of their vital energies, Lady Stacia disposed of her victims in an bottomless pit which her sniveling minions had toiled years to dig for her.

Rhiannon burst into loud tears of grief. Her muffled sobs drew the attention of the captain of the pirates, a burly dark-haired man who was striding the heaving foredeck of the HMS Manly Intent shirtless, despite the fact that it was freezing out and ice was forming on his chest hair. She had heard the other pirates refer to him as "Sven," so Rhiannon was fairly sure that this was his name. (She was very beautiful, Rhiannon, but not so bright.)

Sven strode towards her as the surly waves lashed the heavy deck and Rhiannon struggled uselessly against her bonds, disarranging a great deal

of her clothing in the process. His dark green eyes seared into hers. "Look upon your homeland for the last time, my adorable prisoner," he growled, his eyes hungrily stroking her nearly-naked body with their mesmerizing gaze...

"Hey? Ginny? You awake?" a voice called from behind the curtain drawn around her bed.

"Yes," she squeaked, putting "Passionate Trousers" down hastily and pulling her covers up. It had been a boy's voice, and muffled - Ron possibly? It was too young-sounding to be Charlie. "You can come in."

The curtain was drawn aside, and Ginny saw to her surprise that her visitor was not Ron after all, but Seamus Finnegan. She blinked, but it was very definitely Seamus, from his tow-blond head to his scuffed trainers. What *was* he doing here?

He took a few halting steps into the room. He had his bookbag slung over his shoulder and was carrying a quill; he must have come directly from class. He paused at the foot of her bed, looking uncomfortable. Ginny regarded him with even more surprise. Seamus hardly ever looked uncomfortable. Usually he was too busy telling dirty jokes.

"Hey there, Seamus," she said kindly, hoping to put him at his ease. It didn't work. Seamus just looked more uncomfortable. A thought struck her. "Are you here because you're ill?"

Seamus twisted the quill he'd been holding between his fingers. "No. Not exactly."

"Not exactly?"

"Not at all." Seamus put down the quill, and said, "I was wondering if you'd like to go to the Yule Ball with me."

Astonishment rendered Ginny momentarily speechless. She stared fixedly at poor Seamus until he began, finally to blush. Then she said quickly, "But - you're a Seventh Year! You're meant to be able to go to the Pub Crawl! And I can't go to that."

"I know," said Seamus patiently. "That's why I asked you to the Yule Ball."

"But why would you want to spend the evening with a bunch of sixth-years when you could go to the Pub Crawl?"

"I don't want to spend the evening with a bunch of sixth-years," said Seamus, even more patiently. "I want to spend the evening with you."

"Oh," said Ginny. And then, again, "Oh. Right."

Seamus just looked at her. His blush had gone away and his expression was quizzical, even amused, but she could see he was still a little nervous. It was endearing. Draco was never nervous. She tried to imagine Draco asking her to the Yule Ball, and failed utterly. Even had they been dating, Draco would never have asked her to the Yule Ball. He would simply assume they were going together, and show up at the foot of the Gryffindor Tower stairs, looking fabulous and not even a little worried that she might not be overjoyed to see him. Insecure was not in his repertoire and it could be a little annoying. But then of course he might do something amazing and romantic for her, like conjuring a pair of fragile glass slippers out of a couple of socks. And when Draco did something romantic it never seemed awkward or staged or preplanned, it just grew naturally out of whatever he was feeling and was done with candor and grace.

Ginny blinked. There was no reason to be thinking about Draco right now. He wasn't the one asking her to the Yule Ball, and anyway he had a girlfriend. And Seamus was handsome and nice and very funny. She had been staring at the bedclothes; now she raised her head and looked at him. "Parvati told me what you did on the Quidditch pitch," she said. "It was awfully nice of you."

Seamus smiled. He had freckles, not many but a few, on the bridge of his nose. He said, "Think nothing of it. Any excuse to rile up Malfoy."

"Well, you didn't have to. It was brave."

"I've done braver things since," he said lightly, and Ginny felt herself blush. It had been rather nervy of him to come in here and ask her like this, especially since they didn't know each other that well. And he was being awfully sweet about it.

She raised her chin and said, "Of course I'd love to go to the ball with you, Seamus."

A smile like sunrise broke over Seamus' face. "That's great," he said. "And you can tell Ron I'll have you back by midnight. You know, it's a bit terrifying asking out the Head Boy's little sister."

"Ron'll be at the Pub Crawl," said Ginny. "He'll drink a gallon of butterbeer and be absolutely legless by midnight. He wouldn't notice if you returned a giant pumpkin to Gryffindor Tower instead of me."

"He'll figure it out by the next morning, though. And that Head Boy badge is sharp. I want to keep my skin intact," Seamus grinned, came around to the side of the bed, and to Ginny's surprise, kissed her on the cheek. "I'm off to practice - hope they let you out of this bloody place soon."

"I hope so too," said Ginny absently. A thought had occurred to her. That kiss on her cheek the night before - "Seamus?" she said, suddenly.

He paused in the act of pulling back the curtain. "Yes?"

"Did you - were you here last night?" she asked, her heart pounding. "Did you visit me?"

He shook his head, looking honestly confused by the question. "No, I didn't, why?"

"Oh," said Ginny, sinking back against the pillows as a flood of guilty relief washed through her, "No reason."



"Seamus asked you to the Yule Ball? That's wonderful!" Hermione exclaimed, beaming at Ginny, who was dispiritedly forking scrambled eggs and toast off her plate. It was her first day out of the infirmary, and while

she felt perfectly fine, a strange sort of gloom had settled on her; it was hard to shake it off.

"Shhh," Ginny hissed, although fortunately Seamus was seated far away at the opposite end of the Gryffindor table and couldn't possibly overhear.

"Did you say yes?" asked Ron, who was pushing a piece of bread around his plate with his spoon. Apparently he wasn't very hungry either.

"Of course she said yes," said Hermione quickly. "Seamus is lovely, and he's good-looking and nice and talented and so *funny*."

Ron looked taken aback. "Good grief, Hermione, maybe you should date him."

Hermione blushed. "I just meant -"

"I said yes," said Ginny abruptly.

"Great!" Hermione flashed her a wide smile. "That's so lovely for you, Gin."

"Thanks," said Ginny, unable to shake off the feeling that Hermione was just a bit *too* happy for her.

"Hey all." Ginny looked up and saw Harry, taking the empty place between Ron and Hermione that they had saved for him. He looked a little tired, but on the whole better than he'd looking lately.

"Seamus asked Ginny to the Yule Ball," Hermione told him cheerfully as he sat down and picked up his fork.

"Great." Harry poked uninterestedly at a sausage, then glanced up at Hermione. "That's a good thing, right? You're not telling me this because I'm supposed to be indignant or something?"

"No." Hermione shook her head. "Of course it's a good thing."

"Of course it means Seamus won't be at the Pub Crawl, which is too bad," said Ron, reaching for the cream jug and pouring a liberal amount onto his porridge. When he glanced up, his expression was thoughtful. "Hey, Harry - you've got a study period now, don't you?"

Harry nodded.

"You want to come to Hogsmeade with me?" said Ron. "I've got to go down to the factory, to see George and Fred. Last-minute paperwork before the Crawl." He tapped his pocket, from which a sheaf of parchment extruded. "I've got a pass."

Harry shrugged. "Sure. Why not?"

"Can you make it back in time for Care of Magical Creatures?" Hermione asked, worried.

"If I don't, I don't," said Harry without much interest.

"But -- Charlie said he had something special for us."

"Then you can tell me all about it later," said Harry with finality.

Hermione looked as if she were about to say something. Ginny could tell that if she did, Harry would blow up like a Filibuster Firework. There was so much tension between those two these days you could have bounced a Galleon off it. "Everyone still in love with Charlie?" she interrupted hastily.

Hermione dragged her eyes away from Harry. "He's a really good teacher," she said. "He knows everything. Last week he talked about diricawls for two straight hours."

"Nobody but you could think that was sexy, Hermione," said Ron.

"I didn't say it was sexy," said Hermione indignantly, and then she and Ron were off and running, bickering as was their habit. Harry sat quietly between them, looking across the room. A sense of something familiar tugged at the back of Ginny's mind as she looked at him. He reminded her of someone: the way he sat, the haunted expression, the contained and containing eyes that were light-years older than the rest of his young face. It was when he reached up and pushed his hair back that she knew where she had seen that look before, and such similar eyes.

Tom, of course.

"Hurry up, Harry. Spring is approaching. Let's go, shall we? I did tell George we'd be there before noon."

"Oh, all right." Harry glanced up from his apparent fixed perusal of an icicle clinging to a tree branch. His fair skin was scarlet with cold along his cheekbones and so were his hands; he had not bothered to wear gloves. He sighed, and resumed walking. "Spring is approaching? You sound like Malfoy."

"Heaven forbid." Ron waited patiently for Harry to catch up to him. Fortunately it was a gorgeous December day, the sky a hollowed blue bowl traced with faint white clouds. The path through the trees that led to Hogsmeade was worn to a glassy shimmer, and the bare tree branches stood out overhead like black lacework against the sky. Given the brightness and beauty of the weather, Harry's gloomy mood seemed like even more of a blot on the landscape. "*Really*, Potter," Ron drawled in his best Draco imitation, "If I'd known you were going to drag along like a turtle with heavy shopping I wouldn't have *invited* you in the *first* place."

"Ha ha. Very amusing." Harry had now caught up to Ron, who started off again, Harry beside him. "He doesn't always sound like that." Ron looked at him witheringly. "Oh, all right, so he does. It sounds weird coming from you though." Harry paused, thoughtfully. "Nastier."

"You're just used to my normal radiant personality."

"Probably," said Harry, and glanced sideways at Ron. "Speaking of which, have you asked anyone to the Pub Crawl yet?"

Ron nearly tripped over a fallen tree branch. "Oh. No, actually."

"Why not?" asked Harry curiously.

Ron bit back the response that he was shocked Harry had snapped out of his dirge-like mental state enough to notice whether Ron had a date or not. "It's going to be like work for me, you know, being Head Boy and all. Keeping an eye on everyone. It wouldn't be fun for a girl."

"If you say so."

"You asked Hermione yet?"

Harry looked taken aback. "Well, no. I just assumed...why do you ask?" Alarm was creeping into his voice. "She didn't say she wanted to go with anyone else, did she?"

"No, idiot. It's just...well, you're not going to win any points not asking. Nobody likes to be taken for granted, Hermione especially."

Harry's mouth twitched. Ron wondered if he was remembering their fourth year. *Next time, ask me before someone else does, and not as a last resort!* It was the first time Ron had really seen Hermione angry, not counting the time she'd slapped Malfoy across the face. The memory made him smile now - both memories actually. "Right then," said Harry. "I'll ask her." He scuffed moodily at the snow with the toe of his lace-up boot. It was black dragonhide, waterproofed. One thing Ron had noticed: even as Harry's moods seemed to have deteriorated, his wardrobe had improved. Gone were most of his sweaters with holes in the shoulders, the too-small shirts that rode up over his wrists, the well-used trainers. Ron had no idea if this was Draco's influence or if it was just that Harry now had a girlfriend who took an interest in what he wore. "Ron...?"

"What?"

Harry opened his mouth to speak, then paused, looking ahead of them. Ron followed his gaze and saw Pansy Parkinson coming over the small rise that led up from Hogsmeade. She was carrying a sheaf of parchments in her hands.



She smirked when she saw them. "Hello, Ron, Harry," she said. "Shouldn't you be in Care of Magical Creatures?"

Ron regarded her irritably. It was no wonder Pansy didn't have a date for the pub crawl, she was even more bossy than Hermione but without Hermione's endearing kindness and generosity. Also, while he didn't know

much about women's fashions, he was fairly sure it was not in the best of taste to wear orange, bright blue, green and yellow all at once. The combination made her look even more sallow than she usually did. There were probably boys who would have been attracted to Pansy's brand of hard-faced prettiness; Ron was not one of them. "What're you up to, Pansy?"

"Got permission to come down to Hogsmeade and distribute the leaflets about the Pub Crawl," she said in a superior tone. "Did you?"

"No, we're skiving," said Harry crossly. "Do run back and tell everyone all about it."

"We're on business," elaborated Ron. "Going to the Wheezes factory. Dumbledore gave us passes, so no point squealing."

"As if I would anyway," said Pansy, looking indignant.

"Of course you would, if you thought it would do you the blindest bit of good," said Harry, in a tone that surprised Ron with its harshness.

"Goodbye, Pansy."

And he turned and stalked off, so that Ron was forced to spin round and follow him. "Cor, Harry," he said, catching up. "What was all that?"

"I don't like her," said Harry, and his mouth was set in a hard straight line. "She makes my skin crawl ."

Ron snorted. "You're the one who's all Up-With-Slytherin, not me."

Harry continued to stalk, kicking up lace-like sprays of snow with his boots. "Yeah, right. Whatever. I don't expect you to understand."

"Harry--" Ron began, exasperated, but he could tell from the tense set of Harry's back that there was no point pursuing the matter. Instead he paused, and looked back over his shoulder. Pansy was still standing there in the middle of the snowy trail, looking back at them, and for a moment he saw a flash of what looked like utter malice cross her face. Then she turned and started back down the path and was soon lost among the trees.

Having nearly fallen asleep in History of Magic, Draco was almost late to Care of Magical Creatures. The other students were already there, although Charlie had not yet arrived. As he approached the snow field where they were meeting, he saw that a little ways away from the rest of the Gryffindors, gazing off towards the Forbidden Forest with a distracted expression, was Hermione, looking very much alone. Without either Harry or Ron bookending her, she looked smaller than she usually did and more fragile. It was odd that they weren't there yet - officially class had already started. Walking past Hermione towards the grouped members of his House, Draco paused, swore, knelt down in front of her and proceeded to pretend to be tying his shoe. Out of the corner of his mouth, he hissed, "Where's Harry? And Weasley, for that matter?"

Hermione jumped slightly, then busied herself tucking a curl of hair behind her ear. "They went to Hogsmeade with some Pub Crawl paperwork. Dumbledore gave Ron a pass."

"But not Harry?"

"I don't think so."

"So he's just skiving then."

Hermione looked unhappy. "Maybe he's on his way."

"Maybe." Draco abandoned the pretense of tying his shoe, stood up, and went to stand with the rest of the Slytherins. Blaise caught at his hand and gave it a quick squeeze of welcome as he joined the group.

"You're late," she said, smiling up at him.

"I stopped off in Madam Hooch's office to reschedule yesterday's match," Draco replied.

"We won that," said Malcolm Baddock mutinously, pushing his dark fringe away from his pale, sharp-featured face. "Fair and square."

"We never win anything fair and square, Malcolm," said Draco. "We're Slytherins, let me remind you. Not Hufflepuffs. We win by employing guile."

"And cheating," added Blaise.

"Also cheating," Draco agreed.

"Look," said Blaise, her green eyes going very wide and saucery. Draco turned to see what she was looking at, and saw Charlie coming down the path towards them, swathed in a dark winter cloak. He was pulling behind him something that looked like a large trolley on wheels, which was draped with a heavy tarpaulin fabric covering. From beneath the fabric covering, what looked like thick white steam was rising.

"I wonder what he's got in there," said Malcolm, interested.

"I think I know," said Draco, with certainty. Only one thing made Charlie light up that way. "It's got to be -"

"Dragons," said Charlie loudly, stopping in between the groups of students and letting go of his trolley, which sat and steamed beside him, "are the most fascinating magical creatures in existence."

The whole class nodded. Everyone loved Charlie. Even the frosty Slytherins had melted a little under his relentlessly outgoing charm, and some of the Slytherin girls grew almost giggly when he was around. He was young enough to be the sort of teacher that students had crushes on, and true to form, quite a few of the seventh-year girls in all the houses fancied Charlie. If he'd said that trolls were fascinating conversationalists and Cornish pixies made good study partners, they would have nodded along with him.

"I've been working with dragons for six years," Charlie went on equably, "and there is no animal more misunderstood in the wizarding world. The one I've got here under this covering is only one week old. Now..." he glanced around the class, and Draco saw his eyebrows draw together as he registered Harry's absence. "Right," he went on, "who here wants to see a real live baby dragon?"

The class chorused their eagerness, even the normally reserved Slytherins managing an affirmative-sounding mutter. With a cheerful grin, Charlie picked up two objects from the top of the trolley - thick fireproof gloves - and stripped off the heavy cloak he was wearing to reveal underneath it his battered jacket and trousers of black dragonhide leather. A happy little gasp of appreciation escaped several female members of the class, which Charlie apparently didn't notice - or if he did, he was doing an excellent job of pretending to be oblivious.

"Oooh," said Blaise, under her breath, "this is going to be the best class ever."

Draco snorted with laughter.

Blaise gave him a sloe-eyed look. "You don't mind if I stare at Charlie, do you darling?"

"Not at all." Draco was nonchalant. "Gawk away."

Blaise's eyes narrowed, but Draco hardly noticed. His glance went to Hermione, who he instinctively knew would understand why he thought this was funny. She looked as if she were trying not to laugh as well, which was a nice change from the rest of the girls who looked as if they were deciding whether or not to rush Charlie in a wedge-like formation.

"This class is really a bit of an accident," Charlie went on cheerfully, pulling on his leather gloves and reaching to undo the big buckles that held the tarp down over the open-top trolley. "I've had custody of a dragon egg this year; it wasn't meant to hatch till the holidays, but these things are notoriously unpredictable. Anyway, it hatched last Tuesday, quite unexpectedly, and the hatchling is only now really ready to face the outside world." The last buckle undone, Charlie drew the tarp away, and the class gasped again. Inside the open-topped trolley was a large steel cage, and inside the cage, curled into a ball and fast asleep, was a baby dragon. It was a dark green color, with deep gold horn nubs protruding from its small head. Charlie looked down at it with an unmistakably fond expression, then back up at the class. "Can anyone tell me what type of dragon this is?"

Hermione's hand went up. "Romanian Longhorn," she said, in her usual clear and certain voice, but Draco could tell - without being able to

explain how he could tell - that something was bothering her. She looked very nearly woeful as she let her hand fall back to her side.

"Right," said Charlie. "And what does it eat?"

Hermione's hand went up again, but this time Charlie called on Neville, who ventured a guess that Longhorns ate goats and cattle, and added that its horns were valued as potion ingredients. Charlie awarded five points to Gryffindor, more because he liked Neville than anything else, Draco suspected. Why, Draco didn't know - as far as he was concerned, Neville was completely useless, although the one time he'd shared that thought with Harry, Harry had nearly taken his head off in response.

"Oh, bother," Charlie said, his voice snapping Draco out of his reverie. Charlie was kneeling down next to the trolley now, in the snow, an annoyed expression on his face. "I've forgotten the dragon food. Can I have two student volunteers to race back to my office and get it? It's in a blue bucket above my desk...right, then. Granger, and...Malfoy."

Draco tensed in surprise - he hadn't even had his hand up. Next to him, Blaise was radiating fury. She was wildly jealous of Hermione and had been ever since last year. Without looking at Blaise, he detached himself from the rest of the Slytherins, sauntered over towards Charlie and accepted a large gold key from him. "Second door down from Snape's, and hurry," Charlie said as Hermione came trailing up, looking very unhappy indeed. Draco felt vaguely insulted - he knew she had to pretend to be displeased at the thought of spending time with him, but she didn't have to look quite that wretched about it. "I'd rather the dragon not wake up hungry - he tends to yell."

Draco nodded at Charlie, tucked the key into his pocket and set off towards the castle. He could sense Hermione beside him, her small, booted feet crunching on the hard-packed snow. No sooner were they out of earshot of the class than she announced, without preamble: "Draco, I want to talk to you about something."

"Great, but I already have a date for the Pub Crawl."

"Ha," said Hermione. "Very funny. Although, not unrelated to what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Which is?"

Hermione took a deep breath. "Ginny's going to the Yule Ball with Seamus," she said.

Draco stopped dead in his tracks. For a moment, he was very conscious of the cold air around him, the coldness of the ground seeping through the soles of his shoes, the painfully bright winter sky.

Then, he shrugged. "That's nice for her."

Hermione expelled a breath. "Right. Once more, with less feeling."

"I mean it. It's nice for her." Draco started walking again, and Hermione fell into step with him. They were nearly at the side doors to the castle now. "Ginny and I," he said. "We're not a thing. We never were. I have a girlfriend. And even if I didn't..."

"Even if you didn't?"

"I wouldn't be with Ginny," he said quietly. "For other reasons."

Hermione was silent. Draco knew she was waiting to see if he would elaborate on his reasons; he didn't. They reached the castle doors and went inside, where the warm air felt like a welcoming touch.

As the doors shut behind them Hermione shook her head. "All right, then. Accept it as fate if you want to."

Draco laughed, without real humor. "My father used to say that fate is what you call it when you don't know the name of the person screwing you over."

"Nobody's screwing you over, Draco, except maybe you."

"How are things with Harry?" he said abruptly.

Hermione colored. He was aware that the abruptness of the question was slightly cruel, but he had no interest in continuing the conversation about Ginny and Seamus. He had shoved it to the back of his mind, to process later. "Not great," she said. "I'm still worried."

Draco suddenly realized he didn't want to be having *this* conversation either. "Worried?"

Hermione shrugged. They were walking along a long corridor now, passing other students, some of whom gave them curious looks. Hermione pitched her voice low. "He still seems miserable, he barely pays attention to anything anymore, last night he was up late talking to Sirius and he wouldn't tell me what they talked about. And now he's skipping class, which isn't the end of the world, but isn't like him, either." They were at the door to Charlie's office now, and Hermione looked at Draco unhappily as he slid the key into the lock. "You think he seems depressed too, don't you?"

"Well, he has been wearing a lot of black lately." Draco pushed the door open and went in; Hermione followed. "Either it's the whole 'warrior slated for the coming apocalypse' thing --kind of a downer, that -- or his eyesight's gotten worse and he's just really worried about matching."

"*Don't*," said Hermione sharply. "You know I have no sense of humor about Harry. Or apocalypses."

"I think it just goes to show what sort of life we lead that we can even consider using 'apocalypse' in the plural."

Hermione did smile, then. "Life's been bad lately, hasn't it? I'm sorry, Draco. I know it is for you, too."

Draco didn't reply; he was looking around with curiosity. Since Charlie was a junior member of the faculty, his office was small, but it was decorated in such a homey fashion that that didn't matter. Pictures of the Weasley clan, waving and smiling, were stuck to every available space. The small, battered desks were covered with bolts of colorful Romanian cloth and a beautiful rainbow-hued dragon scale decorated the wall near the door. On the far wall was a wood-framed mirror that Draco recognized - it had hung in Charlie's tent back at the dragon camp. On the small table by the desk were stacked a number of books with gilt-encrusted spines. *Fantastic Beasts*, of course (everyone had that), *The Dragon Hunter's Handbook* *Dragon Tales: A Compendium*, a smaller book on how to treat serious burns, and a colorful clothbound novel entitled *A Dream of Dragons*.

Draco turned around. While he had been scanning the room, Hermione had located the bucket, high on a shelf above Charlie's desk. Draco watched her as she cast about for something to climb up on. "Hermione," he said, his voice thoughtful, "what do you know about onieromantics?"

"Romantic whats?"

"Onieromantics," he corrected her gently.

"Oh." She blushed slightly. "Wizards who can travel in dreams?"

"Right."

"Well, I know it takes a lot of study and preparation," said Hermione, seizing hold of a tall stool and dragging it across the room. "I know there's a branch of the Auror's Guild that deals with it. And I know if you don't do it properly, you can splinch yourself - not your physical self, but your psychic self."

"That sounds nasty."

"You're never the same afterward," she said grimly, climbing up on the stool and wobbling precariously.

"Here - take my hand," Draco said, coming to stand beside her, and she took it gratefully, reaching for the bucket with her other hand. Draco tried not to notice that he was now at eye level with her slender, black-stockinged calves. Even when he had detested Hermione, he'd thought it was a sign of an unfair universe that the repellent Ron Weasley should get to date someone with such nice legs.

"Got it," she said cheerfully, and handed the bucket down to him. He set it carefully on the desk. "Ugh," she added, wrinkling her nose in disgust as she glanced down at the bucket's contents. "There's something all squashy in there."

"Well, what'd you think dragons ate?" Draco replied lightly. "Waffles?"

"Dragon kibble?" suggested Hermione, who was still using his hand to balance herself. "I'm sure Charlie said something about kibble..."

"No dragon worth his salt wants to live on kibble. That's why they're always devouring pretty young virgins in fairy tales, not bowls of salad. In fact, if I were you, I'd just stand well away from the dragon, no matter what Charlie says..." and Draco trailed off, realizing that Hermione was giving him a most peculiar look. "Not," he added hastily, "that you're a virgin." Her eyebrows went up even higher. "And not that you aren't one either," he said, even more hastily, realizing that he had never given this aspect of her relationship with Harry a thought, assuming on some level that well, they just *wouldn't*...would they? "And not that I would know. I mean, how would I know? Because Harry hasn't said anything about you to me. I mean, not that he doesn't talk about you - he talks about you all the time -" Draco realized that he was raving, and, with an effort, stopped the flow of speech. Hermione was staring at him in what he could only interpret as total fury. "I don't suppose," he said finally, "that if I agreed to eat whatever was in that bucket, you would forget everything I just said?"

For a moment, Hermione was silent. Then, to his surprise, she burst out into peals of laughter. She put one hand over her mouth and laughed until she overbalanced, nearly tumbling off the stool; she stumbled and slid forward and he reached up and caught her by the waist as she fell and set her down on her feet, still laughing. "Oh!" she said, her face turned up to his. "Oh, the look on your face - would you really have eaten what was in the bucket?"

"I don't know," Draco said. He was having some trouble keeping his mind on matters at hand. He wasn't sure Hermione realized how close to him she was standing. He had a feeling that if Harry came in at that moment, he'd be facing a fencing match that wasn't just for practice. "Probably, if you wanted me to."

Now, what had possessed him to say *that*? Damn, he thought fiercely, damn, damn, damn. Her eyes went suddenly wide and luminous and her mouth curved up into a smile and she opened her mouth to speak - and stopped. Sudden color flooded her face, as if she had been dropped in boiling water. Hastily, she stepped away from him.

"It's getting late," she said quickly. She reached for the bucket on the desk with a trembling hand, seized it, and nearly threw herself towards the

door. "We'd better go - Charlie will be wondering where we are," she said breathlessly, and hurried out into the corridor.

Draco stood and looked after her, perplexed, until something else caught his attention. Tucked into the frame of the mirror near the door was a photo of Ginny in a white sundress, her hair tied back, smiling and blowing kisses. He looked at it, and then hastily away, back at the doorway through which Hermione had just disappeared.

How had life managed to get so complicated in such a short time? He wondered. And whatever was going on, he couldn't help but feel that it showed every sign of not working out well for him.



Hey, Ron. You look good. Harry, you look like a wet weekend. What's wrong? Upset about the game yesterday? Speaking of which..." Fred pitched his voice lower. "How's Ginny?"

"She's fine. Up and around and sassy and obnoxious," said Ron, sinking into one of the huge stuffed lime-green sherbet sweet-shaped chairs, that decorated George and Fred's front office. "Showing no respect for her elders as usual."

Beyond the huge glass window set into the wall, they could see down to the floor of the Wheezes factory. Huge industrial-size steel cauldrons bubbled and smoked with exotic brews, alembics as tall as a full-grown wizard contained dried and flattened potion ingredients, and a scooped-out pool in the floor held a whirlpool of melted chocolate - for Penguin Peppermints, Harry guessed. The ceiling, like the ceiling of the Great Hall, was enchanted to look like sky, but unlike the ceiling in the Great Hall this one reflected a sky unlike the one outside. Right now it looked like desert sky, vast and blue, touched with dark gold clouds. Harry suspected it was probably the sky over Egypt, where Bill was. (It certainly wasn't the sky over Newcastle, where Percy was.)

"New shipment from Slug and Jiggers," George announced cheerfully, staggering into the office under the weight of a large carton. He dropped it at Fred's feet, and rubbed his sweaty face with his t-shirt. "Hey, kids," he said, nodding at Ron and Harry, both of whom glowered at being called kids. The twins were, after all, only nineteen. "What brings you here?"

"Paperwork," said Ron, tossing his roll of parchments to George, who caught it and perched on the edge of the desk to read the contracts.

"Looks fine," he said. "I can sign this...why didn't you just have these owled over?"

"I wanted to look at the factory space," said Ron, getting to his feet and coming to stand by Harry at the window. "We thought we would wind up the Crawl here, and I just wanted to make sure the place was big enough...and sturdy enough."

Fred and George, having been through their own Pub Crawl, grinned. "Look around all you want," said Fred, "In fact, I was just about to take

this shipment of Benson and Hexes Exploding Cigarettes down to the floor - do you two want to come?"

Ron nodded, but Harry, feeling weary, shook his head. "I'll stay here."

Fred looked at him. His blue eyes were kind. "You feeling all right, Harry?"

It was Ron who answered for Harry. "He's just upset because of our History of Magic assignment. We each have to interview one person who was involved in the downfall of Voldemort, and Harry got Snape."

Harry looked at Ron in surprise; while this was true, Ron knew well enough that this wasn't what he was upset about. Or, maybe he didn't. Harry supposed that Ron was simply trying to save him questioning; it was hard to tell since Ron would not look at him.

Fred snorted. "Sorry to hear that, Harry," he said. "Well, if you find out if the refusal to wash his hair has something to do with fighting evil or is just laziness, let me know."

Fred and Ron left, carrying the carton between them. This left Harry alone with George, who was sitting on the desk with his blue-jeaned legs dangling down. "I thought you didn't mind Snape so much anymore," said George curiously. "After all, he was at your birthday party. And his rendition of *The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald* was masterful."

Harry shrugged. "I don't mind him so much anymore."

"So what is bothering you, then?"

"Nothing," said Harry, and looked at his feet.

"If mum saw you like this, she'd throw a wobbly," said George. "I've half a mind to tell her, too."

"I have parents now," said Harry, stung. "I have Sirius."

"Sirius spent twelve years in Azkaban, he might not be quite as quick to pick up on you looking thin and haggard as an ordinary bloke might -"

"*Sirius takes very good care of me,*" Harry ground out, deliberately not recalling the fact that the night before, he'd accused Sirius of being a neglectful, selfish git.

"All right, all right," said George, taken aback. "Never mind. You look fabulous. Blooming. I hear under-eye circles are in for spring."

"Thanks." Harry was again having trouble paying attention to George. He had been pondering all day how he might get to his parents' graves, if Sirius wouldn't take him. Something kept niggling at the back of his mind.

"Oh, come on, Harry, what is it? Girl trouble?" George burst out in exasperation, having managed to remain circumspectly silent for less than one minute. "Hermione? She's fallen in love with someone else? You've fallen in love with someone else and you're not sure how to break it to her? You're in love with her sister?"

"Hermione's an only child," said Harry dully.

"Well, that's good, those situations are always awkward. Oh - hallo, Jana." George hopped nervously off the desk as his petite, brown-haired girlfriend put her head round the door, a clipboard in her hand.

"How lucky I am I only have brothers," Jana said dryly. "Large, strapping brothers. George dear - there's an owl for you, and he won't go away unless I pay him. Have you got any Sickles?"

George nodded at Harry. "Be right back," he said, scurrying past Jana's clipboard and out into the hall, Jana behind him.

Harry looked after them, then leaned against the wall, happy to be left alone again. He did not want to be questioned about Hermione, or "girl trouble." He knew that he hadn't been very nice to Fred, or George either, or Ron for that matter - not lately. And somewhere in the back of his mind he knew that the way he was behaving towards Hermione was, if not despicable, certainly not admirable. He wanted to be able to help it, but somehow he could not. More and more he found himself focused on exactly one thing, and more and more the trappings and distractions of ordinary life were falling away, like layers of skin being shed.

If he were to do what he needed to do, he could not be distracted or turned aside by selfish concerns. He could not worry about other people, he could not fear their reactions to what he wanted, what he had become. There could be only hatred and the need for vengeance, only waiting and loathing and pain and despair and all the other awful emotions that existed here in this interim between dark and dark.

He turned to look out the factory window and stood there silently, his gaze on the false blue sky of another country. In his head were words spoken months ago, in the depths of a cold stone dungeon, when he had kissed Hermione for the first time.

Do you love him? he had asked her. Meaning Draco, of course.

I could love him, she had replied.

He did not want to be jealous. It was not in his nature to be jealous. But sometimes in the back of his mind, the memory rose up and chilled him - not that she had said that she could love Draco specifically, but that she could love anyone else. He was quite sure that he could not. For him there could not and would not be anyone else. This was why he had not wanted to love her. He was too damaged, his love too fierce - such love, once given, could not be broken and remade.

He heard Hermione's voice in his head, once more. *For six years I have wondered if you were the one for me,* she had said. *And now I know you aren't.*

She had not meant it, he told himself. She had been angry and she had not meant it. But what if someday she came to a place where she did mean it. If she knew what he really was, what was being enacted inside him even now, then she would mean it. And what would happen then? When he was a child, those he had most loved had died and left him. If he was left again, he was afraid it might kill him.

Unless he left her first.

Seamus Finnegan sat at one of the long oak tables at the back of the library, reading a copy of *Quidditch Illustrated* and generally thinking

that all was right with the world. Ginny had agreed to go out with him, and yesterday's match had been declared a draw and rescheduled, which meant the Gryffindors were not set back in the race for the House Cup. In general, life was looking up. He was just in the middle of turning a page when a shadow fell across the table and he glanced up and saw Draco Malfoy standing over him.

He bit back a surprised exclamation and eyed the other boy warily. The last time he'd seen Malfoy had been on the Quidditch pitch, and Draco, white-faced and furious, had looked like nothing on earth; now he was composed and even smiling, his arms crossed over his (expensive-looking) v-neck cashmere sweater. "Finnegan," he said. "I wanted a word with you."

Seamus tipped his chair back, trying for an air of casual disinterest. It wasn't easy. There was something frightening about Malfoy's cold composure, and the set line of his mouth. Not that he could do anything here, but what would Seamus do if Malfoy challenged him to a duel later on? He couldn't beat him, not at magic, although he suspected that if it came to fisticuffs he could quite successfully damage the other boy's perfect features, if temporarily. "Yeah?" he said. "What is it?"

"I heard you're taking Ginny Weasley to the Yule Ball," said Malfoy calmly.

Seamus was momentarily speechless. "So what if I am?" he said finally. "How is that your business?"

"Because," said Malfoy, and leaned forward until his face was inches from Seamus'. "If you hurt her, I will beat you to death with a shovel. Got that?"

Seamus just stared.

"And if you tell anyone what I just said, I will still beat you to death with a shovel. I want to be very clear about this, Finnegan. Do you understand me?"

Seamus found his voice, although it was fainter than usual. "A shovel?"

"That's right. A vague disclaimer is nobody's friend. Keep it in mind," said Malfoy shortly, stepped back, and walked away from Seamus without looking back.

Hermione decided to skip supper in favor of studying that evening, and ensconced herself in a corner of the common room, surrounded by pillows and books. Harry gave her an absentminded wave on his way down to the Great Hall, which caused her to fantasize about throwing her copy of *Dreams: Fantasy or Memory? An Onieromancer's Guide* at him. It was Ron who paused and came over to see what she was doing. "Studying? Now? Aren't you hungry?"

She shook her head. "No. Hand me that green book, will you?"

Ron handed her the copy of *A Runic Alphabet* that she had special-ordered from Flourish and Blotts. "Don't you think it's about time you talked to Harry?"

"I talk to Harry all the time."

"You know what I mean. About - you two."

Hermione sighed. "I know. I promise I will - I'm sorry, all this must be rotten for you. How was your trip to Hogsmeade?"

"Harry didn't tell you?"

Hermione let a note of bitterness creep into her voice. "We haven't talked today. I think he thinks I'm angry with him about missing Care of Magical Creatures."

Ron looked mildly taken aback. "Are you?"

"No!" Hermione threw her hands up, and *A Runic Alphabet* slid off her lap. "I mean, I missed him, I missed you both, Charlie had a baby dragon and I kept thinking about Norbert and wishing you were there. But that doesn't mean I'm angry."

Ron shook his head. "You have got to resolve all this. I can't take much more of Misery Boy. Better to just -"

"I don't think he's miserable about me," Hermione said softly. "It's something else. That's why I'm worried. That's why I haven't said anything."

"Well, what, then?" Ron bent down and picked up the Runic Studies book, and handed it back to her, but not after peering at the parchment she had folded into the pages. It was covered with strange symbols and odd scribblings. "Now what are you up to?" he laughed.

"Just trying to translate some runes," said Hermione, feeling despairing. "I can't find any key for these, though. They're not Etruscan, they're not Egyptian -"

"I think they're Norwegian," said Ron.

Hermione sat up straight. "Really?"

"Yes," said Ron somberly. "In fact, I'm pretty sure this translates as "Are you happy to see me, or is that a longboat in your pocket?""

Hermione punched him in the arm, making him yelp. "I hate you - give me my homework back -"

"Forget it -" Ron held the parchment over his head, and mayhem might well have ensued had Ginny not appeared in the common room, looked at them, and started to laugh.

"Would the Head Girl and Head Boy like to stop hitting each other long enough to get dinner?" she said finally, once she had stopped giggling.

Hermione took her parchment back, and stuck her tongue out at Ron. "Go on," she said, and he hopped up obediently and went to join his sister. She watched them a little wistfully as they headed down the stairs together, but the thought of another long meal wherein Harry said nothing to her was more than she could deal with. She sank back sadly amongst the cushions and picked up her books. She had just flipped open her Runic Alphabet when a sound made her pause. A muffled noise - the sound of someone crying?

She got to her feet, drawing her plaid blanket around herself, and went to investigate. The sound was coming from the boys' dormitory, to her

surprise, and she paused before going in - but she was, after all, Head Girl, and the students' welfare was her concern. She wasn't just being nosy - well, all right, she was being a little nosy, but nobody needed to know that.

The door swung wide, and she went in, She blinked a moment in the dim light before her eyes adjusted and she saw Neville, sitting on the floor by his bed, an open Chocolate Frog box in his lap. "Neville?" she said, her voice worried. "Are you all right?"

Neville brought his hands down from his face and looked up at her. "Oh. Hermione." His voice was quiet. "Why aren't you at dinner?"

"I was studying. Neville, what's wrong?"

He said nothing. She came across the room and sat down beside him. He was looking down at the box in his lap again, and when she followed his gaze, her heart turned over. "Oh...Neville."

Trevor the toad lay curled in a scattering of sawdust at the bottom of the box. He was not trying to escape. He was not even moving. His eyes were open. Hermione knew immediately that he was dead.

"Oh, Neville, I'm so sorry. When did he die? Were you going to bury him?"

"Bury him?" Neville laughed shortly. "This box just turned up at the foot of my bed when I came back from Care of Magical Creatures. I don't know what happened to him." He looked up at Hermione. "Do you think someone could have killed him?"

"Oh, but why would anyone do that? That would just be evil. Maybe somebody found him and was too shy to say anything to you. How long has he been missing?"

"Nearly two weeks," said Neville. His voice was quiet. "Trevor used to be my dad's when he was at school. My grandfather raised him from a tadpole. He was supposed to live a hundred years."

Hermione reached out and patted Neville's hand. It was thinner than she remembered, but then Neville wasn't the round-faced kid he had been at eleven. He had grown into a tall and lanky boy. But the sadness in his eyes

reminded her of the child he once had been. "Come on, Neville," she said. "Let's go bury him in the snow out by Hagrid's hut. And if Charlie comes back, maybe he'll let you have some Firewhiskey - I think you need it."

"You must think I'm stupid, crying over a dead toad," said Neville in a low voice. "You won't tell anyone, will you?"

"No," she said. "I don't think you're stupid. And I won't tell anyone."

It took Draco a long time to fall asleep that night. His brief conversation with Hermione played over and over in his head like a news report on the Wizarding Wireless, and then again he saw Blaise's hurt expression during Charlie's class, and Ginny sitting with Seamus in the Great Hall. He would have liked to have talked to Harry, but Harry seemed distracted, and there was nobody else he really had any interest in talking to. Life was grim. Even recalling the look of fleeting terror that had crossed Finnegan's face in the library didn't help matters much.

He had no sooner drifted into an uneasy slumber than a muffled pounding on the door to his bedroom woke him once again. He struggled to sit up, brushing his hair away from his eyes; reaching out, he tapped the candle on his bed stand to light it. He swung his legs over the side of the bed, and winced at the coldness of the stone floor.

The pounding came again, louder this time. "All right, all right, keep your knickers on," he muttered to himself, and went to open the door.

There was no one there. Draco blinked into the emptiness for a moment, startled, before he twigged. "Harry?"

There was a slight rustling and Harry's head appeared, crowned with even messier hair than usual, seeming to float in midair above the floor. Draco remembered the first time he had ever seen Harry pull that stunt with his Invisibility Cloak, back at the Shrieking Shack; it had nearly scared the living daylights out of him. Now, he could take it in stride. "Sorry," said Harry contritely. "I didn't want anyone to see me here."

"Yes, not even me, apparently," said Draco, leaning against the doorjamb. "How did you get past the common room door? How'd you know the password?"

"It's 'Slytherin Pride', isn't it?" said Harry. "Just the sort of password you *would* think up."

"Yes, very clever."

"Look, are you going to let me in or are you just going to swank around in your silk pajamas like a big fat pretentious git? Because in that case I'm leaving."

Draco looked injured. "You think I'm fat?"

"Let me in, Malfoy."

Draco dropped his arm and Harry stalked past him, tossing his Invisibility Cloak onto the chest of drawers at the foot of Draco's bed. Underneath it he was wearing blue cotton pajamas with a hole in the right sleeve, piped with yellow around the collar and cuffs. The sort of pajamas Draco himself might have worn when he was about seven. Harry glanced around the room cursorily. "It's not so small," he said. "Weird ceiling, though."

Draco glanced up. The ceiling of his bedroom was oddly angled, slanting so sharply down towards the far side that he had to crouch down to climb into the window seat. Small windows were cut into the wall above his bed, but they had been bricked up on the far side and lent a claustrophobic air to the proceedings. He did, however, have a working fireplace, which had always pleased him.

Draco closed the door behind him, and bolted it against intrusions. "Yeah," he said. "I call the architectural style 'early maniac.' It was a working dungeon once, you know." Draco gestured towards the fireplace, and a small fire shimmered to life in the grate. "Anyway, Potter - what are you doing here? Is something wrong?"

"I needed to talk to you about our homework," Harry said.

Draco stared. "You what?"

"The homework for DaDA," Harry elaborated. "The end-of-year project."

"This couldn't have waited until tomorrow?"

Harry looked puzzled for a moment, then sheepish. "I guess it is kind of late," he said, looking down at his bare feet, which were coated in hallway dust. "I talked to Sirius last night, and I had an idea..."

Draco began to realize there was more here than met the eye. He dragged a chair over to the bed, turned it around backwards, and sat down, resting his arms on the back. "You talked to Sirius? Did you ask about your parents?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah. He told me they're buried at a place called Doon's Hill. Ring any bells?"

Draco shook his head. "No, not really."

Harry reached into the breast pocket of his pajamas and drew out a folded parchment. Draco recognized it as their homework assignment. Opening it with a flourish, Harry read out, "Pick one specific site from this list: the Forbidden Forest, Ravyn Cael, Knockturn Alley, Doon's Hill, Chipping Sodbury, Shepton Mallet.' You see?"

Draco glanced down and then back up. Harry was looking at him expectantly, his green eyes sharp and intent, his lower lip caught between his teeth. Draco felt a faint foreboding stir within him. Whatever all this meant to Harry, it was not just something significant but something significant that he was expecting Draco to pick up on immediately. Draco was very tempted to say something snide, but the thought that this was the most animated, interested and alive he had seen Harry look in more than a month stayed his tongue. "All right," he said cautiously. "So it's on our homework..."

"I want to go," said Harry. "We can get permission to be Portkeyed to Doon's Hill if we pick that project for the class, and when we're there we can go to the cemetery."

"Um," said Draco. "Wouldn't Sirius take you?"

"I don't want to go with Sirius, I want to go with you."

Draco felt his eyebrows fly up. "Why?"

"Because..." Harry flung his hands in the air. "For one thing, Sirius has the wedding and then the honeymoon so if he took me he couldn't take me for months. He said not till after I graduate, and I want to go as soon as possible. Anyway, he'd spend the whole time watching me to see if I start freaking out and I don't need that...why are you looking at me like that?"

"Why do I have the feeling there's something you aren't telling me?"

Harry sighed. "Probably because there's something I'm not telling you."

"What?"

"I can't tell you," Harry said firmly. "You have to trust me."

There was a short silence. Harry sat where he was, looking down at his hands. His dark hair spilled down, hiding his features. His shoulders were set, angular under the thin cotton of his pajama top. When he raised his face, his eyes were dark, unreadably green. Draco remembered the boy who had thrust a hand through the bars of the prison that contained him, and had mixed their blood together, changing them both irrevocably in the process. He had never known anyone else like Harry; he never would.



"All right." Draco shrugged. "I trust you."

Harry exhaled his held breath. "Okay, then." He got to his feet, shoving the parchment back into his pocket. "Sorry I woke you up."

"It's fine. Sleep is overrated." Draco got to his feet, and stood there awkwardly for a second. He wondered if this was what Harry and Ron were like when those two were alone. He doubted it. He had some vague mental image of them sitting around, discussing Quidditch and girls and hitting each other on the back in a matey fashion. He and Harry never discussed Quidditch and girls, unless they had been drinking abusively. Mostly their conversations revolved around fencing and imminent, life-threatening danger. Draco hesitated a moment, wondering if he should ask Harry something more casually friendly, like what he planned to do after the N.E.W.T.'s, or what he was going to get Sirius and Narcissa as a wedding present, or...

"You all right, Malfoy? Your eyes are crossing." Harry was at the door now, his head tilted to the side as he looked back at Draco in concern. "Falling asleep on your feet?"

"Something like that." Draco bent down, picked up Harry's cloak and held it out to him, a silvery unfolded tangle. "Don't forget your cloak," he said. "People see you sneaking out of my bedroom at 2am, they might get the wrong idea."

"Thanks," said Harry, and took the cloak.

"On the other hand, it could only enhance my reputation as a major stud," added Draco cheerfully.

Harry raised an eyebrow.

"That was my sarcastic voice," said Draco.

"It sounds a lot like your regular voice," said Harry dryly.

"Yeah. I've been told that."

"See you in class tomorrow," said Harry, turning to go. He paused then, and bent down to pick up something from the ground. When he straightened up, Draco saw that he had a rolled parchment in his hand, stamped with a familiar silver seal. "Looks like someone left a note shoved under your door, Malfoy."

"Right. Thanks." Draco took the note. "Bye, now," he added firmly, and shut the door on Harry, who was still looking at him curiously.

He glanced down at the note in his hand, unrolled it reluctantly, and saw that it was as he had expected, a map. In Rhysenn's familiar flowing writing the words *meet me here* appeared towards the top, after a complicated series of illustrated pathways showing the route he was meant to take outside the castle.

He let his shoulders sag, a rare feeling of total exhaustion and dejection nearly overcoming him. It just never ended -- it never, never ended. How many secrets could one person keep and not go completely mad? And now he had another one to keep: Harry's secret about his parents. On the other hand, it did mean that Harry trusted him, trusted him in a way he didn't trust anyone else. He remembered the demons who had told him that for every profit in one thing, there must be an equal payment. Perhaps it then followed that for every payment, there must be compensation. If there was one thing the past eight months had brought him other than pain and confusion, it was friends. He had never had friends before, not friends like Harry and Hermione, Ginny and Sirius. That was worth a lot - it was worth everything.

Straightening his shoulders, he went to get his clothes.

She lay beside him in the pools of scarlet and gold flung onto the floor by the high stained-glass windows. They lay face-to-face, on their sides, his right hand trailing slowly down her cheek to her pajama top, tracing the line of pearl buttons there before beginning to undo them one by one.

"Ron," she said softly.

He raised his eyes to hers; even in the darkness, they were very blue.
"Yes?"

"Do you think about me when we're not ... in here?"

He was halfway through the row of buttons. "I think about you all the time."

She sighed. "You pretend so well."

He was done with the buttons; his hands slid over her bare skin, gentle and careful - she remembered how clumsy he had been, the first time, but that was all different now. "So do you," he said, and leaned to kiss her. His lips brushed hers, gently, then slid to the corners of her mouth, her throat, her cheek. She let her head fall back, and then the door of the room opened and she heard someone gasp out loud in surprise.

She sprang away from Ron, her hands flying up to cover herself. Malcolm Baddock, the Slytherin Chaser, stood in the doorway, one hand on the latch, the other dangling at his side, gazing at them in utter and total astonished surprise.

Reaching to tug the open top of her pajamas shut, she tried to hide herself behind Ron, who at least was wearing his boxers, but it was no use - Malcolm had seen them both clearly. He stood frozen in the doorway, staring in shock, mouth open, his dark eyes almost impossibly wide. There was a long silence, and then he said, with astonished but profound admiration: "Damn, Weasley. When you go for it, you *really* go for it."

That broke the tableau. Ron scrambled for his clothes, and Malcolm, as if suddenly sensing the seriousness of the situation, began to back towards the door.

"Malcolm - " said Ron, sharply.

"I won't tell anyone," Malcolm interrupted quickly, his eyes on the wand next to Ron's hand. "Really, I'll keep it to myself -"

He turned and bolted then, and Ron, leaping to his feet and fumbling with the zipper on his jeans, swore out loud. "Wait here," he said to her, and raced to the door, buttoning up his shirt as he ran, without putting his shoes on or stopping to pick up his wand.

She hesitated for a moment, frozen, before her own shock drove her to her feet. She paused to seize up Ron's wand and his shoes before she raced after him, flinging the door closed behind her. She dashed out into the hallway - saw a flicker of movement off to her left, and bolted after it - fled around a corner and then another corner, running on instinct - stairs rose up before her; she raced up them, spun to her left, and nearly

crashed into Ron, who was standing stock-still in the middle of a hallway, his hands at his sides.

"Ron," she gasped, almost in tears, "Where is he - where's Malcolm -"

"Right there," said Ron, in a queer strained sort of voice, and pointed.

She looked where he indicated, and then the wand and shoes slid out of her grasp and hit the floor. "What - what happened? What happened to him?"

"I don't know," said Ron in the same strained voice, looking down at where Malcolm lay, sprawled across the hallway floor, his arms flung out stiffly. He was on his back, his eyes staring up blankly, his body rigid. "I just came around the corner and - he was here, like this."

"Did you - did you do anything to him?"

"No!" said Ron sharply, turning to face her. "I didn't even have my wand - what could I have done?"

"I know ... I'm sorry. What should we do? Should we get a teacher?"

"And get caught together?" he demanded, then paused. "But we can't just leave him....you go. Go on back quickly, take care no one sees you."

"What will you say when they come?"

"I'll say I came across him while I was ..I don't know... I'll say something, okay? I'll say I was on my way to check up on the prefects' bathroom and I found him like this. It doesn't matter. I'll think of something." She looked at him in distracted panic, unable to move, and he touched her face gently, with so much loving concern it almost made her start to cry once more.

"Go," he said again, and she went.

The map led Draco to an outside balcony, up a flight of stairs, and along a wide stone pathway he had never noticed before, running along the castle's edge, high above the ground. As he walked along the battlements,

the clear night air broke over his exposed skin like splashes of cold water. All around beneath him the icy world stretched away towards the Forest, an unbroken and unmoving sea of milky glass. The fragile winter moon showed its lace-like edges against a sky of black velvet, illuminating the hexagonal paving stones beneath his feet. Exhilarated by the night and by the coldness of the air, Draco began to forget that he had not wanted to come out tonight.

The long walk along the battlement dead-ended at the circular top of a tower, fringed with a collar of crenellated stone. Rhysenn was there, as he had expected her to be, all black hair and black eyes and black cloak blowing in the wind, against a background of moonlit sky.



"You're late," she said as he approached. Under the cloak she wore another velvet dress; this one gold and indigo and scarlet. Matching gems sparkled on her fingers: champagne and ink and blood. "I almost didn't wait for you."

"Don't you ever worry about freezing to death?" he demanded, by way of an answer. "Why can't you just meet me inside?"

Rhysenn just smirked. "The fresh air is good for you."

"Look--"

She waved a jeweled hand. "I am not welcome inside these walls."

"Why not?"

"It's a long story. And part of it concerns things I would rather have left alone." Her eyes shut down; he knew he would get no more from her on that subject. And yet it nagged at him. Everything about her nagged at him. What did she get out of acting as his father's personal courier, if that was even what she was really doing? Did she do it for money? For fun? She didn't look more than twenty, but she behaved as if she were much older. "I have a letter for you, Draco."

"Now there's a shocker. And I thought you invited me out here to give me my Christmas present."

"Christmas isn't for twelve more days," said Rhysenn severely. She was nothing if not literal-minded. Then, to his surprise, she reached into a fold of her cloak and drew out a rolled white scrap of parchment, and handed it to him. He took it with surprise. Never before had Rhysenn handed him a message without insisting he "search" for it first. "Read this tonight."

"Say 'please.'"

"You know," she said, "you would probably have a much more pleasant personality if you had been born ugly."

"But how much worse life would be for everyone else around me." Draco reached out and took the parchment from her hands, which gave up their grip reluctantly. "Nothing nice to look at during those long boring History of Magic classes."

Rhysenn smirked again. "You would do well to pay attention during your history classes, Draco."

"Thanks, Mum." The parchment was cold against Draco's bare hands. He wanted to unroll it and read it, but not in front of Rhysenn. Her cool curiosity unnerved him.

"Those who do not understand history," she said, turning so that she looked out over the frozen grounds, "are condemned to repeat it."

Draco took a deep breath. The icy air seared into his lungs. "What do you know, Rhysenn?"

She didn't turn around. "I don't know what you mean?"

"You know something you're not telling me."

Now she turned, and ran a catlike finger through a loose curl of her hair. "I know a lot of things."

"I bet you do. But only some of them are relevant to me. Who sends you to me? My father, or *him*? Do they tell you what to say, what to do? All this pouting and flirting, it's just to catch me off guard - I'm not stupid, I know that. But *why*?"

"Who are you," she said, and the tone of her voice had changed, "that you think I should answer to you?"

"Who *do* you answer to, then?" he demanded, but she turned away with a dismissive gesture, and then to his own surprise he found he had reached out and caught her by the wrist, and spun her towards him, angrily. "Are you the best they can do?" he snarled. "It seems to me like the forces of darkness aren't even *trying*."

"Let me go," she said coldly.

"Answer me first," he replied.

"Let me go or I will make you sorry," she said in a sharp hard voice, and her eyes were black splinters in the still white face turned up to his. The fine hairs rose up all along the back of his neck, as if someone had walked over his grave. "And so will my Master, who rules the world."

He let her go. She moved away from him, her black cloak falling open; it was lined with colorful cloth woven in eye-dizzying patterns. "My father -" he began.

"Your *father*," she said, her voice flawed with crystalline disgust. "He is Voldemort's lapdog. "It is not the place of a Malfoy to serve, but to *rule*--"

"I didn't realize you were on our side," said Draco, snidely.

"On your side?" Her voice was freezing. "You cannot even begin to comprehend what I am, or who I serve. You cannot help me, any more than an ant or a snail could help me. And you are no more to me than that. You, with your little magics and your life as short as a heartbeat."

"And yours isn't.....Oh," said Draco, feeling slightly foolish. "You aren't...what are you? A vampire?"

"Nothing so crude," said Rhysenn, looking superior. "So you can take your hand off your neck. I'm not interested in biting you. Well...not biting you there, anyway."

Draco dropped his hand, with some reluctance. "So you're immortal, or just very long-lived?"

"Living forever *is* the best revenge," said Rhysenn, examining her long red nails.

"I've been offered eternal life before," Draco said flatly. "I pretty much turned it down."

"Then you are a fool," she said. "As well as stubborn - and arrogant -"

"Anything else?" Draco asked curiously. "Do I also have bad taste in clothes and stupid hair?"

She looked away, her black hair blowing across her face. He wondered again how old she was. "I could show you..." she began slowly, and took a step back, and as she moved away her cloak flew to the side and he saw the carvings etched into the battlements behind her. They were a repeating pattern of symbols. A mirror, a cup, a dagger, a sword. They were familiar, as if he had seen them before. And then he realized that he

had. The vision he had had the day before, during the prefects' meeting. He had seen himself, standing against battlements, and behind him a wall of stone etched with carvings, burned silver by moonlight...

He spun around, the sensation that he was being watched right now, at this very moment, suddenly overpowering. He cast his gaze over the battlements where they stood and then up and beyond and saw something dark and hunched, huddled against the side of the tower that rose above them. The terror he had felt in the vision rose up again, even stronger, and then something bright and silvery flashed out against the darkness of the huddled figure, and Draco turned and shoved Rhysenn, hard, to the side and out of the way.

She shrieked out loud and fell, and then he heard a sharp whistling noise by his ear and knew what it was, a sound familiar to him from hunting although he couldn't imagine what it was doing here, at Hogwarts. It was too late for him to move away; something struck his shoulder once, hard, and then again. A lancing pain like white fire engulfed him; he saw the moon tilt away, the world falling open like an unfurling flower. Somewhere very far away he could still hear Rhysenn screaming. And then the darkness closed in, and there was no pain at all.

Having not slept well, Ginny was late to breakfast. As a result, she found everyone already in the throes of heated discussion about the fact that the night before, fifth-year Malcolm Baddock had been discovered frozen in a state of magical stasis by none other than Ron himself, on his way to the prefects' bathroom. The rumor was that it had been a prank or a duel gone wrong; the Slytherins looked dour and annoyed, all except Draco, who wasn't at breakfast yet. A few first-years looked nervous, and an even fewer number of students who remembered the basilisk attacks of years ago looked discomforted. "I was in magical stasis," Colin Creevey was announcing cheerfully to anyone who would listen. "It wasn't so bad!"

Neville looked apprehensive. "Do you think it was another basilisk?" he demanded.

"No," said Ron, who was looking drained and irritable. There were shadows under his eyes and the good-humored air that had hung around him lately was gone. "There was no water around him, or anything

reflective. If it had been a basilisk he would be dead. Like Moaning Myrtle."

"I'm pretty sure Myrtle spies on me in the bath," said John Walton, a sixth-year prefect.

"Nonsense," said Ron flatly. "Of course she doesn't."

Ginny was glad for the change of subject from basilisks and magical stasis. Her first year at Hogwarts was not something she liked to dwell on. She tried to focus her attention instead on what Harry and Hermione, sitting across from her, were talking about, but that turned out not to be a such a good idea either.

"Harry," Hermione was saying, her voice low but intent, "I have to talk to you."

"Not right now," said Harry, reaching for the pumpkin juice and pouring some into his glass. "Can we talk later?"

Hermione flushed. "When, then?" she said. "It's important. There's something I need to talk to you about - to tell you."

"Tomorrow," said Harry, filling his glass. He put the jug down with an exasperated thump. "When I *don't* have a meeting with Snape coming up."

"You always have something -" Hermione began.

"Not now," said Harry with sharp finality. He still wasn't looking at her.

For a moment, Hermione sat very still. Ginny wondered if perhaps she might be going to cry - in her memory, Harry had never spoken to Hermione like that. He had never looked at her like that before, either. When they had been friends, he had looked at her with fond exasperation; when she became his girlfriend, he had looked at her as if she were a minor but unbelievable miracle. Now, he wouldn't look at her at all.

Hermione slowly raised her head. Even more slowly, she got to her feet, her glass of pumpkin juice in her hand. And then, without the slightest warning, she flung the glass hard at the table. It shattered with a sound

like a bomb dropping, spraying pumpkin juice and glass in all directions. Harry jerked back, stunned, as the whole table fell silent and stared.

"Harry James Potter!" Hermione shouted at the top of her lungs. "*You are going to talk to me RIGHT NOW!*"

Shocked out of his torpor, Harry stared in astonishment. Beside him, Ron sat stunned, dripping pumpkin juice and wisely remaining silent. Hermione herself stood where she was, her hands on her hips, her cheeks flushed scarlet and her eyes suspiciously bright.

"Hermione -" Harry turned in his seat, his hand held out to her, his expression surprised and wondering, but without any of the closed-off coldness they had all grown used to. "Hermione, can we just -"

The Great Hall doors banged open.

Everyone turned to look as a student raced into the Hall - a girl, she looked no more than fourteen and wore the banded gold and black scarf of Hufflepuff - or was that Gryffindor red? Her robes were soaking wet now, as was her hair, and she was in tears. A low susurrations of curious surprise ran around the room; Ginny whipped around to stare, a sharp feeling of foreboding gripping her stomach, as the girl raced distractedly past the students towards the High Table. Charlie was already on his feet, running down the steps, and as he neared the girl and caught hold of her, steadying her, Ginny saw that the red she had noted on the girl's scarf was blood.

The other teachers were getting to their feet now, and Charlie had hold of the girl's shoulders. She was talking through her tears, gesturing wildly with her hands and pointing. As the whole school fell silent and leaned forward, trying to hear her, the girl's voice rose up sharp and clear, tinged with hysteria. "..In the snow," she was gasping, tripping breathlessly over her words. "By the North Tower - there was blood *everywhere*. I think -- maybe he might be dead. You *have* to come--Madame Pomfrey too--"

Even at this distance, Ginny could see the look of shock on Charlie's face. When he spoke, his voice was strained.

"You're *quite* certain it's Draco Malfoy?"

The girl nodded, her expression quite terrified. "Yes," she said. "There was a lot of blood, but - it was him." She burst into a fresh spate of tears. "I've never seen anyone dead before," she wept, but Ginny had stopped hearing her. The world had gone a sickening sort of gray color, and she grabbed for the table to steady herself. She heard a loud slamming sound off to her left and looked up; it was Harry, who had shoved his chair back with such force that it had tipped over and hit the flagstone floor.

Hermione looked at him in horror. He was very white, his hand at the Epicyclical Charm around his throat. "He's isn't dead," Harry said. "He isn't - I'd know."

"Harry," Hermione whispered, but Harry had turned, bolted for the Great Hall doors, still wide open, and raced through. Hermione, having gone an ashy gray color, looked wildly around the table at the silent, stunned Gryffindors, hesitated - and fled after Harry.

A hum of astonished shock ran around the table. On instinct, Ginny turned towards her brother; Ron was already there, having come around the table to kneel down next to her. He took her hand and held it hard, and she looked down at him. All around her she was aware of movement - Charlie racing by towards the doors, followed by Madam Pomfrey, a magical stretcher already by her side. The Heads of Houses were moving rapidly towards their respective tables of students. Somewhere a girl had burst into hysterical tears: Blaise Zabini, probably. Ginny sat where she was, Ron's hands tight around her wrists. "You can't," he said, so quietly that nobody else could hear. "You can't," and she nodded, and knew it was true, even as the tears struggled to fight their way to the surface.

References:

"What?" said Lavender blankly. Then comprehension dawned. "Oh, right. You had that whole....Harry thing. Sorry." -*Friends*

a turtle with heavy shopping -*Blackadder*

"fate is what you call it when you don't know the name of the person screwing you over." - Malcolm in the Middle

"I think it just goes to show what sort of life we lead that we can even consider using 'apocalypse' in the plural" - Buffy

"Beat you to death with a shovel ... A vague disclaimer is nobody's friend." - Buffy

"Are you happy to see me, or is that a longboat in your pocket?"
Blackadder

Draco Veritas Chapter Four: The Girl In the Cage

*Yet, love and hate me too,
So, these extremes shall neither office do;
Love me, that I may die the gentler way;
Hate me, because thy love is too great for me.*

John Donne

Harry and Hermione were already standing outside the infirmary when Ginny arrived there. She had had to wait for many agonizing minutes inside the Great Hall, until, in the chaos, she could slip away undetected. Instead of trying to head outside, she made a beeline for the hospital wing, Ron in reluctant tow behind her. No matter what shape Draco was in, they would have to bring him there eventually. Even if he was - well, but that didn't bear thinking about.

The infirmary door was shut fast, and outside in the hallway stood Harry, with Hermione beside him. They were deep in intent conversation. It wasn't until Ginny got close to them that she realized that the dark splotches on Harry's clothes were not melted snow, but blood. Quite a lot of blood.

"What's going on?" Ron asked, looking from one white face to another. "Is Malfoy all right?"

Hermione shrugged hopelessly. "We don't really know..."

"They're not telling us a bloody thing," Harry said, and -- in what Ginny couldn't help but think of as a classic example of pointless teenage-boy aggression - he kicked the wall, and then sat down on the floor, pulling his knees up and resting his head on his arms. He didn't look as if he wanted anyone to go near him and Ginny would actually have been afraid to do so. Instead, she looked at Hermione. "Did you get to see him?" she asked quietly. "How bad do you think it is?"

Hermione shook her head. "Very bad," she said. Her voice was pitched low, as if she didn't want Harry to overhear her. She put her hand on Ginny's elbow and steered her towards Ron. "We saw him," she said, still in the same quiet voice. Ginny could hear the strain underlying her words. "He was lying in the snow and there was blood all around him. A lot of blood. I think it was coming from his shoulder - his shirt was torn there, and that seemed to be where most of the blood was. Harry went to try to stop the bleeding and..." Hermione bit her lip. "Then Lupin and Charlie and the rest of the teachers came, and they pulled Harry back. We couldn't see what was going on. Harry was fighting to get away but Lupin grabbed him and held onto him--Lupin's very strong. And Charlie picked Draco up and put him on the stretcher, and Madam Pomfrey took him through an opening into the castle, and everyone followed her. We followed too, but they shut us out at the door. They said that we would just be in the way."

Ron reached out and touched her shoulder gently. "What are they doing in there?"

Hermione shook her head. "I don't know."

Ron looked as if he were going to say something else, but paused as the infirmary door opened and Charlie stepped out, closing the door behind himself. He looked weary. The front of his shirt and his sleeves were soaked in blood where he must have carried Draco. His robe was off. He looked at the three of them standing clustered together, and then down at Harry on the floor, and said:

"Draco's going to be all right."

Ginny exhaled, feeling as if she were letting out a breath she had been holding for hours. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. He'll be fine. He lost a lot of blood; I know it looked nasty, but that was all it was. The wound was in his shoulder, so nothing vital was damaged."

Hermione stepped forward. "Can we see him?"

Charlie shook his head. "No, not yet. He's out cold anyway. He nearly froze to death, along with the blood loss. It looks as if he may have been out there for several hours." He tried to smile at them; it turned into a yawn. "Sorry. Look, you all should head off to class. There's nothing you can do here right now."

"Just one thing," said a soft voice. Ginny turned. It was Harry. He had gotten to his feet without any of them noticing, and stood there quietly. His eyes were dark in the torchlight. "What happened to him, exactly?"

Charlie shook his head. "We've no idea, Harry."

"Well, what does it *look* like?" Harry demanded. "An accident?"

"No," said Charlie slowly. "Not an accident."

Harry's jaw set. "Then what are you not telling us? Was it a magical attack? A spell? Some kind of ... creature?"

"Harry," replied Charlie flatly. "Go to class."

"No," Harry said.

"Harry -" Charlie began in a placating tone.

"Charlie," Harry snapped right back. "I want to know who or what was responsible for this, and I want to know now."

"What's going on here?" It was Professor Lupin, who had opened the infirmary door behind Charlie. He looked from Charlie's exasperated face to Harry's pale, set one. "Did you tell them Draco's fine?"

"No," said Charlie irritably. "I felt like keeping it to myself so I could make it a really *big* surprise."

Lupin shut the door behind him and turned to face Harry. "So what's the problem?"

"I want to know what happened, Harry said. "I want to know who's responsible for .. for this," and he made a sweeping gesture towards the

infirmary door. "I'm family. I have a right to know."

"Yes, you do," said Lupin. "And as soon as we know, we will tell you."

"Let me see him. He'll tell me what happened."

"He's passed out, Harry. He can't tell you anything."

Harry glanced at Hermione. She was looking at him with large, worried eyes. Beside her, Ron looked taken aback at the force of Harry's anger. "Harry," Hermione said gently. "We'll go to class and come back after - maybe then they'll know a bit more."

"No," said Lupin. "When we know anything, we'll find you, Harry. Hanging about in the corridor here won't do any good. Go to class, there's no need to come back."

Ron reached for Harry's arm, but Harry shook him off. He was staring at Lupin. "You're keeping something from me," he said intently. "All of you are - and what's the difference? Whatever it is, I'll be the one who has to deal with it in the end, all alone. I always am."

"We're not keeping anything from you," Lupin said sharply. "You know what we know." Harry started to speak, but Lupin cut him off. "Draco is going to be fine, but he's still very weak. And in pain. And we need to be taking care of him, but instead you are wasting our time out here. Think about it."

Hermione took hold of Harry's arm. "We're going," she said, and gestured with her chin for Ron and Ginny to follow. Harry went with Hermione unwillingly, looking back over his shoulder at Lupin and Charlie until they turned the corner of the hallway and were once again all four alone, at which point Hermione turned to Harry, her hand still on his arm. "There's no need to talk to Charlie like that -" she began.

Harry jerked his arm away from Hermione as soon as they had stopped walking, and glared at her. "And *you* don't need to lead me around as if I'm some sort of mentally deficient child," he snapped.

Hermione dropped her hand, looking fed up. "Then quit acting like one,"

she snapped right back.

Harry looked grimly satisfied, as if his goal of provoking a response out of Hermione had now been reached. "I will if you quit acting like a bossy know-it-all," he replied.

She looked shocked, then put her hands on her hips. "Harry Potter," she said in a voice that seethed with rage, "you self-centered, inconsiderate, *obstinate* -"

Ginny felt a hand land on her shoulder. It was Ron. "We'll just be going now," he said, very loudly, although neither of his two friends turned to look at him. "We have to...there's thing that...we have to do...very soon. Like, now."

"Right," Ginny agreed weakly. "That thing we have to do," and she fled after Ron. Not, however, before she caught another glimpse of Harry and Hermione glaring fiercely at each other. Harry's hands were balled into fists in his pockets, and Hermione was pale and tight-lipped. She was glad not to have to stay to watch this fight; while Ron and Hermione often bickered and sniped in a wearying manner, Harry and Hermione fought extremely rarely - but when they did, it was with the force of several exploding volcanoes.

She caught up to her brother as they turned the next corner and emerged into the corridor that led to her History of Magic class. Ron was shaking his head. "Unbelievable," he said.

"What's unbelievable?"

Ron gave a short laugh. "Those two," he said. "And their relationship. Otherwise known as the Circus of Pain."

"Oh, come on. It's not that bad."

"Lately being around them is like repeatedly hitting yourself in the head with a hammer. The only bright side is that it feels good when you stop."

"Ron!" Ginny glowered at her brother. "They're just having a rough patch."

Ron shrugged. "Maybe."

Ginny gave her brother a very hard look. He seemed distracted, and his color was high, as if he were annoyed. "Well, maybe you should get a girlfriend yourself before you go making pronouncements," she said severely.

Ron shrugged again. "What makes you think I don't have one?"

Ginny stopped dead. "Ron! You don't, do you? *Do you?*"

Ron paused, and looked at her as if in surprise. Then he laughed awkwardly. "No. Of course not."

She continued to look at him until he began to flush slowly.

"Not that anyone would take any interest if I did," he said shortly.

"That's not true! Ron, what on earth is going on with you?"

Ron opened his mouth to reply, then shut it with a snap. He was looking off past her shoulder. She turned to follow his gaze and saw that someone was standing in the hall just ahead of them, near the doorway to History of Magic. It was a moment before she realized that it was Seamus. He must have been waiting out in front of Professor Binns' classroom - waiting for her.

"Hey, Ginny," he said, straightening up as her gaze fell on him.

"Seamus...shouldn't you be in class?" Ron asked, looking surprised.

Seamus nodded, but when he spoke again it was to Ginny. "Please," he said. "Can I talk to you for a second?" He looked from her to Ron. "Alone," he added.

Ron shrugged. "Go ahead. I have to get to Potions anyway," and he took off down the hall. With his long-legged stride he was soon out of view, and Ginny turned reluctantly back towards Seamus.

"All right," she said. "What's so important you cut class to ask me about it?"

He was leaning back against the wall now, looking at her steadily. His blue eyes were almost indigo in the low light. He said, "It's about Malfoy."

Hermione heard her own voice rising as if it had left her control. "Harry Potter," she said in a voice that seethed with rage, "you self-centered, inconsiderate, obstinate, selfish - *troll!*"

Harry looked bored. "Are you done yet?"

"No," she snapped, anger making her irrational. Somewhere in the back of her mind she was aware that Ron and Ginny had departed, and was glad. Now she could get as angry as she wanted to. "Not *nearly.*"

Harry looked at her without moving. His green eyes had gone nearly black, but otherwise his face was expressionless. "Fine," he said. "Owl me when you do finish this pointless diatribe, then." And he turned around, and walked away.

Before she even realized what she was doing, Hermione had fumbled her wand out of her sleeve. "*Petrificus partialitus!*" she cried, and Harry froze where he was, about three feet away from her, his feet seemingly nailed to the stone floor.

He twisted around and glared. "Oh, very mature, Hermione."

Hermione shoved her wand back into her sleeve and regarded him grimly. "I'm immature? That's amusing, coming from you."

"Don't talk about things you don't understand," said Harry in a withering tone.

"Oh, I understand," she said. "I understand more than you might think."

Harry crossed his arms over his chest. "Enlighten me, then." His tone was heavy with sarcasm.

Hermione pointed her finger at him and spoke in a voice that trembled with tension. "I may not know what's bothering you," she said. "But I know that something is. And whatever it is, it's poisoning you from the inside out. You're turning into someone I don't know, Harry. Maybe even into someone I don't like."

She raised her eyes to his face as she spoke, and was startled. He looked stricken. She had not expected that. She stood for a moment, taken aback. She had never really realized how important her good opinion was to Harry, how much his self-image was shaped by what he saw reflected in her eyes. He ducked his head immediately, his jaw set, hiding the hurt in his eyes - but she had seen it. When she spoke again, it was with less rancor. "I've always admired you, Harry. As much as I love you, I admire you, too. Not just because you're brave, but because you're kind, and because you hold yourself to such a high standard. Higher than anyone else would ever think of holding you to. And you've never had any self-pity, even when you were entitled to it. So when I see you using who you are to try make someone else feel guilty, or even worse, sorry for you, like you just did with Lupin -- that's not you, Harry. That's not who you are."

Harry did not move. He was looking down at the floor, his shoulders tense. The anger that Hermione had felt was dissipating fast. Exasperated as she was, it went against every fiber of everything she had been for the past six years to hurt Harry deliberately. She had spent far too much time putting herself between him and any harm to do that. She began to reach for her wand to De-Hex him, but before she could, he said, "I shouldn't have said that to Lupin. But you don't understand."

"So explain it to me."

Harry closed his eyes. "I've always known that one day Voldemort would strike at those closest to me. I've always tried to prepare myself. But you have to make a choice, if you're me. Either you choose never to love anyone and close yourself off to that particular threat...or you swear to protect the people that you do love, no matter what happens. I chose the second option...mostly because of you." He opened his eyes and looked at her again, his gaze green and steady. "You gave me a choice, to love you or lose you...and I couldn't stand to lose you."

"And maybe you resent me for that?" said Hermione softly.

"I think I do," said Harry slowly. His hands were knotted together, as if he were nervous. She wanted to go to him, but held herself back. This was the most he'd said to her, the most open he had been, in months. "Maybe I blame you for teaching me how to be vulnerable. You did, you know. Years ago. There's all sorts of ways Voldemort could get at me, besides you...Ron. Sirius. Draco. But if it hadn't been for you..."

"What makes you think what happened to Draco has anything to do with you in the first place?"

Harry blinked. "Well, what else would it be?"

"I absolutely guarantee you that there are people out there who want to kill Draco for reasons that have nothing to do with you," said Hermione in a heartfelt tone. "Trust me."

Harry seemed unwilling to accept this. "But..."

"Self-centered, aren't you?" Hermione asked gently. "Not everything is about you, Harry."

Harry didn't smile. He was gazing down. "Look," he said, and held out his right arm, the sleeve pulled up. "Look at all that blood. It's on my hands, that blood."

Hermione looked more closely at Harry's arm, then wrinkled her nose. "That's not blood," she said, with authority. "That's pumpkin juice."

"It is not, it's blood."

"That is pumpkin juice. From where I threw it at you this morning. Honestly, Harry. It's *orange*."

Harry looked offended. "It is too blood."

Hermione grabbed Harry's hand, lifted it up to inspect the stain, and then to his apparent immense surprise, stuck out her tongue and gingerly licked the skin. "Pumpkin juice," she said.

Harry looked at her, his mouth twitching. "I can't believe you did that."

"Kind of makes all that whining about blood on your hands seem a little affected, doesn't it?"

"Mmm," said Harry. He was looking thoughtful. "You know, come to think of it, I think you spilled some pumpkin juice here as well," he added, and pointed at his neck.

"Really?" Hermione smiled. "Well, in that case," and she stepped closer to him, and put her lips against his neck, and very gently kissed him there. He tasted of soap and salt. "Definitely pumpkin juice," she said.

"And here," he said, and indicated his face. She touched her mouth to his cheek - the skin there was as soft as it had been the first time she had kissed him, when he had been fourteen. "And here," he said, and touched his lips, and she stood on tiptoe and put her arms around him and kissed his mouth.

He folded his arms around her and held her tightly while they kissed, so tightly she could barely breathe, his hands knotted into fists against her back. "Oh, Harry," she said, when they had broken apart. "I'm so sorry about everything."

"Don't," he said, and leaned back a little so that he could look at her. "Don't apologize, you haven't done anything you'd need to apologize for."

Her breath caught in her throat. His eyes were on hers, full of concern, but more than that they were animated and alive and he was *present*. Present as he had not been in a long while. He was really there. Lately touching him had been like touching a hollow shell, something reflexively animate but certainly not familiar, but now she was holding her Harry again, feeling just as he always had, solid and limber and a little gawky. He was cold, his cloak still wet with melted snow, his skin chill against hers, but he was *hers*, her Harry, whom she adored.

He let her go. She kept hold of his wrist as she stepped back. She could feel the blood pounding in it under the skin. She smiled up at him, and he smiled back. "We should go to class," she said, her voice very soft.

"Oh, right. You run along," he said.

She blinked. "You're not coming?"

"Well, I would," he replied patiently, "but someone's stuck my feet to the floor."

"Oh!" Hermione felt herself flush. "Oh - oh - I forgot. Oh, *dear*," but he was laughing, and as she took her wand and removed the hex on him, she found that she was laughing too.

They went a little ways down the hall, Seamus walking in front of her. Ginny looked fixedly at the back of his head, feeling unaccountably guilty. *And for what?* She thought. *I haven't done anything!* By the time Seamus slowed down and turned to face her, she was beginning to feel rebellious.

"I wanted to talk to you about Malfoy," he said, brushing his thick wheat-colored hair out of his eyes with his left hand. She had never previously noticed that Seamus was left-handed. Then again, there were a lot of things about Seamus she had never previously noticed.

"What about Malfoy?" Ginny asked, her voice flat and uninviting.

"Do you know if he owns a shovel?"

She blinked, thrown. "What?"

"Or a spade? A trowel, even."

"Why do I have the feeling that this has nothing to do with, say, Herbology?"

Seamus smiled at her, but his eyes were serious. "I wasn't going to say anything, mainly because Malfoy pretty much threatened to rip my liver out, but he doesn't seem to be in any kind of liver-ripping shape right now, so..."

"So *what*?"

"What's between you two?"

"There's nothing between us," Ginny said. This was somewhat true. One-sided feelings didn't count as "between".

"Well, what's going on then?"

That was a trickier question. Ginny decided to dodge it by being flippant. "Why? Suddenly decided you fancy him yourself?"

Seamus raised an eyebrow. "I don't think Malfoy likes me that way, or at least if he does he's playing it very close to the chest."

Ginny giggled despite herself. "Sorry. I was just winding you up. It's only that, well, you don't *know* him, Seamus."

"I do actually," Seamus said. "We used to play together on opposite Junior Quidditch teams back in prep school. He was a little cheat, one of those kids that will do anything to win. Whatever it took. Every time he was Beater, someone wound up with a bloody nose or a cracked elbow."

"Well," said Ginny weakly, "things are different now."

"Look, I know his mum is marrying Sirius, and so maybe Harry feels like they have to get along now, but I'm telling you - he isn't trustworthy and he isn't nice. He's one of those people who will smile and stab you in the back. Ginny..."

He reached for her hand then, but she took a step back. "I still don't understand why you're telling me this. Did Draco...did Malfoy tell you there was something going on with us?"

"No. He just threatened to beat me to death with a shovel if I ever hurt you."

Ginny gasped, then recollected herself. "Oh. That's...very weird."

Seamus shook his head. "You must think I'm stupid."

"No! No. Look, Seamus..." Ginny knotted her hands together. "If you think I'm not being fair to you...I'm sorry, maybe I shouldn't have agreed to go to the Yule Ball with you."

Seamus looked at her for a moment in surprise and then smiled. His eyes were not precisely blue: they had a green cast, like blue water in a green glass. "Relax," he said. "All I did was ask you to the Yule Ball; we're not getting married. I'm not angry with you. I just wanted to..."

"Warn me?"

Seamus shrugged. "All right, maybe a little bit. Draco Malfoy is not a nice person. He was a pretty revolting kid and I haven't seen any evidence that he's changed."

"That's not fair. He has changed, a lot, this past year. He's different."

"Different than he used to be? That's faint praise. Look..." he added quickly, seeing perhaps some resistance in her expression. "It's all right. I just want to take you to the Yule Ball. I don't need to hear any more about you and Malfoy, if there ever was a you and Malfoy."

"Well, there certainly isn't now," said Ginny firmly.

"Good," said Seamus, and slung his rucksack over his shoulder. "I'm off to History of Magic - you want to walk with me?"

"Sure."

He reached to take her hand as they walked down the corridor, and this time she let him.

"You're sure he'll be all right?"

"I'm sure." Lupin tried to make his voice as soothing as possible - Sirius was looking extremely anxious. Lupin was sure that some of the heat radiating out from the fire through which he they were conversing was

Sirius' anxiety, and not the flames. "He's already fine. Perfectly fine. Just worn out and his shoulder has to heal."

"And you're sure we shouldn't come to school?" There were dark lines of strain around Sirius' eyes. He looked tired, and uncomfortable - he was wearing Muggle clothes, at least from the shoulders up (which was all that was visible in the office fireplace): a white shirt and an unknotted dark tie. Lupin had asked him what he'd been doing but had been brushed off with the response, "Auror business. Dull stuff."

"I'm sure, Sirius. There's no need. Draco is fine and if you come here, it'll just panic him and all his friends, make them think something serious is going on -"

"Something serious? He could have died!"

"Right, I know. But so could we, dozens of times. How many times did you land in the hospital wing?"

"Because we were being stupid. If it was Harry - but Draco, he doesn't do reckless things. He's too careful for that. Whatever happened, he wasn't expecting it."

Lupin sighed, and leaned back against the legs of the chair he'd pulled up to the fireplace. "It was a puncture wound, a regular puncture wound - possibly a knife wound, or an arrow. Whatever it was had been pulled out. There are plenty of spells that could accomplish that effect. It could have been a duel gone wrong...or even a spell Draco was trying to cast himself could have backfired. We just don't know."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"If it's any consolation, Draco himself doesn't seem very worried."

"No. It's no consolation." Sirius raked a hand through his black hair -no gray yet, although Lupin had a feeling that if Harry and Draco kept up their near-brushes with death, that would change. "You're sure we shouldn't come?"

"Dumbledore specifically said no." Lupin hesitated. "How's Narcissa?"

Sirius' eyes darkened. "Not very well. She's lying down - she had to take half a philter of Tranquility Solution."

Lupin sighed. "I'm sorry. It'd be harder for her, wouldn't it? I mean, you must remember that time you dueled with Snape?"

Sirius chuckled.

"He threw that curse at you that practically took your arm off."

Sirius looked rebellious. "I was about to win that duel before you interfered."

"Sirius! Your hand fell off!"

"Madam Pomfrey put it back on," Sirius pointed out cheerfully. "James was always a better second than you. He never got in the way." His eyebrows knitted. "Which makes me think...maybe you should ask Snape if it looks like some kind of Hex wound?"

"Already have done," said Lupin. "He's looking into it."

Sirius expelled a breath. "And Draco doesn't seem ... panicked at all?"

"No." Lupin shook his head. "Harry seems to be taking care of that angle for him."

Instead of smiling, Sirius' mouth tightened. "Harry. Is he not taking all this well?"

Lupin shook his head. "No. He threw a tantrum. Accused me of hiding things from him, not telling him what was happening - basically, of lying."

Sirius swore quietly.

"You aren't surprised?"

"No," said Sirius ruefully. "I tried to have a talk with him the other day, because I was worried. He seems so thin and pale these days. I

thought...maybe problems with Hermione? Maybe he was anxious about the wedding, thought I wouldn't be around as much for him afterward? But he just shut me out. Accused me of being a liar as well, by the way."

"Sirius...has something happened to him lately to damage his trust? Because that's how it seems to me. As if he wants to trust, is afraid to, and is resentful as a result. On top of that, he seems to be feeling -" and Lupin was about to add "abandoned", when there was a knock at his office door.

He got to his feet and went to open it, keeping his body between himself and the fireplace, blocking Sirius from whoever might be at the door. To his surprise, it was Harry.

"Hello, Professor Lupin," he said. "Can I talk to you for a second?"

Lupin looked at the boy on the threshold. Sirius had been right. Harry did look thinner, and paler, and more tired than he had before. The shadows under his eyes seemed bruised. It was odd, but as Harry grew older, and especially when he seemed tired or troubled, his resemblance to his father faded slowly and in his face Lupin could once again see Lily. She also had not been beautiful in a conventional sense of the term, but there had been a bravery and grace to her spirit that made her always worth looking at. Harry had that as well, along with the emerald-green eyes that had once prompted a particularly nasty Daily Prophet reporter to remark that "those eyes, hidden behind the famous old-fashioned spectacles, are the one beauty of an otherwise unremarkable face."

"Professor," said Harry politely. "Can I come in?"

"You should know I'm not alone," Lupin replied, but Harry had already looked past him and seen Sirius in the fireplace. His hands tightened at his sides, but he evinced no other expression of nervousness.

"Sirius," Harry said quietly. "Are you all right?"

Sirius nodded. "Fine, Harry." His eyes went to Lupin. "Could you give us a moment?"

Without even thinking about it, Lupin nodded and went out of the room, closing the door after him. Only then did he realize that he had just shut

himself out of his office while shutting a student in. This was not generally considered good practice. Still, Sirius was there to keep an eye on Harry.

He leaned back against the wall and sighed. The look on Sirius' face when Harry had appeared at the door...Lupin had recognized that potent cocktail of hope, love, pride, concern and fear. Certainly it was the way his own father had looked at him when the letter of acceptance had come from Hogwarts. He remembered hearing his parents' voices through the bedroom wall that night...*He can't go, he's so small for his age, and what will the other students do, how will they treat him? What if he gets hurt or hurts somebody else? But how can we keep him back - can't he have a normal life?*

If there was one thing Lupin had learned since then it was that there was no such thing as a normal life, not for some people. Not for himself. And not for Harry. He had been branded by the bite of a wolf; Harry was branded by something much graver and much darker. It showed itself now in his eyes and the knowledge in them, as much as in the scar on his forehead.

The office door opened, and Harry looked around it. "Come back in, Professor," he said. He wasn't smiling exactly, but he seemed relieved, as if a burden on him had been lightened. Lupin presumed that he and Sirius must have made up their fight. "Sorry I kicked you out of your office."

Lupin followed Harry back into the office and bid goodbye to Sirius, who was also looking a deal more cheerful. "Right then, Sirius...owl me tomorrow."

"Will do," said Sirius, and disappeared in a shower of blue-green sparks.

Lupin turned to look at Harry. "What was it you wanted to see me about, then?"

"Oh." Harry considered a moment. "It was about the DADA homework, actually."

Lupin, despite himself, was surprised. Usually when Harry wound up in his or any other teacher's office, it had little to do with homework and

more to do with life-threatening emergencies. "What about it, Harry?"

"Well, I know we were supposed to have chosen at least our first assignment today.."

"Obviously, I understand if you and Draco need some time to get that to me. A week's extension would --"

"No, that's just it, we chose already." Harry took out a parchment and handed it to Lupin, who received it with surprise. "We want to do the Research project on Dark locations. We'd like to go to Shepton Mallet."

Lupin looked at Harry with some bemusement. Harry returned his gaze, his green eyes very clear behind his glasses. Again, Lupin was reminded of Lily. Lily when she was hiding something, or up to mischief. Perhaps he was being overly suspicious, however. Surely Harry and Draco wouldn't be likely to be up to anything given the condition Draco was in. "All right, then, Harry."

"I just wanted to let you know so you could get started getting a Portkey for us," Harry said, with boyish sincerity. "I know they take a while to make."

"All right." Lupin looked at Harry, bemused. What was going on with the boy? Unfortunately, nothing he could put his finger on exactly. "I'll get it ready for you, Harry. In the meantime, while Draco's in the infirmary, I suggest you tell him not to worry about schoolwork. He needs to rest."

Harry nodded. "Sure. I'll tell him we can work on it just before Christmas, if you can have the Portkey ready by then. We'd work on it during the break, but you know, no magic during the holidays, and the wedding..."

Lupin nodded. "Of course. Are you looking forward to the wedding?"

Harry looked briefly surprised, then shrugged. "I haven't thought about it, really. I've been so busy with classes and getting ready for NEWTS and...I haven't bought anything for Sirius and Narcissa yet."

"Well, the shops in Hogsmeade should be staying open tomorrow night, shouldn't they?"

Harry blinked at him. "Tomorrow?"

"Pub Crawl, Harry."

"Oh! Right." Harry nodded. "Sure. I'll get something then." He looked down at the gold pocket watch that glimmered on his wrist. As always, when Lupin saw that watch, his throat tightened. Standing there in the dim half-light, with his dark untidy head bent over the familiar watch, Harry could have been James. James, too, had fidgeted with his hands when he was nervous. James, too, had been proud of the watch he'd been given by the girl he loved. James had looked forward to their first Pub Crawl... "I've got to go, Professor," Harry said. "I've got class."

"Sure." Lupin flicked his wand towards the door, and it swung open. Harry went out, and paused for a moment on the threshold.

"Will you be at the Pub Crawl, Professor?"

"I might stop by. Look, Harry, I..."

Harry looked at him with inquiring eyes. "Yes?"

"I didn't want you to think I was angry with you. I was sharp with you earlier today, and I'm sorry. You were concerned about your friend and it does you credit. You've always been just like your father that way."

Harry's eyes lit up and he flushed. "Thanks, Professor."

"It's just the truth." Lupin shrugged. "I've been thinking about your father lately. Wishing he could be at the wedding."

"It's all right," Harry said. "You'll be there with me." He shifted his rucksack higher on his shoulder and backed away from the door. "Thanks for letting me use your office to talk to Sirius, Professor."

Lupin nodded. His throat was still tight and he did not want to speak. He watched as Harry walked away, turned the corner, and was gone. Then he went back into his office and shut the door and sat down at his desk, looking into the fire. For the first time in a long time, he felt suddenly old.

Draco woke to a splintering pain in his head and the feeling that someone was sitting on his chest. He dragged his heavy eyelids up, and saw a stone-arched ceiling above him, white rising sheets on either side of his bed.
The infirmary.

He sat up slowly, and looked down at himself. Someone had dressed him in blue and white pinstripe pajamas, and there were blankets heaped on his bed. Huh. He wondered how he'd gotten here. He wondered who had brought him here, and who had dressed him. Obviously not somebody who understood that Malfoys did not wear flannel.

He closed his eyes, and cast his mind back to the last thing he remembered. He recalled Rhysenn screaming, himself pushing her away, the world turning upside down, silver inverting into black...

What had happened? What had injured him? He unbuttoned his pajama top and shrugged it off, but his shoulder was tightly bandaged and offered no evidence. It was still slightly sore, and he winced when he touched the bandages, even lightly. Slowly, he leaned back against the pillows, his mind lost in recollection. He remembered a strange sound, and the sharp pain in his shoulder. A sound like...a bow and arrow? But who would go around shooting students with a bow and arrow? And why, when an Unforgivable Curse was so much quicker? He knew why his father used a bow and arrow: for the sport of it. But the memory made him shiver.

He covered his face with his hands, and rested there for a moment in the quiet darkness. His mind swam with questions, not the least of which was how long he had been out cold in the infirmary. Who had discovered him, and what had become of Rhysenn? He let his hands drop, and closed his eyes, letting his thoughts range outward, slowly, trying something he had done before only rarely -- searching the castle with his mind, seeking another and a familiar presence, one bound to him even in sleep by an unbreakable cord of telepathy and magic.

He found him, like a pinpoint of light in the darkness. *Harry*. He could not, of course, ever tell what Harry was thinking precisely, but the shape

of his thoughts was as familiar as the shape of his face. *Harry*, he whispered into the darkness. *Harry, are you awake?*

There was a moment of startled silence, and then Harry replied. *I am. Are you all right? Where are you? Infirmary still?*

Yes.

All right. Stay where you are, I'll be right there.

Trust me when I say I'm not going anywhere.

There was no response. Harry was probably distracted. Draco busied himself with shrugging his pajama top back on and buttoning it up, which hurt rather more than he would have liked it to. He could not still a small, cold fear...he remembered stories Lucius had told him of magical poisons...but no, he would surely be dead already if he had been poisoned.

There was a faint rattle, and the curtain around his bed was pulled back. He sat up straight as Harry appeared, the Invisibility Cloak falling at his feet as he stepped forward. He had obviously dressed quickly: his green sweater was on inside-out and his hair was even more of a disaster than usual. "Malfoy..." Harry said, his eyes wide behind his glasses. "You look really pale."

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Thank you for that bulletin from the Department of the Obvious, Potter. Massive blood loss does often result in pallor, you know. Now are you going to sit down, or are you just going to stand there and goggle at me like a landed trout?"

Harry flung himself into the chair next to the bed, still staring at Draco. "But you're okay? You're really...okay?"

Draco tried to push the thought of deadly poisons out of his mind. "I'm all right...did you think I wouldn't be?"

Harry drew out the chain that hung around his throat, and looked down at it. In the half-light, the gold Epicyclical Charm glimmered dully. "I knew you weren't dead already," he said quietly. "But I didn't know you

wouldn't die." He let the chain drop back into his shirt. "Draco, what happened? What were you doing wandering around in the snow at 6 am anyway?"



Draco noted the use of his given name and was, despite himself, pleased. "I'll tell you in a second. Reach onto that nightstand and get my clothes, will you?"

Harry gave him a narrow look. "Why?"

"Because I want something that's in the pocket, Potter. Actually I just want the shirt...thanks," he said, and caught the shirt that Harry tossed to him, which had been neatly folded. Draco unfolded it, and blinked. It was ruined, unsurprisingly, the right shoulder a stiffened mass of blood and torn fabric. The shirt had been slit down the front as well, where they must have cut it off his body.

Harry looked vaguely sickened. "That's a lot of blood."

"Yep," said Draco, still staring down at the shirt. "It was really expensive,

too. Donna Charon autumn collection..."

"Malfoy." Harry looked impatient. "*What happened?*"

"I went outside to meet someone," Draco said slowly. "And I wasn't outside in the snow...I was up on a tower."

"The Astronomy Tower?" Harry looked interested now. "You told me people only ever go up there to have sex." His eyes widened. "Were you having *sex*?"

"I have a bedroom, Potter. Why would I go up onto the Astronomy Tower to have sex?"

"Well, who were you meeting, then?"

"Rhysenn, my cousin."

Harry gave Draco a blank, uncomprehending stare.

"The black-haired girl who came down the stairs with Charlie at your birthday party."

"So you *were* having sex!" Harry glanced at Draco's ruined shirt. "She must be fairly wild."

"Potter, if you do not shut up about sex, I will twist your head off and use it as a Quaffle."

"Okay, okay." Harry subsided, his eyes shining with silent mirth. Draco was fairly sure that Harry had been being purposely obnoxious this whole time. "So tell me what you *were* doing."

Draco sighed, and explained - about Rhysenn, about the letters from his father, the maps that led to secret meeting places, the cryptic messages, and finally, the attack on them both. "I've no idea who she really is," he finished. "Or what she wants, or whether the person who shot at us was trying to kill me or to kill her. And I don't know how I wound up at the foot of the tower, either. I must have fallen. I'm just surprised the fall didn't kill me."

Harry was staring at him with saucer eyes. "Your father is alive?"

Draco nodded.

"Your father is alive and you didn't tell me?"

Draco looked at his hands. "Dumbledore made me swear not to tell you. I'm .. sorry. I wanted to." He held himself very still. Harry was a barely visible shadow beyond the fringe of silvery light that was his own falling hair. "Who else could I tell besides you?"

"But you didn't tell me."

"I swore I wouldn't." Draco paused. "It's not as if there aren't things you haven't been telling me."

Draco heard Harry sigh. "That's true." He hesitated. "But you're telling me now? You're breaking your promise?"

"I could have died," Draco said. "And if I did die, you would deserve to know why and how."

He looked up, and saw Harry staring at him with a tense expression.

"I owe Dumbledore," added Draco. "But I owe you more."

Harry hesitated, and then his face relaxed into a smile. "Thanks," he said, and Draco felt gratified despite himself. It was the annoying thing about Harry - he had that quality given to only a very few, that made even his smallest gesture seem weighted with significance. Whatever it was, it was what made him a natural leader -- it was what made people want to protect him, that made them line up to stand between him and whatever encroaching darkness he must one day defeat. But then, that was the nature of being a hero.

That was of course, when he wasn't being a prat.

"Malfoy," Harry said. "What do the letters say?"

"The letters Rhysenn brings? Not much useful. Here, this last one's in the pocket of my shirt - that's why I wanted it." Draco pulled the parchment, remarkably unharmed, out of the shirt pocket where he had tucked it, and unrolled it. "*Draco,*" he read out. "*Lo these many years we have waited, you and I, for your true birthday to dawn. Remember this: some must be sacrificed that others might be saved. True obedience requires no illusions. Soon you will know everything.*" Draco shrugged. "That's it."

Harry sat for a moment, gnawing his lower lip. Then he held his hand out. "Let me see the letter."

"I told you what it said."

"I want to see it anyway. There might be clues."

"Right, because bad guys love to leave clues lying around. It's really a desperate cry for help."

"Give it here, Malfoy," said Harry.

Draco handed the letter over with a shrug. "If you insist on playing Junior Auror, I guess I can't stop you."

Harry ignored him. "This letter was written in Green Viridian Ink," he said, his voice intent. "Only bona fide Ministry officials can use it, you know."

Draco was impressed. "Really?"

"No, actually, I made that up. Here, take your stupid letter." Harry tossed the letter back, looking disgusted. "Who says 'Lo', anyway?"

"Who says 'bona fide'?" Harry was prevented from answering this when the letter in Draco's hand caught fire. Draco dropped it with an oath, and it turned to ash before it hit the stone infirmary floor. "They always do that," Draco said sulkily, putting his burned thumb in his mouth. "I guess so I can't keep them as evidence."

"What does that mean, your 'true birthday'?"

"No idea."

"Didn't it ever occur to you to try to find out what a true birthday might be?"

"How?"

"Well," said Harry, as if it were obvious, "Ask Hermione. If she doesn't know, she could find out for you."

"I'd rather not bring anyone else into this."

"Hermione isn't anyone else," Harry pointed out. "She's...Hermione. You can tell her anything."

"Which is why you told her about our little graveyard excursion?"

Harry opened his mouth to say something, then shut it with a snap. "That's different."

"Why, because it's *your* big secret?"

"Because nobody's trying to kill *me*."

"Ha!"

Harry looked at him sharply. "Did you just say 'Ha!'?"

Draco considered. "Embarrassingly, yes."

"By which you meant...?"

Draco yawned hugely. He was growing more and more tired. "Someone's always trying to kill you, Potter. You wouldn't be you if they weren't. And in point of fact, who knows if someone was trying to kill me or if they were going for Rhysenn and missed?"

Harry was silent for a moment. His right hand was playing with the loop of his belt - actually, with the odd-looking scarlet bangle that he never seemed to go without. "I don't think you should trust her," he said finally.

"Thank you, I don't." Draco yawned again. "Potter, I was thinking..."

"What?"

"Well, if you ask Lupin to give you a Portkey that'll take you to Doon's Hill, won't he guess why you're going there? I'm surprised he put it on the homework, actually."

"Right. That's why I'm going to tell him that we want to go to Shepton Mallet instead."

"But we don't want to go there...oh."

"Come on, Malfoy. Cunning plans, remember? The big thing is to get off school grounds, considering that we can't Apparate or fly away and don't exactly have time to walk."

"So how are we meant to get from that Mallet place to Doon's Hill?"

"Leave that to me." Harry smiled, then bit his lip. "But you're sure...you still want to go?"

"Want to might be a little strong. I'm still willing. I'll be fine in a day or two, I'm pretty sure."

"We can wait as long as you want," said Harry.

"No, it's fine." Draco leaned back against the pillows and shut his eyes. "You do realize," he said sleepily, "that this means...we're going to have to do...an entire report on Shepton Mallet...for no damn good reason at all." He yawned a final time. "Thanks to you," he added.

He never heard what Harry said in response; he had already fallen asleep.

He was dreaming again. He was in the tower room once more, and his father was there, as was the Dark Lord. He stood at a different angle now, and could see out the tall and narrow windows. They showed an

unfamiliar landscape: a ridged valley dropping away into wooded trees. The night sky was high and black, the stars like naked daggers. Lucius and the Dark Lord stood together by a huge and circular golden cage, the kind that might have held a lion or a tiger. Instead it held a woman. A slender, tall woman clad only in her own long black hair, which swirled around her like smoke, hiding her body. It was not until she raised her face that he knew her.

Rhysenn.

Draco's eyelids flew open.

It was morning, and the infirmary was full of light. It took a moment for him to realize who had spoken, and that he was not dreaming. It was Charlie Weasley, standing at the foot of his bed. His hands were on his hips and he looked bemused. Draco suspected he had come directly from feeding his baby dragon, since his face and dark blue work robes were dusted with soot.

Draco sat up gingerly against the piled pillows, and found he could move without much pain. There was a dull ache in his shoulder, but nothing else. "Well," he said reasonably, "where else would I be?"

"Not you," said Charlie, and poked at something with his foot. Draco got up on his knees and peered over the edge of his bed. Harry was there, lying curled on the floor, asleep on his folded Invisibility Cloak. His cheek was pillowed on his hand.

"Go 'way," said Harry and curled himself into a tighter ball.

"Get up, Harry," said Charlie. "Dumbledore will be here any second."

"Nerble," said Harry, his face buried in his arms. "Splurgit. *Argh.*"

"What was that?" Charlie looked as if he was trying not to laugh.

"He said to leave him alone," Draco translated. "He's having a dream about Professor Sinistra."

"He *is*?" Charlie demanded, clearly fascinated. "Well, she is awfully--"

"I am *not*," protested Harry, sitting up. His hair stood out wildly, as if he had been electrocuted, and his face was lined with creases where it had pressed against the folded cloak material. "Malfoy, you sodding liar."

"Got you up," pointed out Draco, unfazed. "Now get out of here, before Dumbledore gets here and you get in trouble - or not," he added hastily, as the curtain was drawn back and Professor Dumbledore entered, followed by Madam Pomfrey and Draco's head of House, Professor Snape. Draco sat back on his heels, and rubbed his shoulder ruefully. "I just want everyone to remember," he remarked, "that I've lost a great deal of blood. I might be delirious."

"It's all right, Draco," said Dumbledore, his eyes kindly and serious as they rested first on Draco, then on Harry. "While we might frown upon students breaking into locked infirmaries in the middle of the night, the urge to be with one's friends in times of trouble is both admirable and understandable. Neither you nor Harry will have points taken from your Houses. Now do get up, Harry. Just looking at you is making my bones ache."

Harry got up hastily, and rubbed at his eyes in an effort to appear more awake. "Thanks, Professor."

Dumbledore waved a hand, and four high-backed chairs appeared around the bed. Dumbledore sat down, and Madam Pomfrey, Snape, and Charlie followed suit. Harry sat down on the foot of the bed, covering a yawn; to Draco's surprise, nobody moved to stop him.

"Before you tell us what you know, Mr. Malfoy," Dumbledore began, "why don't we tell you what we know? Now. We were first alerted to your plight when a Hufflepuff first-year student came racing into the Great Hall yesterday morning, announcing that she had found Draco Malfoy lying in a snowbank, quite dead. As you can imagine, this caused something of a stir."

"Mass suicides among the fifth-year girls, I imagine," said Draco cheerfully.

"Perhaps the mourning was not quite so extreme," said Dumbledore, "although there was much concern at the Slytherin table, and several Gryffindors made remarkable scenes." At this, Harry became very interested in a bootlace. "As you can imagine, much haste was made to reach you. You were, as reported, lying in a snowbank, inert and drenched in blood. It is very surprising, in fact, that the blood loss did not kill you. Coupled with that, it is even more surprising that the cold did not finish you off. You were nearly frozen when the Hufflepuff girl found you while she was on her way down to the greenhouse. She held you to warm you up. She had Muggle first-aid training. Fortunately for you."

"Sure," said Draco, leaning back against a pillow. "That's her story."

"We brought you back here, where it was discovered that the source of your injury was a puncture in your right shoulder. The injury was deemed non-magical in nature, and both your hypothermia and blood loss were quickly treated. You may thank Professor Snape for providing us with a potion that is usually used to treat vampire attacks, which restored to you the blood you had lost..."

"Vampire attacks?" Draco echoed, thinking of Rhysenn again, her white skin and red lips. She had said she wasn't a vampire, but...

"You were not bitten by a vampire, Draco," said Madam Pomfrey. "You had no bite marks on you. But we would love to know how you did come to be injured. Do you know who attacked you?"

There was a long silence. Draco looked over at Harry, who was looking pale and serious. He did, however, look better than he had. His eyes no longer swam in blue hollows.

"I was outside," Draco said slowly. "I was heading down to the Quidditch pitch to, uh, meet someone -"

"Who?" Snape's question snapped towards him like a striking cobra.

"Me," said Harry promptly. "Because we were going to, uh.."

Draco floundered, then found his footing. "...Work on our homework for our DaDA project and..."

"It had to be done at night, because..."

"Constructing a Locator Charm requires star charts," Draco finished weakly.

"And you couldn't do that from the Astronomy Tower?" Charlie demanded.

"Too crowded with people snogging," said Draco firmly. "Terrible working conditions."

"But I was late," Harry continued, "because I, uh, overslept, and..."

"And I was practicing a bit of magic on my own," Draco said, warming to the theme. "To, uh, get ready for our project and.."

"And he threw a curse that rebounded and hit him in the arm," said Harry with relish.

"I did *not*," said Draco.

"Oh, yes you did," said Harry.

"I think you're remembering what I told you wrong, *Potter*."

"Then why don't you tell us how you got that hole in your shoulder, *Malfoy*?"

Draco gritted his teeth. "I threw a curse that rebounded and hit me in the arm," he muttered.

"Careless of you," said Harry with obvious delight.

"Perhaps a *Priori Incantatum* might be in order here," said Snape silkily.

"Draco didn't use his wand," Harry put in quickly. "I...I assume."

Draco raised his left hand. "No wand," he said.

"Magid spells," said Snape darkly. "Both out of bed sneaking around after dark. Using curses. Filch would string you up in the dungeons by your thumbs for this."

Harry looked mildly horrified.

"May I remind you," said Draco, "that detention is a time-honored form of punishment."

"And detention you shall have," said Dumbledore. "Both of you, commencing when you return from Christmas holidays. As well as twenty points from each of your houses. I will consider the damage done to you physically, Draco, and you mentally, Harry, by the results of this escapade to be the rest of your punishment."

Both boys looked at the ground. Draco was the first to speak. "Headmaster..." he began slowly. "Won't the...what will the other students...won't they wonder about..."

"Me?" Harry clarified.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled briefly. "I trust you two to fabricate a story they'll believe," he said. "I have the utmost faith in you both."

"Thanks, Professor," Draco said, not exactly sure what he was thanking him for, but feeling grateful nonetheless. For the vote of confidence, perhaps. "And...we're sorry."

Both Snape and Charlie looked to Dumbledore, who shrugged, and rose creakily to his feet. "Very well," he said. "I would like to see you in my office later, Mr. Malfoy, when you are fully recovered." He looked at Harry, and then back at Draco. "Alone," he clarified.

Draco felt himself flush. "Of course, Professor."

Snape and Charlie had risen to their feet as well, and Charlie looked expectantly at Harry, who glanced over at Dumbledore. "I'd like to stay,"

he said. "If that's all right."

"Normally, outside of visiting hours, only family..." Snape began.

"I *am* family," Harry said.

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, you are," he said. "And you may stay."

When Ginny left Herbology in the afternoon, she found Ron and Hermione standing on the snowy path that led up from the greenhouse to school, waiting for her. They were deep in conversation, Ron's dark red head bent over Hermione's brown one, and she had to clear her throat loudly to get their attention. They spun around, looking surprised.

"Hey, Ginny," said Hermione. There was color in her cheeks and she clutched a white piece of parchment in a red-mittened fist. "I'm skipping lunch and going to see Draco in the hospital wing - I thought you might want to come along."

Ginny was surprised. "He can have visitors? He's awake?"

"He's awake," said Hermione. "And Harry's with him." She waved her parchment. "He owled down and said we should come."

"How'd Harry get there so early?" Ginny asked, starting to walk up the path.

"Spent the night on the floor," said Hermione, sounding amused. "You know how he gets when he's worried. Remember when that Bludger broke Ron's arm last year and Harry camped out in the infirmary and brought him all his homework?"

"True," said Ron. He held out a hand to help Hermione up the iced-over steps, and she took it. "But I don't think he spent the night on the floor, ever."

"Well, Draco's a bit different," said Ginny, and was about to add that Draco was different because it seemed like someone had actually tried to

kill him, as opposed to his having had an accident, but Ron interrupted.

"Yeah, because if Harry didn't stay with him constantly, you know, Malfoy might stop breathing."

"Ron, don't even say that," Hermione admonished him gently. "Harry's just being a friend - he'd do it for you." Reaching the top of the stairs, she let go of Ron's hand. "In fact, we should all go visit him. You, too, Ron."

"Nooo," Ron moaned, looking mutinous. "Can't I just clean out the prefects' bathroom instead? Something fun?"

"He saved your life once," said Hermione severely.

"I saved his life twice. I'm one up on him still."

"Can't you just pretend to like him? As a favor to me?" Hermione asked.

Ron's resistance seemed to deflate like a punctured balloon. "Oh, *all right*."

Hermione smiled sunnily. "Let's go! Come on," and she pushed open the castle doors, gesturing for the other two to follow her. "You too, Ginny."

Ginny hesitated. "Oh, I don't know..."

"If I have to go, you have to go too," Ron said, and grabbed her wrist. She followed him, her heart pounding with nervous anticipation. Her great happiness that Draco was all right was tempered with nervousness about seeing him. Especially now that she was almost sure that he was the one who had kissed her while she was sleeping. Unless, of course, it *had* been Snape. But that was so very...yuck.

Madam Pomfrey let them all into the infirmary with only a perfunctory eye roll. The infirmary was warm and full of light. At the far end of the huge room, Ginny could see a small still figure lying on a bed against the wall - Malcolm Baddock, she assumed. Ginny looked quickly away, and fixed her eyes on the white-curtained bed up ahead. The curtains hung from the ceiling without visible means of suspension, and were half-transparent. She could see shadows behind them: someone sitting upright

in a bed, someone in a chair beside it. She recognized the outline of Harry's messy hair, and smiled. As they drew nearer, she began to hear Harry's voice, and then Draco's in response. "The Wronski Feint is not a better move than the Luhzkin Parallel Slide! What drugs are you on, Potter?"

Hermione paused at the foot of the bed, and pulled the curtain back. "You're talking Quidditch?" she said, sounding amused. "I can't believe you two are actually talking Quidditch."

Ginny and Ron joined her at the foot of the bed in time to see Harry look up surprised, and laugh. "Where did you all spring from?"

Ginny looked at him in surprise as he got to his feet. He looked bright-eyed and awake, almost - lively. It was as if something had shocked him out of his self-imposed exile from the rest of the world. He hugged Hermione hard, and let her go reluctantly. "I don't suppose you brought anything to eat..."

Hermione laughed and handed him something wrapped in a napkin. "Raided the kitchens," she said, and then turned to Draco, who was sitting propped up in bed, his back against a stack of pillows that looked as if they had been pilfered from other, empty beds. Ginny said a little inward prayer of relief. He looked almost normal, perhaps a little tired, but his face was flushed with a healthy color and his bandaged shoulder looked whole. He was wearing blue-and-white striped standard-issue infirmary pajamas that made him look six years younger. "You're all right?" Hermione asked him, her voice suddenly gentle. "I would have brought you something too, but I didn't know..."

"It's all right." Draco's voice was strong. Normal. It was hard to believe that he had been so very near death not long ago. She banished the thought of blood-stained snow. "I'm not hungry." His eyes went to Ron and Ginny. "Hello, Weasley." He paused. "Ginny."

Ron nodded at him. "Glad you're okay."

"So am I," Ginny added quickly.

Hermione sat down on the foot of the bed. "Did they tell you when you

would be out?"

"Tomorrow, probably," Draco said.

"Will you be able to go to the Pub Crawl?" she asked.

Draco shrugged. "I wasn't going to go anyway," he said. "Weasley here has me hanging about pestering the sixth-years, don't you?"

Ron, who was still looking as if he wished he were elsewhere, now looked uncomfortable. "Well, you volunteered," he said.

"Oh, but that won't take all night!" said Hermione, looking anxious. "Will it? You should still go, Draco - you only get one Pub Crawl." She twisted herself around and looked at Ron. "He doesn't have to stay at school all night, does he?"

Ron looked even more uncomfortable. "Well..."

Draco shrugged, looking piteous. "I'll see how I feel. I mean, I did agree to do it...although perhaps if I'm feeling very weak and ill it might not be the best thing for -"

"Malfoy," said Ron, sounding exasperated. "If you're well enough to be let out, you're well enough to sit in the Great Hall and watch the door!"

Draco looked even more piteous. Ginny wanted to hug him, but restrained the impulse. "But I don't want to," he said.

Ron smiled at him brightly. "Haven't you ever heard the expression, 'When life gives you lemons, make lemonade?'"

"No," said Draco. "I've heard the expression, 'When life gives you lemons, make lemonade, and then throw it in the face of the person who gave you the lemons until they give you the oranges you originally asked for.'"

Harry started to laugh, and Ron glared at him. Before he could say anything, however, the curtain was drawn aside, and Madam Pomfrey peered in, her expression amused. "There's someone here to see you, Draco," she said.

It was Blaise. Ginny instinctively drew back as Draco's girlfriend stalked into the room, her green eyes blazing and her fiery hair tumbling around her shoulders. Hermione leaped up from where she had been sitting on the bed and backed away as Blaise advanced on Draco, who looked alarmed. "Blaise...?" he began.

"Darling!" Blaise launched herself onto the bed and threw her arms around Draco, embracing him fiercely. Draco yelled in pain. Harry leaped up to get out of the way of the windmilling limbs, and went to stand near Hermione, looking amused. "I came as soon as I possibly could! I was absolutely frightened to death!"

Draco patted her back awkwardly. "There, there," he said, or at least that was what Ginny thought he had said - his voice was muffled against Blaise. "I'm fine. No harm done."

"No harm done? You could have been killed. Were you dueling?" Blaise pulled back. "And if you were, why didn't you pick me as your second? You know perfectly well I'm better at Slashing Hexes and Transfixion Torments than anyone else in school!"

Ron cleared his throat. "I'll just pretend I didn't hear that."

Blaise twisted around in the circle of Draco's arms, and looked at him. Then she smiled, a kittenish, amused smile, her eyes sliding down to Ron's Head Boy badge. "I'm sorry, Ron," she said. "I didn't notice you standing there." Her eyes slid to Harry, and then to Hermione, and darkened. She didn't look at Ginny at all. "What is this, a Gryffindor invasion? Come to see if you could finish him off?"

"That's right," said Harry, with heavy sarcasm. "We thought if we showed up here in a big group, we could kill him under cover of broad daylight and nobody would notice."

"Sounds like a typical Gryffindor plan," sniffed Blaise. "What are you all doing here, anyway?"

"Official business -" Ron began, but was cut off by an enormous clang, as if someone had dropped a pile of dishes. Ginny jumped, and leaned

around one of the sheets that blocked off the bed. Madam Pomfrey was standing a little ways away, filling Charm packets at the small dispensary on the wall. She had turned around, as well, and was staring towards the far bed where Malcolm Baddock had been lying inert - only he was no longer inert. He was moving, apparently struggling to sit up. On the floor beside his bed lay a shattered glass of water, knocked off the bedside table. With an exclamation of "Good Heavens!" Madam Pomfrey turned and rushed across the room.

Ginny drew her head back inside and turned around. The others were looking at her curiously. "Malcolm Baddock - he's awake," she announced.

Blaise's mouth fell open. "He is? He's woken up?"

Ginny nodded. "Looks like it."

Draco tapped Blaise gently on the shoulder. "Go see if he's all right, will you?"

Blaise didn't need to be told twice. With a distracted glance at Draco, she slid off the bed, got to her feet, and raced out of the small enclosure, brushing by Ron as she went. Ginny did a double take as her gaze fell on her brother -- Ron had gone terribly white, and had grabbed hold of a chair back to steady himself as if he were afraid he might fall over. "Ron!" she said, shocked. "Are you okay?"

He nodded. "I -- don't feel well," he said, his voice tight.

"Well, you've come to the right place," said Draco.

"Shut up, Malfoy," said Ron, and there was no humor in it and no teasing. Draco looked surprised.

Ginny looked at her brother, worried. "Can I get you some water?" she asked, and he nodded. She summoned an empty glass and went to fill it at the infirmary's small sink. The sink, against the wall, was near Malcolm's bed. Malcolm was sitting up, quite pale and very surprised-looking, with Blaise and Madam Pomfrey hovering solicitously over him. "What happened to me?" he was asking. "How did I get here?"

"We don't know what happened to you, Malcolm," Madam Pomfrey was saying. She was in the midst of Summoning packets of Charm transfusions from the cupboards across the room; they flew around her head like a small swarm of birds. "What's the last thing you remember?"

"I...I was on my way to the prefects' bathroom, and I remembered I'd left my History of Magic parchments in the meeting room, and so I stopped there, and when I opened the door, I..." Malcolm paused and frowned, a line of concentration denting his forehead. "I..."

"You what?" Blaise demanded, and was rewarded with a sharp look from Madam Pomfrey.

"I don't remember," Malcolm announced despairingly. "I don't remember anything after that..." He looked entreatingly at Madam Pomfrey. "How long have I been here? Have I missed the Yule Ball? And the rematch we had with Gryffindor? Tell me they didn't win, the smug bastards..."

Ginny retrieved her water and returned to the others at a swift pace. When she drew the curtain back, she saw that Harry and Hermione were fussing over Ron, who appeared to be trying to shoo them away. Draco was sitting quietly in his bed, folding the parchment Ron had given him into a rude but amusing shape. "It's true, Malcolm did wake up," she said, handing the glass of water to her brother, who was now very green. "Someone must have put a temporary stasis spell on him or something."

"Well, who?" asked Draco, looking interested - Malcolm was, after all, one of his own Chasers. "Does he know?"

Ginny shook her head. "He doesn't remember anything."

Ron drained the glass she had handed him, and set it down on the nightstand. "That's too bad," he said. Some of the color was starting to come back into his face - the water must have helped. "Nothing at all?"

"That's what he said," Ginny replied, setting herself down at the foot of the bed. "I wonder what did happen to him?"

"Strange things are afoot at Hogwarts School," Harry intoned.

Hermione was shaking her head. "Things have been very odd lately. I'm glad Christmas is coming and we can all go back to the Manor."

"Right," said Ron, "because nothing weird ever happens *there*."

Draco made a face at him, but Ron took no notice. He was looking at Harry. "we're meant to have practice now," he said. "Do you want me to take over Captaining?"

"Oh." Harry looked startled. "Uh..."

"Actually, I'm tired," Draco said. "Harry, you go on."

Harry looked as if he were going to say something, but Draco looked at him, and he shut his mouth. Ginny was quite sure that they were talking, in that way that they sometimes did, so that no one else could overhear. Talking mind - to -mind - she wondered what that was like, if it was frightening and invasive or comfortable and normal-seeming. It didn't seem to bother either Draco or Harry either, who turned to Ron and nodded. "All right. You ready, Ginny?"

"Sure." She threw a last glance at Draco, but he was looking down at his hands. "I -"

"Darling!" It was Blaise, again, tossing the curtains aside. "Malcolm's all right - isn't it wonderful? Of course he has no idea what happened to him, which is too frightful, but Madam Pomfrey says he'll likely get his memory back over time. In the meantime, she says he can't play in the rematch on Saturday...and what are you all still doing here?" She glared at the Gryffindors. "Somewhere, I'm sure a little tiny kitty cat is stuck up a tree. Why don't you go rescue it? Take all the time you like."

"We were just going, not that it's any of your business," Ron began edgily.

"Blaise, sweetheart," put in Draco, his tone amused, and Ginny silently bit back a gagging noise - Draco calling someone sweetheart? Hermione looked similarly appalled. "Could you do me a favor?"

Blaise sat down on the edge of the bed. "Of course, anything."

"Could you go ask Mark Nott if he'd mind suiting up and playing with us on Saturday? He's a fair flyer and we could really use him. I'd do it myself, but..." Draco made a sweeping gesture that encompassed the infirmary.

"Of course I can," she said, leaned forward, and kissed him. "I'll go right now," and she bounced up to her feet, shooting a death glare at the Gryffindors. "Honestly," she said loudly. "I understand you have to check on Draco for his mum, Harry, but did you need to bring your bodyguards?"

Harry looked deadpan. "I couldn't help it," he said, glancing from Hermione, to Ginny, to Ron. "They're just so cute, bless their little cotton socks."

"Run along now, Blaise," said Ron. "Or would you like me to take points from Slytherin?"

The Slytherin girl's eyes narrowed. "You think that Head Boy badge makes you important, don't you, Ron," Blaise said, in a purring sort of voice, reached out, and stroked her finger gently over the silver front of his badge. Ron, looking like a rabbit trapped in headlights, didn't move. "Isn't that ... sweet."

She dropped her hand, smiled, and flounced away, her heels clicking on the stone floor. The infirmary door slammed behind her.

"Nice girlfriend you've got there, Malfoy," said Ron acidly.

"Thanks," said Draco. "I made her myself."

"See you later, Malfoy," said Harry with finality, waved at Draco, and took hold of Ron's arm. "We're off to practice."

"And I'm off to class," said Hermione, reaching to pick up her rucksack from the side of the bed.

"Actually," Draco said quickly, "could you stay for a second? There's something I wanted to ask you."

"Oh," said Hermione, and straightened up. "I..." She glanced towards

Harry, who nodded emphatically. "Sure," she said, and sat down in the chair by the bed. "What did you want to ask me?"

Ginny pricked up her ears, trying to hear Draco's answer, but Ron and Harry had already started walking away, and she had no choice but to follow them. Glancing back, all she could see of Hermione and Draco was their shadows, thrown into sharp relief against the white curtains.

"Right," Draco said without preamble, as soon as Harry and the others were out of earshot. "Now that they've all gone, why don't you tell me what the hell is up with Weasley?"

Hermione blinked at him in surprise. "Ron? What about him?"

Draco's lips curled into a disbelieving smile. "You can't honestly say you didn't notice something odd about his behavior just now?"

Hermione shook her head. She tried to think. She'd been worried about Draco, and concentrating on him, also on Harry, since she'd been worried about him as well - he tended to get lightheaded when he skipped meals. Ron...? "No," she said. "But I'm sure you'll tell me."

"Tell you what? That your redheaded sidekick is acting bizarrely? And you missed it? I suppose you've been having so much fun playing the exciting 'What On Earth Is Up With Harry' game that you've missed the even more exciting sequel, 'Bugger It, Something's Up With Ron As Well!'"

"Well, *what* is wrong with him?" Hermione demanded, exasperated.

Draco looked smugly unconcerned. "I wouldn't know. That's your job, isn't it? He's your friend."

"How *do* you manage to say that as if it's an insult?"

"It isn't my fault if you choose to be all buddy-buddy with an overgrown gingery lummoX who'd lose a battle of wits with a stuffed iguana."

"You think I won't smack you just because you're in hospital, don't you?"

Hermione demanded calmly. "Think again."

She was gratified to see that Draco scooted back several inches. "I've no idea what bee Weasley has in his bonnet," Draco said. "But I do know something's bothering him. None too surprising he wouldn't tell you, I suppose."

"Ron tells me things!" Hermione snapped.

Draco's eyes narrowed slightly. "Has he ever told you he resented Harry for being famous and getting all the attention?"

"No, but I know he did. I don't think he does anymore, by the way."

"Has he ever told you that he resented you for having broken up with him, and then gone right over to Harry?"

Hermione looked at Draco in amazement. "No."

"You don't think he resents it just a little?"

"No, I don't. And do you know why?"

Draco shook his head.

"I didn't break up with Ron," Hermione said. "He broke up with me."

Draco sat forward with such suddenness that she felt the bed bounce. "No way. No way did Weasley break up with you."

"Yes, he did," said Hermione, casting her mind back to that night the winter of fifth year, Ron standing in front of the Gryffindor common room fireplace. The shadows turning his red hair black. *I don't think we should do this any more*, he had said. *I think it was a mistake. I thought we felt one way about each other, but I was wrong.*

"He did - it was his idea."

"What did you do?" Draco asked. He looked bewildered, and his fair hair was standing up around his head in licks like little silver flames. He

looked about ten.

"I cried," said Hermione. "I thought we were *supposed* to be together. Everybody did. Even Harry, I thought. It just seemed like we fit as a couple. I would be with Ron, and Harry would be with Ginny, and we'd all get married and have Christmas together every year."

"How revolting," said Draco.

"Well, yes, and the big problem there was that Harry didn't love Ginny, and I didn't really love Ron - and I guess he didn't love me either. We were just trying to fit into these molds that people had made for us with their expectations. So I cried when Ron broke up with me - but I was relieved, in a way. I was always terrified that our dating would ruin our friendship somehow, and then when it was over, and it wasn't ruined, I felt like a huge weight was off me. We tried it, and it didn't work, and now there would be no more pressure. Although Mrs. Weasley wasn't any too happy with me that year. I don't think she believed Ron that he had broken up with me."

"You worried that dating Ron would ruin your friendship?" Draco asked, looking curious. Hermione looked at him sideways - he was a very unlikely Agony Aunt, and he had never seemed remotely interested in her past history with Ron before. But he seemed sincere enough. "Didn't you worry that with Harry?"

"No." She felt herself blush. "But I guess that's what being desperately in love will do to you." In the back of her mind, she was seeing that day in front of the Mirror again, Harry standing there soaking wet and saying all those unbelievable things to her - and she'd barely believed them, even when he'd kissed her and she'd tasted the rain on his mouth - that night, alone in bed, she'd cried again, piercingly and terribly and as if she'd never stop. There were reasons she had for crying, but they were deeper reasons she herself did not quite understand.

"If only you'd figured out that business about being in love with Harry a bit earlier," Draco said, his voice betraying no emotion. "Would have saved you a lot of trouble with Ron."

And with me, his eyes said, although his mouth didn't.

"I don't think of it as trouble," Hermione said. "It was something I had to do. But of course I wish we'd figured it out earlier."

Draco shook his head. "Hard to imagine two people could be any blinder," he said. "Would have thought that little exercise in futility would have taught you something, but apparently not."

Hermione looked at him in surprise, stung. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that sometimes I can't tell if you're both honestly stupid, or you just don't see things you don't want to see."

Hermione glared at him. "Well, we've figured it out now, thank you."

"Sure you have."

"This from the guy who's got his own love life *all* sorted," Hermione snapped. "Do you think Blaise notices that you look sick every time she touches you?"

"No, but you apparently do," Draco snapped right back.

"It's a bit hard to miss!"

"Right," he said. His cheeks were flushed with annoyance, his gray eyes burning. "Especially if you're watching."

"I am *not* -" Hermione began, and checked herself as Madam Pomfrey stuck her head around the side of one of the hanging sheets, and glared.

"Do *not* excite the patient," she said severely, and walked away sniffing.

Draco said something unintelligible.

"What?" Hermione demanded sharply.

Draco flashed her a vexed look. "I *said*," he said through his teeth, "that this was not what I wanted you to stay and talk to me about."

"I didn't bring it up. And I'm not sure I even want to hear what your problem is any more!" she snapped, and started to stand up.

"Wait," he said, and caught at her arm. The fire had gone out of his eyes; now he looked startled, as if he realized he'd said more than he wanted to. "Harry said I ought to ask you to help," he said quickly. "He was right. I should have asked before. I wouldn't ask now if it wasn't important."

Now she was slightly alarmed. She sat back down, and Draco let go of her arm. "What is it? Is it something about Harry?"

"Not this time, no. About me." Draco had found a stray thread on the cuff of his pajama sleeve, and was worrying it. She knew he hated asking for help, loathed it more than Harry did. "I've been - having dreams."

"No." She almost overbalanced and fell into him, but steadied herself on a pillow. "Not - the kind you used to have?"

"No." His eyes didn't leave his shirt cuff. "Not about any kind of past life, not that kind of thing. This is in real-time - these are events that are actually happening while I'm seeing them. I'm sure of that now." He looked up. "It's like I've opened a window onto a place I've never been, but it's a real place, Hermione."

She shivered when he said her name. There was an intensity in his voice she had not heard in a long time. "Do you recognize the place?"

He shook his head. "No, but I could describe it to you in detail. It's a dark magic place, I know that. Maybe we could find some reference to it in the *Le Grand Grimoire* or the *Lexicon of Unpleasant Locations*. Or -"

Hermione smiled at him. "I know the Restricted Section as well as you do, Draco," she said. "Well, perhaps not quite as well. But well enough. If you give me a good enough description of what you saw, we can go from there. Also," and she began to tick off items on her fingers, noting out of the corner of her eye that he was watching her with an amused expression, "I want to know if you just fall asleep and find yourself in this place or do you have to will your mind there, and if there are people in your dreams, can they see you or not - I want to know if you're dream-

walking or having real visions."

He nodded. "All right," he said. "Do you need a quill and parchment?"

"I'll get some," said Hermione, and stood up. His eyes followed her as she went to push the sheet aside.

"There's one more thing," he said. "Don't let me forget to tell you - there's a girl."

Hermione paused, her hand on the bedpost. "A girl?" she asked neutrally. "Who is she?"

The failing light silvered Draco's eyes as he looked down at the bedclothes. "That's what I want you to find out," he said. "Her name is Rhysenn. Rhysenn Malfoy, but I don't think she's actually human at all..."

"He's lying to us," said Charlie. "Isn't he, Headmaster?"

"Who is lying, Charles?" Dumbledore glanced up from his position behind his desk at the young man in front of him. His eyes, behind the gold-rimmed spectacles, were not twinkling at all, but somber and thoughtful.

"Draco," said Charlie. He got up from where he had been sitting across from Dumbledore, feeling unaccountably restless, and crossed to the north wall, where there was a window that looked out over the grounds. Well, sometimes there was a window. Dumbledore's office tended, like the moving stairways, to change from day to day. "That was no duel gone wrong that got him that injury," he said, resting a hand on the windowpane. Outside, the sky was heavy and leaden, the pearly gray of a winter seascape. He could clearly see the Quidditch pitch from here, the hoops reaching into the sky like bare, stripped tree branches. There were a collection of small figures gathered down by the pitch entrance, although they were too far away for him to make them out clearly.

"Most assuredly," said Dumbledore. "As a matter of fact, they are both lying."

"Harry, too? I suppose he must be."

"Of course he is," said Dumbledore, his eyes shadowed as he glanced up at Charlie.

"This is what I wanted to ask you, Charles - you were the first teacher to arrive at Draco's side, weren't you?"

Charlie nodded.

"Did you notice how many sets of footprints there were around him?"

"Mm." Charlie nodded, recollecting. "I was just thinking that, Professor. It looked to me, from the impressions in the snow, as if he hadn't walked to where he was. There were only two set of footprints: Harry's, and that Hufflepuff girl's. He must have fallen from somewhere, not walked there."

"Yes. I believe he did. Here, take these," said the Headmaster, and held out to Charlie a battered-looking pair of Omnioculars that had obviously seen much use. His desk was in fact covered with an assortment of useful magical objects - a silver Put-Outer, a Macroscope, and what was clearly a prototype of the next generation Dream Integrator sitting perilously close to an open jar of honey.

Charlie took the Omnioculars and focused them on the view outside the window, sweeping his gaze up from the spot where he had found Draco that morning.

"It's just under the North Tower. Which is off-limits, correct?"

"You say that as if the term had meaning for most of the students here. Harry and Draco especially."

"But why would they bother going up there?"

"Why, indeed?" Dumbledore shrugged. "Now, if it had been the Astronomy Tower, I might venture an educated guess."

Charlie stifled a snort. It was nice, he supposed, to know that some things hadn't changed since his own school days, including the popularity of the

Astronomy Tower for purposes unrelated to Astronomy. "I'll go up the North Tower and look around, shall I, Professor?"

"Certainly, Charlie. That would be helpful."

"In the meantime..." Charlie swung the Omnioculars down so that he was looking at the crowd standing on the Quidditch pitch. Two bright red heads leaped out at him immediately: Ron and Ginny. Seamus Finnegan and Elizabeth Thomas were there too, as were the Creevey brothers. The Gryffindor team must be having its practice. The players were all looking towards the farther end of the pitch, where Harry was standing. He seemed to be pointing from the hoops and back: illustrating some point of game mechanics. Everyone seemed to be paying attention except Ron, who was amusing himself by tying Ginny's long braids together in a knot. "What shall we do about Draco? Should we look into protective charms, or send him home, or -"

"No," said Dumbledore. "We will do nothing."

Charlie lowered the Omnioculars in surprise. "Nothing? Isn't that a bit dangerous?"

"I cannot help but feel," said Dumbledore slowly, "that any and all efforts made to protect either Draco or Harry in this instance -beyond how they are already protected, by being here at Hogwarts - will in the end, be both gratuitous and counterproductive. Neither boy willingly takes to being protected. You saw how Harry reacted to the suggestion that you were trying to protect him from knowledge he might not like, even though, in that case, you were not. Should we try to constrain them, they will rebel against the constraints, and we may lose them entirely."

Charlie was silent a moment. Then he raised the Omnioculars to his eyes and glanced out the window again, in time to see Harry take off on his broomstick, and soar up into the air above the heads of his teammates. Charlie wasn't sure if Harry was illustrating another point of game strategy, or if he'd simply decided he couldn't bear to be on the ground any more. Charlie always loved watching Harry fly, because Harry reminded him of himself at that age - the same overwhelming joy in flight, the same bearing that said that in leaving the ground, he had left his cares and troubles behind. He flew like an arrow, straight and true and

unswerving, his black hair whipping across his face. He would never be as handsome as Draco was, but when he flew, he was beautiful.

"But if they were to ask us for help, we should help them?" Charlie said, still trying to make sense of what Dumbledore had just said. He understood it...but in some ways, did not want to. "I mean

"Of course. If Draco were to ask me for Protective charms, I would give them to him."

"But they won't ask for help. Harry, especially, never will."

"Of course not," Dumbledore said. "Think of the first eleven years of his life. He grew up knowing that were he to cry out in a nightmare, no one would come to comfort him. That if he were in pain, he could expect no aid or sympathy. That if he were lost, no one would trouble to find him. That if he died, he would not be mourned. Such an upbringing hardly breeds a child who readily seeks assistance in times of trouble."

"Headmaster, with all due respect..."

"Yes?"

"You chose that childhood for him."

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "Yes, I did."

It was two days before they let Draco out of the infirmary, and even then Madam Pomfrey stood and wrung her hands as he walked out, looking as if she were quite sure that he would be returned later in several pieces.

She also asked him if he wanted anyone to escort him back to his room, but he told her he preferred to go alone. As he walked through the hallways on his way back to the Slytherin dungeons, he noted that the new Yule Ball decorations had gone up that day, and realized with a faint pang that of course the Pub Crawl was that night. And of course, he could not go to it.

He had been somewhat concerned that the Slytherins would be cool to him on his return, but they had not been. Rumors based on the story he had told Blaise in confidence (which meant of course that the whole school now knew it) said that Draco had been injured as a result of preparing for a duel with Harry, and that Harry had fled the Great Hall out of guilty familial concern and fear of Narcissa. Variations on the rumor were flying thick and fast, and while Draco resented the implication that he couldn't cast a curse properly without it rebounding and nearly taking his arm off, it was worth it for a modicum of peace of mind.

That night before the Pub Crawl, Draco stood alone in his room, regarding himself thoughtfully in the mirror over his dresser. It showed him his own reflection, bare from the waist up. He was pale (unsurprising, as it was winter) and against his shoulder the scar where the arrow had gone in was healed, and looked like a small silvery star against the skin. For someone so young, it occurred to him, he had certainly done a great deal of damage to the unmarked flesh he had been born with. There was a white line under his right eye where Harry had accidentally cut him with the jagged fragments of an ink bottle. There was also the silver lightning scar on the palm of his hand, and if he leaned close to the mirror he could see the thin white line on his bottom lip where he had bitten through the skin when the Dark Lord had tortured him. He liked his scars. They were like the faint tracery of a map that marked the greatest events of his life. He was of course especially attached to the scar on his hand, the only one he had acquired voluntarily.

He reached for his clothes and dressed slowly, even though it was cold in the dungeon. He might be spending the evening alone, but that was no reason not to look as good as possible. He chose black trousers, cut from expensive and heavy material, and a dark green sweater. His dress robes were black, shot through with a fine weave of silver and edged with a pattern of constellations picked out in splinters of glass. The heavy silver clasp at the throat that held on his cloak was also carved in the shape of a constellation: Draco, the dragon. As he closed the clasp, his shoulder ached with a brief and fiery twinge.

When he left his room, the corridors were already full of people - girls rushing to and from the bathrooms with their hair half-done, boys in fancy dress robes giving themselves a last glance before the mirrors.

Draco edged past them and out into the common room, where a huge fire was burning in the grate. Standing by the fire was Malcolm Baddock, in navy blue dress robes over a dark suit, and beside him was Blaise. She stood perfectly positioned so that the firelight made her long hair glow, turning it to fiery tinsel, and the faint outline of her body showed through her pale gray dress robes. She smiled when she saw him. "Draco," she said, and held out her hand.



He went towards her. Some part of him was glad that she wasn't angry, although how could she have been - everyone knew that Dumbledore had forbidden him to leave the grounds before Christmas, and she could hardly expect him to disobey that edict. So he'd never even had to tell her that he'd already agreed not to go to the Pub Crawl, which was a nice freebie (if one could consider the consequences of nearly bleeding to death a freebie.) He hated fighting with Blaise, probably because she had a slicing perceptiveness when she put her mind to it, and often told him things about himself he would have preferred not to hear. "Look at you,"

she said. "You're gorgeous."

"So are you," he said, which was the flat-out truth. Blaise looked stunning as always, from her tight-fitting coppery satin robes to her six-inch spiked Mundungus Blahniks. Her hair was up, knotted low on the nape of her neck and strung with sparkling charmed lights. He kissed her cheek and she accepted the kiss graciously. Malcolm looked on, smiling with narrow eyes that matched his blue-black robes. Before he could greet Draco, they were joined by Tess Hammond, looking like a brick wall in scarlet robes, and Pansy Parkinson, in her ordinary dress robes, a woolly winter hat, and jeans.

"Pansy," Blaise drawled. "You're not going like that, are you?"

"I'm not going at all," said Pansy coolly. "I'm staying back and handing out leaflets. I agreed to."

"I can't imagine why," said Blaise, arching her nose into the air, and taking Draco's arm. "How utterly boring." And she flounced towards the dungeon exit, everyone else in tow. Draco let his mind go blank as Blaise steered him upstairs and down the hallways that led to the Great Hall. "I don't know *what* is going on with Pansy," Blaise was saying in his ear as they entered the vestibule before the great, flung-open castle doors. "She always takes hours to get ready, has enough cosmetics to stock one of her father's silly shops - you should see all her lotions and potions - and then she shows up looking like something the cat sicked up on the rug. I ask you."

"Fascinating," said Draco with great insincerity, but fortunately Blaise fell silent as they paused to look around at the decorations. Hogwarts had outdone itself this time. Huge sparkling icicles floated in the air, wrapped around with ropes of silvery tinsel. The four huge Christmas trees at each corner of the room were strung with brilliant, flower-shaped glowing lights and brightly wrapped sweets. The heavy end tables that normally decorated the room had been transmogrified into friendly-looking reindeer, although unfortunately they were still no more intelligent than end tables, and kept bashing into the walls. Draco let go of Blaise's hand and jumped to the side as one narrowly missed him with its antlers.

Blaise sniffed. "Those silly things should not be allowed," she opined, and

glared at the offending creature. "Go away!" she commanded, and, with a scuttle of hooves, it fled. Draco grinned. Everyone was afraid of Blaise, even furniture.

Blaise returned his smile with a satisfied look, which modified into a concerned pout. "You will be all right, won't you darling?" she asked. "I'd stay here with you, but..."

"No, you shouldn't miss your Pub Crawl," Draco assured her firmly. "Have a good time." He looked over at Malcolm Baddock, who was standing with Tess (Pansy having vanished, presumably to distribute leaflets), looking haughtily around the room. "Take care of her, Malcolm," he said, and kissed Blaise's silky, jasmine-scented cheek lightly. He walked her to the door, and watched her being led down the steps by Malcolm and Tess with mixed feelings of regret and relief. He probably could have talked Blaise into spending the evening with him in the dungeons, doing what she called "things I can't tell my father about because he thinks I'm a good girl", which was usually good for killing bothersome thoughts that might otherwise plague him - but he really hadn't wanted to. It required too much dissembling energy, and he was exhausted.

Malfoy. How are you holding up?

He heard Harry's voice in his head, clear and strong, and knew he must be nearby. He turned slowly and scanned the room. He saw Ron first, because he was so tall - his bright red head was always visible above a crowd. He was in the middle of a knot of Gryffindors who were laughing and talking together. Now that the Weasleys had a bit more money, Ron was always impeccably turned out - Draco surmised that the years of frayed and outworn clothes had hung very heavy on Ron when he was younger. He wore sharply cut dark blue dress robes over a charcoal-colored suit, and his Head Boy badge gleamed on his chest. He was talking to a morose-looking Neville Longbottom, sad-faced in orange dress robes. Next to him was Harry, with his back to Draco, holding Hermione by the hand.

I'm just fine, Potter. You?

Fine. Harry turned around, and Hermione turned around with him. *You look pretty sharp for someone who isn't going to the Pub Crawl,* Harry remarked, and smiled.

You don't look horrible yourself, Draco replied. This was true. Harry had the sort of off-center looks that could veer from boyishly unremarkable to arresting and striking. Right now he looked striking. His cloak was black, lined with dark blue, over a lighter blue shirt and black trousers, and he had managed, somehow, to temporarily tame his hair. *How'd you pull that off?*

Bit of help from Hermione, said Harry, and Draco saw him (probably unconsciously) tighten his grip on Hermione's hand. She looked up at Harry and smiled, and Draco looked away quickly, but the image stayed in his head. He couldn't see the dress she wore, she was wrapped tightly in a soft white cloak, but he saw the way her dark brown hair fell sleekly past her shoulders, fastened with pins in the shape of white flowers, and remembered the first time he'd seen her dressed up like that, when she'd been fourteen and so had he. He'd never thought of her as a girl before that, much less a pretty girl, much less a beautiful one. *Malfoy...you going to be all right?*

I wish people would quit asking me that, Draco snapped, with more force than he'd intended. *It's just a bleeding Pub Crawl, Potter, not the Quidditch World Cup.*

Harry raised both eyebrows (Draco had always felt superior that while he could raise only one, Harry couldn't) and seemed about to respond, but then the Gryffindor crowd seemed to reach a joint decision and began surging towards the stairs in a flurry of boys in dark cloaks and girls in candy-colored dress robes. Hermione stood out among them in her white cloak, like a pale flower in a bed of bright roses. She cast him a brief, searching glance as they went by, and smiled. He did not smile back. Leaning against the jamb of the huge doors, Draco watched them all spill down the stairs in twos and threes, shouting and laughing, Harry, Ron and Hermione in the rear, standing close together as they always did. At the bottom step, however, they paused, and Harry and Ron turned towards Hermione, who was gesturing urgently. Draco saw Harry nod, and then Hermione kissed his cheek, turned, and ran back up the stairs, her white hood falling back and her dark hair caught by the wind. Her cloak blew back and he saw that the dress under it, like the cloak itself, was all white. For a moment he stood and just aesthetically appreciated the picture she made: all dark hair and pale skin against the greater paleness of the dress

and cloak, as if she had wrapped her dark brunette beauty in a shroud of snow. Her cheeks were scarlet, her eyes very bright. It was a moment before he realized that she was running to him - he stiffened in surprise when she reached the top of the stairs and caught at his hands. He felt the soft wool of her gloves warm against his skin. "Please come along to Hogsmeade," she said. "We want you with us. Harry said you can have his cloak if you want it, so nobody will know." She paused. "It's our first Christmas together...do come."

"We've had six others, you know."

"No," she said. "We haven't. Not *together*."

Draco looked down at their interwoven hands. Hers were gloved in white wool, his in black, and wound with his their twined fingers resemble the keys of a piano. He looked up and past her, down the steps of the castle, where Harry and Ron were waiting. Harry was looking up at them, the wind blowing his black hair across his eyes. Behind him, Ron was an inky shadow against the white snow, even his fiery hair darkened by the night. He was looking off towards Hogsmeade.

"It's all right," Draco said. "I'll stay here."

She looked at him, her dark eyes troubled. In her ears glittered the tiny starlike diamond earrings Harry had given her for her birthday in September. "Are you sure? The cloak is at the foot of Harry's bed, and the password is..."

"I'm sure."

She bit her lip. "All right."

"Happy Christmas, Hermione," Draco said, and let her hands go. She backed away from him with a half-regretful smile, and then turned and walked down the stairs towards Harry. He caught her hand in his, waved a farewell to Draco, and then the three of them were gone, under the bright moonlight, disappearing into the burnished lane between the trees.

"Alas, my love, you do me wrong

To cast me off discourteously

For I have loved you for so long,

Delighting in your company."

"Well, I got them to sing," said Harry, looking down at the clamoring set of green-stemmed wineglasses that sat on the table in Kelley and Ping's House of Enchanted Curiosities. "Now how do I get them to shut up?"

Hermione giggled at his bemused expression. "Oh, they sing 'Greensleeves'," she exclaimed, coming to stand beside him. "Harry, that's a lovely present for Narcissa and Sirius."

"Bit seasonal, isn't it?" Harry asked, putting an arm around her. She felt warm and contented - the shop smelled of cinnamon and apples, and outside the window she could see the fairytale town that was Hogsmeade, every shop window glowing with gold and silver tapers. Students in bright cloaks and dresses roamed up and down the icy streets, ducking into and out of warmly lit shops and taverns. She was with Harry, and Ron was over by the next table, close enough to touch, examining an enchanted mirror which he was considering getting for Ginny's birthday in early February. Everything was perfect - well, nearly everything.

"Greensleeves isn't a Christmas song," Hermione said cheerfully. "It's a love song."

As if on cue, the enchanted glasses launched into a second verse.

"Now if you intend to show me disdain

Don't you know it all the more enraptures me,

For even so I still remain

Your lover in captivity."

Hermione tapped the nearest glass with her wand, and the music stopped.

"Just when I was starting to like it," said Harry, with a slight tone of protest.

"It's a good present, Harry," she said firmly. "Get them."

"Yes, do," said Ron, looking up and grinning, "I'm sick of shopping - I want to get over to the Winery and see what Fred and George have cooked up."

Harry's eyes lit up. "Oh, right - so do I." He looked thoughtfully at the glasses, and shrugged. "It'll get them - it's just too bad they don't play 'I May Be A Tiny Chimney Sweep...'"

Having arranged for the glasses to be owled over to the Manor at the appropriate time, the trio headed for Fred and George's. The twins had really outdone themselves with their decorations for the factory. Illusion spells has transformed the huge main room into a jungle landscape, complete with jobberknolls, a fwooper, a jungle gnome and swinging jarveys. There were fountains of wine, lakes of chocolate, and dangling green vines that, on closer, inspection, turned out to be green-apple licorice. The leaves of the trees were spearmint leaves (and if, nibbled on, would turn the unwary muncher into a cricket for five minutes. The room was full of annoyed chirping.) Silver platters covered with sweets floated by at intervals - Hermione passed up a Snogberry Cordial on the theory that it was probably better to save the snogging for the end of the evening. Terry Boot and Padma Patil were taking turns bungee-jumping into a Bottomless Pit which had been rented for the occasion. Ron wanted to try it out, but Harry shook his head. "Falling into a Bottomless Pit once is good enough for me," he avowed.

The main attraction of the evening, to everyone's surprise, turned out to be Oliver Wood, on holiday leave from his starring position as Keeper for Puddlemere United. Oliver was one of the most celebrated young Quidditch players in the country, which didn't surprise anyone who had ever seen him play. It wasn't so much that he was talented - which he was - but that he was grimly determined, and always had been.

Ron whistled at the sight of the huge crowd of giggling girls and starstruck boys gathered around Oliver, who was seated with Fred and

George on a chair inside a floating pavilion draped with fiery curtains. Jana and Angelina were both there as well, and to say that they seemed entirely unaffected by Oliver's presence would have been an exaggeration. Both were blushing and smiling. George and Fred, who was eating an enormous color-changing lollipop, seemed bemused.

"Who would have thought Oliver would turn into such girl catnip?" said Ron, grinning as he picked a cup of hot buttered chocolate off a floating silver tray. "Fred and George used to say the only girl who would ever have a chance with him would be one with really skinny legs and big ears - that way she could convince him that she *was* the Quidditch World Cup."

Harry cast a sideways glance at Hermione. "Are you going to leave me for Oliver Wood, then?"

"No," said Hermione, "but I might leave you for that table of chocolate over there." She arched up on her tiptoes and stared at the groaning tables of food and candy that stretched along the walls. There were white-chocolate snowballs, Snogberry Cordials, icicles spun out of clear sugar, and powdered-sugar Penguin Peppermints. Her stomach growled slightly. "You ought to go say hello to Oliver, Harry - he was always so fond of you."

"But there's a huge crowd around him -" Harry began diffidently.

Hermione snorted. "He'll talk to *you*," she said firmly, and gave him a light push. "Go on, then."

Harry went, and Hermione headed over to the table to nab the last Never-Melting Ice Pop off a gold plate before Lavender Brown (who had already eaten three) could snag it. Ron, following her, made do with a sugared sardine. Hermione looked at him and wrinkled her nose. "How *can* you eat those things?"

"Practice," said Ron, and bit the sardine in half with flair.

"Blech," said Hermione, in a decided manner.

"Mmm. Scrummy." Ron grinned around the sardine. "I dare you to eat one."

"Ugh. No way."

"Come on." He held out a sardine, and she laughed and battled his hand away.

"You never ate that blood lollipop I dared you to in third year," she pointed out smugly.

"I licked it though." Ron shuddered. "I'm pretty sure that's what evil tastes like."

"Well, I'm not licking your sardine."

"No," put in Lavender, who had evidently been listening. "Harry wouldn't like that, would he?"

Ron choked on his candy.

"Lavender!" said Hermione, but Lavender had already sidled away with an evil grin. Hermione sighed and looked at Ron. "I don't think she's ever forgiven you for that Uranus comment," she said.

But Ron was looking past her, towards the pavilion floating on its lake of peppermint syrup. "Harry seems different," he said. "Better."

Hermione turned and looked where he was looking, and saw Oliver Wood standing up to give Harry a comradely hug. She noted with a pang that Harry was now taller than Oliver. "He is a bit better these days," she said. "I just hope it lasts."

"Do you know why?" Ron's eyes were intent. "Did you say something to him?"

"Well, I said a little, but I really don't think it was me. I think it had something to do with Draco nearly getting himself killed. I think Harry's been trying and trying to focus on other things besides what's been bothering him, and that gave him something to focus on. You know how he is. He likes to have something to *do*, to feel like he's being effective. Otherwise..."

"He freaks out," Ron finished.

"Right."

"Well, it's great that he's freaked back in. I just hope it stays that way."

"You don't sound very happy."

"I am," said Ron slowly, and she could tell that he was measuring his speech carefully, "but considering that he's spent six months refusing to tell me what's wrong, and stonewalling me when I ask him, color me pessimistic when I hear the problem's cured itself. He might be shoving it down for now, but it'll just come back later, whatever it is."

Hermione bit her lip and looked back at the pavilion. Harry had already left it, and was moving back towards them through the crowd. She had no trouble picking out his dark hair and blue-lined cloak even in the tight-packed throng. But then she had always been sure that she and Harry would be able to find each other in any crowd, that even at a costume ball they would know each other instantly, by touch or sound or instinct. She turned back towards Ron.

"It's not fair," she said, her voice low and fierce. "It isn't."

Sympathy flashed in his blue eyes. "I know," he said. "But you can't let that get in the way of your life, Hermione. Harry wouldn't want that."

Wouldn't he? she thought, as Harry came to stand beside her, and clasped her hand with his. *Wouldn't he, though?*

Draco stood at the castle's front door and watched the seventh-years leaving, until the grounds were empty and he could once again hear the wind. Then he turned, and went back inside. There was a certain lonely gloom to the entrance hall once all the students were gone, despite the festive decorations. The only person there was Pansy Parkinson, clutching a large red-ribboned green gift box. She glared when she saw Draco, and disappeared down the stairs that led to the Slytherin dungeon, her booted

feet crunching on the discarded bits of tinsel and confetti that littered the floor.

Draco looked after her, shrugged, and headed towards the double doors in the far wall. They swung open to let him through, and he walked into the Great Hall at last.

The Yule Ball started before the Pub Crawl did, so it looked to Draco as if the meal had already been eaten, and the dancing had begun. Each year the decorations were much like the year before: glowing lights, glittering taper candles, rows of pear trees in whose branches chirping partridges fluttered their pale wings. Brightly wrapped crackers floated about six feet off the ground (Weasley would have banged his head into one, Draco thought) and every once in a while there was a muffled, fiery explosion when a student picked one out of the air and pulled it apart, filling the air with flower petals, tiny sweets, or a shower of toys.

Draco glanced over at the dance floor, looking, somewhat against his will, for flame-red hair. - and there was Charlie, dancing with Professor Sinistra, who had a very predatory look on her face. Lupin was over by the High Table, making what looked like uncomfortable conversation with Snape. Dumbledore was deep in conversation with Madam Pomfrey. Draco's gaze flicked over the crowd, mostly composed of younger students he didn't recognize, and then the dancers parted like water and there they were.

He saw Ginny first. Her green satin dress made her look like a slender flower stem, crowned with petals of fiery hair. Her slim shoulders were bared above the dress, her skin very white, dappled with gold where the candlelight touched it. Seamus, blond and handsome in dark blue robes, had her by the hands and was drawing her towards the dance floor; Ginny was laughing and shaking her head. She looked happy: uncomplicatedly so. It made him sad in a way he had not expected.

The two of them began to dance. Draco recalled dancing with Ginny. She danced the way she looked with her bright hair floating around her: like fire, bright and darting. He saw Seamus stumble, following her. He was briefly and ungenerously amused. Not that he was surprised that Seamus could not keep pace with her. It would be hard to keep pace with fire. She spun away from Seamus again, and this time he didn't even try to follow

her; instead, laughing, he pulled her back towards him, and put his arms around her. His hands met at the small of her back, where her dress dipped into a V, his fingers white against the green satin. Ginny moved uncomplainingly into the circle of his embrace, sliding her hands up to lock around his neck.

Draco turned away. He felt voyeuristic, watching, and desperately out of place. Silently, he turned away from the dancing throng and headed back to the entryway. He recalled Hermione catching at his hands with her own, and entreating him to come along to Hogsmeade. He didn't want to do that either, though. It was not enjoyable being with Hermione, Ron and Harry all together. They created a locked circle that no outsider could penetrate. Nor did he even want to try. He pushed the double doors open and went through them, unaware that Ginny had turned within the circle of Seamus' arms to watch him go.

He went down the front stairs of the castle and headed east, towards the rose garden. It was empty and lovely under the stars, the ground dusted with a light sugar coating of snow. He made his way down the narrow path between two bushes strung with colored lights. It was early yet, and no amorous couples had yet taken up residence in the rose bushes. In fact, he was alone. Alone in a garden scented heavily with roses and woodsmoke, under a sky dusted with glassy shards of stars. And he felt...lonely. This was not usual for him. He had grown up from a self-contained child into a self-contained young man. Other people had always seemed not quite real, puppets being moved across a darkened stage. It had never really occurred to him until this year that he might need anybody else, or want to. That there were other people in the world as real and alive as himself still struck him sometimes as something shocking. Even stranger was that he now suspected they might be more real and alive than he was. Harry, Hermione, Ginny, they seemed to radiate a bright shared spirit that he was no part of and that he did not truly understand.

He saw Ginny again against the backs of his eyelids, dancing across the ballroom floor with Seamus. She had seemed so happy. He had never made her happy like that. Perhaps, after all, he had done the right thing. It wasn't until his shoe struck against something hard that he realized that in his distracted state, he had wandered off the path and into the ornamental rock garden. He turned to go back to the path, but it was no

longer deserted. There was someone there. A bare-shouldered someone in shimmering green satin, her face framed in a cascade of fiery hair. Someone who was watching him as intently as, earlier, he had watched her.

"Ginny," he said.

It was past midnight, and The Three Broomsticks was full of laughter and shouting. Hermione, pleasantly tired and very warm, sat at one of the long tables before the fire, her gloves off, a warm pint of butterbeer in her cupped hands. Parvati Patil and her sister Padma were sitting across the table; Lavender had long since disappeared to snog with Mark Nott, her attractive blond Slytherin date.

With a yawn, Hermione glanced over at the far side of the room, where Harry was standing beside Ron. They were laughing at Neville, who, with Justin and Dean, was playing a game of Blindfold Spark, and had just walked into a wall. She saw Harry put his hand out and turn Neville around so that he was facing the proper way, and smiled to herself. Neville went on his way, and Ron leaned back to laugh with Justin and Dean. Harry stood where he was, looking thoughtful. She noted the way the room seemed to rearrange itself around Harry so that he was its focal point. But maybe that was just because he was her focal point.

It was a moment before she realized that someone else, someone who had come to stand next to her, was looking at him as well.

It was Blaise Zabini. She had a little smile on her lovely face, and her green eyes - not bright green like Harry's, but a dark, foresty green - were shaded by her thick lashes. She was nibbling very thoughtfully on a Maraschino Cherry Bomb, eating the red candied coating off the exploding center. "You know," she said in a conspiratorial tone, "I have to compliment you on the way you've cleaned Harry up. I used to think he was terribly funny-looking, but you've really improved him."



"Thank you," said Hermione tightly. "Thank you, Blaise, for that veiled insult."

"Oh, no offense meant," said Blaise sweetly. "He's just gorgeous now. I could eat him up with a spoon," and she bit another piece off her candy, and smiled.

"If you're going to leer at my boyfriend, do it elsewhere," said Hermione coldly.

"Oh, I didn't think you'd mind," Blaise replied airily. "After all, I've seen you looking at mine," and then she was gone, sashaying into the crowd as if she owned it. Hermione looked after her with loathing, and a small cold feeling in her heart. She turned back to Parvati, who had both eyebrows raised.

"I didn't know you knew her," she said.

"I don't," said Hermione shortly.

"Well, Harry and Ron certainly seem to," said Parvati, her voice laden with irony.

"What...?" Hermione turned, and saw, with a start, that Blaise was now standing next to Ron and Harry. She was tossing her bright hair back and laughing and both Ron and Harry were staring at her, with identical astonished expressions. "What is she saying to them?" Hermione exclaimed, rising half out of her seat.

Parvati sniffed. "I wouldn't know. I don't speak 'silly bint.'" She paused. "Well, would you look at that!"

Hermione, standing up, saw Blaise do something that looked very much like putting her hand on Harry's shoulder and moving in a bit closer and ... she was over at Harry's side within several seconds, placing herself between Blaise and both boys. Harry blinked at her, looking surprised. "Hermione! Decided you want to play Blindfold Spark?"

"No," said Hermione, ignoring Blaise, who was looking at her with amusement. "I want to go for a walk."

Harry blinked at her. "Not by yourself?"

"No. Not by myself." Hermione took his hand. "With you." She looked at Ron, who was glancing between her and Blaise with a curious expression. "You can hold the fort down without him for a minute?"

Ron returned her look with a very peculiar expression indeed. "Sure, if it's important."

"It's important," said Hermione, and yanked Harry after her with such suddenness that his glass flew out of his hand; she saw Ron catch it in midair out of the corner of her eye. She was vaguely aware of Blaise calling after them, something about the boys outside throwing snowballs at unwary snogging couples, but Hermione paid no attention. She pushed the front door of the Three Broomsticks open, pulled Harry after her, and

didn't stop until she was at the foot of the stairs.

"Okay," said Harry, once she had paused. She turned to look at him; he seemed bemused. "That was a credible imitation of a bat out of hell. What's wrong?"

Hermione looked at him, realizing she was out of breath. The cold wind was already striking color into his cheeks, and in the dim light coming from the Three Broomsticks, his eyes were very green. "I just...wanted to be alone with you," she said lamely.

"Okay," said Harry again, very reasonably. "Why?"

She opened her mouth to respond, then paused as a group of giggling Ravenclaw girls pushed past them and began mounting the stairs. With a sigh, Hermione looked up and down the street for somewhere they could go. The year before she and Ron had always gone around to the alley behind the Three Broomsticks to talk and be alone...she glanced to the left and saw that the small iron gate that barred the way was still there. She gestured for Harry to follow her and led him quickly towards the alley entrance. She opened the gate with a quick Alohomora, and then she and Harry were through the gate and he was closing it behind them. It was a narrow, dead-end alley, lit only by the lights coming from the windows of the Three Broomsticks. The cobblestones underfoot were slick with a sheen of ice and there were empty butterbeer and Dragon's Blood vodka boxes stacked haphazardly against the walls.

Harry looked around, confused - at the bare stone walls, the shadowy darkness, the narrow strip of starry sky overhead. "What did you want to talk about?" he asked, and turned to look at her. The wind blew his black hair across his face and in the sharp-edged moonlight, she could see herself reflected in his eyes.

For a moment, she stood there, unsure. She had only wanted to get out of that room, to be alone with Harry. But now they were outside, in the bitter cold air, the sky above full of stars and wind and she had nothing she could say to him. And the night was lovely. Everything seemed powdered with diamonds, even the narrow dirty alleyway and the empty boxes stacked against the wall. The starlight tipped Harry's hair with silver, glazed his bare skin with platinum where the collar of his shirt fell away

from his throat and starred each pitch-black eyelash with jewelry light. Her body trembled when she looked at him, as if it knew things she didn't know.

He had been looking down at her, half-inquiring, half-amused, and then whatever he saw in her eyes drove the amusement from his expression. He caught his breath, and she saw the pulse at the base of his throat begin to pound, his blood stirring as hers did.

"Hermione..." he began, and despite all her misgivings she pulled him close, hard against her, and kissed him.

Draco looked at her without surprise, as if he had expected to see her there. "Hello, Ginny," he said. "Sneaking off to Hogsmeade, are you? I'm afraid I'll have to report you."

She smiled. She couldn't help it. He was beautiful in the starlight, even more so than usual. His silver hair and eyes reflected the pale light like mirrors, and the shadows described the fine bones of his face. Seamus was handsome, but...realizing she shouldn't be thinking of Seamus, she thrust the cup she was holding in her hand towards Draco awkwardly. "I brought you some hot tea," she said. "I thought you might be cold out here."

Coming closer, Draco took the cup from her politely. "Thank you," he said. "Nice of you to think of me, especially when you're busy with your date and all."

"Well, I.."

"Or were you bored?" His light eyes raked her face with amusement. "Dancing with Captain Cardboard not all it's cracked up to be?"

"Don't. Seamus is a wonderful guy and..."

"You know, I hit him with a teakettle once and he cried like a baby."

"Draco, he *was* a baby. He was four. Let it go."

"I've let it go. It's gone. Look, if you're happy I'm happy for you. We can...double date." Draco looked at his cup of hot tea, and then drained it in one gulp, as if he were hoping there might be alcohol in it. (There wasn't.) He crumpled the empty cup and tossed it towards a rosebush. It landed among the brambles, and a small flower fairy climbed out along a branch, looked disapprovingly at Draco, and vanished with the cup in hand.

"Well, thanks for being happy for me," Ginny said. "Really."

"Think nothing of it."

"Now that I've got Seamus, we can be friends again without Blaise minding," she added, brushing a stray curl of hair behind her ear. She was aware that she was provoking him, but for some reason she didn't feel she could stop. "Isn't that wonderful?"

"Right." His silver eyes were long and unreadable. "Friends."

"I mean, that was part of the problem, wasn't it? Blaise. She doesn't like me."

"I'm not sure she likes anyone," he said, which was no kind of answer.

"She must like you," Ginny said.

"I wouldn't bet money on it," said Draco, made a face, and sat down on the nearest stone bench, leaning on his hands. He stretched out his long legs in front of him, and looked moodily down at the tips of his boots, which gleamed, black and polished, in the moonlight. "I think half the reason she goes out with me is her parents. They're a piece of work." He sighed. "I'd rather not talk about Blaise, actually."

"Do you mind missing your Pub Crawl?" Ginny asked him.

Draco shrugged. "Not so much. I really just wanted to be alone." He checked himself at her expression. "It's all right - I was getting a bit lonely. Sit down."

Ginny bit her lip. She knew she should go back inside - she had told

Seamus she was going upstairs to get another cloak, as she was cold, and she wasn't sure how long that excuse would hold her. "All right," she said. "Just for a minute," and she sat down, as far away from him as she could, which on the tiny bench wasn't very far at all. "I'm glad you're better," she added, conversationally. She saw him begin to smile, and added quickly, "Harry was really worried, and he's been so down lately..."

"Uh-huh," said Draco neutrally. "He seems better though, doesn't he?"

"I suppose...well, you could see into his head if you really wanted to, couldn't you? You tell me."

"I probably could," he said. "But I wouldn't."

"Why not?"

Draco shrugged. "I respect his privacy." He tilted his head up to look at the sky, his eyes thoughtful. His silver hair streamed starlight. "Or maybe I just don't want to know what he's thinking."

"Don't you trust him?"

"Of course I do. But you can't always control what you think. What you dream about, what you want. If you could, there would be no need for such a thing as self-restraint."

Ginny shivered, and Draco moved closer to her, as if on instinct. She wondered if he realized how close they were sitting. "Harry has plenty of self-restraint," she said, in a voice that sounded thready to her own ears.

Draco looked at her, almost as if he were surprised. "No, he doesn't," he said.

"Of course he does! Think of the things he's done. What kind of self-control it must have taken to bring Cedric's body back to school - when he knew what he was facing - and when he was in the Chamber of Secrets, with me-"

"Right," Draco interrupted, a bit irritably. "Thank you, I can do without a rendition of Harry's Potter's Greatest Hits."

Ginny glared at him.

"I'm not minimizing anything he's done," said Draco, his voice slightly distant. "There isn't anyone braver, or more determined - in a reckless sort of Gryffindor way. But that doesn't necessarily translate to the kind of self-control I'm talking about. He doesn't hide what he feels. He never has been able to. You wouldn't know - you've never tried to manipulate that easy emotional access. I have. I've spent years trying to hurt him. Let me tell you, with Harry you always know when you've scored a hit and really injured him. His whole face breaks apart. Everything about him crumples up like he's been kicked everywhere at once. It's -"

"Heartbreaking," Ginny interrupted.

Draco looked at her with narrow eyes.

"No, I'm not still in love with Harry," she said, answering the unasked question. "And I'm not sure I ever really was - but I used to spend a lot of time watching him. I know exactly what you mean."

Draco kicked at a piece of gravel with the toe of his boot. "Maybe you do," he said. "Anyway, that's what I meant. Harry can't hide things like that. He's as transparent as glass. Come on, when did you figure out he was in love with Hermione?"

Ginny felt herself flush. "My fourth year," she said quietly. "Maybe my fifth - I wasn't here that year, but I saw them all over Christmas at the Burrow. I remember Hermione was teaching Harry how to put together a wizarding Christmas tree, and I saw him watching her while she was spinning a web of lights over the branches. I saw the expression on his face and I just - knew." Her throat closed up with the remembered pain of it. Not just her pain - she had also felt for her brother. Later they had talked about it, and he had said he had always known, but she often wondered if that was true. He had shocked her with how well he had taken it, when it happened. Maybe a little too well. "What about - what about you?"

"Oh, last year," said Draco, with an offhanded shrug. "It would have been earlier, but I was a bit blindsided by that whole her-dating-Weasley thing -"

oh, sorry. Your brother." He grinned, a white flash in the darkness. "Harry was looking at her in Potions class when he thought she wouldn't notice. Staring at her as if she was water in the desert. So obvious, really. I recall catching the look and thinking, "Aha. He's besotted with her and he's too stupid to know it. Wonder how I can use that?"

Ginny shook her head. "That's really grotesque, you know. And how did you?"

"How did I what?"

"Use that."

"I didn't. The Polyjuice thing happened before I got a chance."

"Poetic justice," said Ginny, firmly.

"What?"

"You heard me. You were going to use the fact that Harry loved Hermione against him. And then..." Her voice trailed off before she wandered into the dangerous territory they had agreed not to discuss. "What an awful thing to do that would have been."

"I agree," said Draco, his voice clear and hard as glass. "And there's something else bothersome about it."

"What?"

"Well, I can't have been the only person who's had that idea."

"That idea?"

"Of using her to break him. Come on, Ginny. Everyone has one weakness. He's protected elsewhere. Not where she's concerned."

"Well, if letting yourself love someone is a weakness -- " she began sharply.

"Of course it is," said Draco, as if she'd said something very stupid.

"I think you're talking like your father," said Ginny softly.

"I think I'm talking too much," Draco replied, and sat up straight. "Never mind."

"You're underestimating Harry," Ginny said. "He'd never let harm come to anyone he cared about. If that's a weakness, then he has a dozen. My brother. Sirius. Hagrid. You." She reached out, and put her hand on his shoulder. The soft silvery-fair hair that fell past his ears just brushed the tops of her knuckles. "He isn't protected where you're concerned, either."

"Oh, no," said Draco in a remote sort of voice, "I think he'd sacrifice me along with all the rest."

"Draco--"

"He's a hero, isn't he? That's what they do. Sacrifice for the greater good."

"He needs you," Ginny said.

Draco looked at her. His eyes were clear and silver, untouched by any shade of blue or green or gray. "Harry doesn't need one single one of us an eighth as much as we all need him," Draco said. "It's what he is as much as who he is. He's the hero, we're his companions. We're satellites. We revolve around what he does."

"You don't think he needs us? You said he needs Hermione...didn't you?"

"He's in love with her," said Draco. "And more than that. You know he was almost sorted into Slytherin, don't you? That, and other things - he always feels like he's a fraud somehow. It's in the back of his mind, every day. It's why he wants to win, prove himself, all the time, why he never backs down, why he always has to be not just good enough but damn near perfect. He's afraid of what he might be capable of if he didn't hold himself back. But Hermione - he told me once that she sees him not as he is, but as he wishes he was. That she sees a better world than we live in, a better Harry than the Harry that really exists. I think he sees her as the custodian of his better self. She protects him not just from the world but from himself - am I making any sense?"

Ginny realized she was staring at him. "Scarily," she said, "yes."

"But that's a double-edged sword," said Draco, his eyes on her face now, finding her own eyes, their gazes locking. "Because the more he feels that perhaps he isn't the person she thinks he is, and the more afraid he is that he can never be that person, the more afraid he is that one day she'll realize what he really is, and leave him. And take with her not just herself, which would nearly kill him, but her vision of that better Harry that he has always wanted to be. And that's something that might do what even Voldemort couldn't."

"Which is?"

"Destroy him." He reached out and touched the curl of hair that had been falling in front of her eyes, tucking it back behind her ear in an absentminded manner. "He thinks he has to be perfect, and that if he isn't perfect he's nothing. He doesn't understand that we all have to fight our worse impulses to be what we want, that we have to give things up, that we disappoint the people we love, that as much as you love someone sometimes it just isn't going to happen and you have to understand that you aren't nothing without them, and -"

"Are we still talking about Harry?" Ginny said, her voice very soft.

For a moment, Draco was very still, looking at her. The feel of his glance on her face was like a caress, if not a gentle one. Then his eyes went flat, as if shutters had been dropped down over them, and he sat back and away from her. "I'm sorry," he said. "I've been rambling. I think it was the blood loss. Or something."

"No," she said, and reached for his hand, then thought better of it and let her own hand fall to her lap. "You weren't rambling - you were making sense and I'm glad, because I've been so worried about Hermione and Harry and -"

"You shouldn't worry," Draco replied, still distantly. "It's your Yule Ball night. You should enjoy it."

She wanted to tell him that she had been enjoying it, that these few

moments with him out in the rose-scented, bitter cold night were the best moments she had had in months; that she loved the way he talked to her, as nobody else did, as if there was no question that she could be too fragile to handle the truth; the way he spoke his mind to her and didn't cajole or flatter or patronize. He never had, even when he was being nasty. "Do you want me to go back?" she asked.

"No, but you should," he said, without glancing away. "Go back and be beautiful for Seamus. It's wasted on me."

She hesitated, looking at him. The moment seemed poised on a crystalline point, sharp and diamond-like. "You think I'm beautiful?" she asked.



He looked down at his hands, and then back up at her. When he spoke, it was in a toneless voice, made all the more sincere somehow by its lack of affect. "You are so beautiful it is hard to look at you for very long," he said.

There was a long silence. The moment stretched out between them, sharp

and tense and elongated. He was looking at her, and in his eyes she could see the reflected moonlight, and she remembered the drowning pleasure of his mouth over hers, so she did something she had never done before, and kissed him.

He was sitting and not standing; they were at almost the same height. She did not have to stretch upward to kiss him. She had only to lean forward to cover his mouth with hers. She had never initiated a kiss. Others had always kissed her first. She could not believe she was doing this, and yet she was. The proof was there: his mouth against her own, tense and unyielding at first, then softening as he leaned into the kiss, reaching forward to pull her towards him. His arms went around her and pressed her tightly against him, so tightly that the clasp of his cloak dug sharply and almost painfully into the base of her throat. She could feel his hands on the velvet of her dress, sliding up to touch her bare skin. His fingers burned, ten slender wands of fire, and she felt her blood singing in her veins.

And then it was over. As quickly as he had drawn her towards him, he pulled back. His hands were on her shoulders now, pushing her away as adamantly as a moment before, he had pulled her towards him. "No," he said, his voice a little ragged, and then more firmly, "No."

He let go of her. She sat where she was, certain that she was scarlet with humiliation. It was a moment before she realized that the burning behind her eyes was tears. When she spoke, her voice shook. "Damn it, Draco," she whispered. "What are you playing at?"

He raised his face. The dark moonlight silvered the shadows under his eyes and cheekbones. "You asked me," he said. "I said you were beautiful - that's all."

"You can't say things like that to me," she said. "And not mean them."

"I mean everything I say. It's my besetting sin."

"Then *why*?" The words seemed torn out of her throat. "If you like me, if you think I'm beautiful, then *why*?"

He knew what she meant, of course. He looked away. "Harry likes you. He

probably thinks you're beautiful, too. Why not ask *him* that?"

"Because it's not like that with us; he's in love with someone else," she said, and then stopped herself. "And - and you are too, aren't you?"

He didn't say anything. He was looking down at his hands with a fierce desperate intensity. He seemed to be holding himself back, as tightly as if he were trying to prevent himself from hitting her.

"Blaise," she said. "How can you? She's horrible."

Draco looked away.

"Or not her - oh, of course not her," Ginny whispered. She felt as if she were being cut apart inside. "You -"

"I don't want to talk about this," he said. His voice cut with an edge like diamond. His eyes were unreadable again. He had wanted her. She knew he had wanted her; she was not stupid, or blind. But he had pushed her away, and was doing so still. "There is no point."

Ginny stared at him. For some reason, she was hearing Hermione's voice in her head. It had been months ago when she had told Hermione that she was beginning to have feelings for Draco. And she had complained that Draco would not tell her that he returned those feelings. What had Hermione said? *"It means he likes you enough not to want you to have unrealistic expectations of him. You have to understand - he won't lie. Not about how he feels. He's always painfully honest."*

Finally, Ginny understood exactly why Hermione had characterized that honesty as painful. She thought she had felt all the pain she could feel where Draco was concerned. But apparently not. "No point - there's every point," she said, her voice very quiet.

"No," he said, firmly. "There isn't." He looked away, out over the rose garden, drenched in moonlight as bright as unicorn blood. "If we keep on like this, you'll start to hate me."

"I could never hate you, Draco."

"Oh, yes you could," he said, and his voice held a weary knowledge. "And you would. Because you're like me. You could never be happy with second-best, or half of what you want. And you would fight it, and so would I, but we'd just end up fighting each other. When you're like us, you don't just give up when it goes wrong. We would tear each other apart until one of us couldn't take it. We couldn't just ... forget."

There was a long silence. Ginny was concentrating so much of her energy on not crying, that it took her several moments before she could speak. Finally, she said, "You're wrong."

"Am I?" Draco's expression gave nothing away. "Wrong about what?"

"I *can* forget about you," she said. "And I will. Starting now."

He looked at her. He had withstood everything else she had thrown at him, but it seemed even Draco had a breaking point. His eyes gleamed for a moment with their old provocative malice.

"Try," he said.

She had nothing to say to that. She turned and walked away, conscious to the moment she reached the castle doors of his eyes on her back.

Hermione did not know how long they had been standing there. They were still kissing, if it could even be called that; she felt more as if they were trying to bridge the gap that had sprung up between them over the past weeks and months, and fuse themselves into one person.

Harry had frozen the moment she had kissed him, and she had been for a second afraid that he would push her away - but then his hands had gone to her waist, and he had lifted her up - she had been dimly aware of him kicking the empty butterbeer cartons out of the way, and then she was pressed up against the wall of the Three Broomsticks, the stones digging into her back, and he was kissing her as if both their lives depended on it. His sudden explosive passionate reaction had first stunned her, and then galvanized her own response; she felt great shocks, as if of cold or heat, tearing through her nerves, burning away rational thought. They had had

kisses before, sweet and gentle kisses, passionate kisses as well, but never anything quite like this - there was something messy and unguarded about the desperation of the way Harry clutched at her, his hands tight around her arms (the next day she would find five bruises on the circumference of each arm, like an unfolded flower, where his fingers had been), as if he never expected to see her or touch her again.

She felt as if she were falling and there was no end to her descent. She remembered the first time she had ever kissed him and it had been like a strange miracle, all that known familiar country she had seen so often now being learned by touch: the feel of his mouth, the slight roughness of his skin, the taste of him. But it had been nothing like this, with this desperation: this clash of teeth and tongues and kisses like bites, her frantic snatching at the clasp that held his cloak together, hers falling as well, Harry kicking both garments aside and pressing her up against the wall with the force of his body, his hands busy elsewhere. Her own hands were on the hem of his sweater, tugging it up over his head, and it came off with his glasses and she dropped it on top of an empty carton. He had only a thin cotton shirt on underneath --Harry was very strong for someone with such a lean frame, and as he moved to hold her more tightly she could feel the muscles in his back move under her hands. He was shaking, his hands trembling where they touched her face, her throat, cupped her breasts through the material of her dress. "Are you cold?" she whispered against his mouth, "Are you all right?" but he didn't answer her. "Harry," she whispered again, and this time he covered her mouth with his again, silencing her. She closed her eyes, willing herself not to worry - and then a sudden lancinating cold struck her skin, and she opened her eyes in surprise. Somehow Harry had managed to get the front of her bodice undone, and it was open to the waist, the frigid air breaking against her bare skin like dashes of cold champagne. "Harry," she said, more urgently, a sudden nervousness gripping her as he slid his hands under the material of her dress. The dizzying feeling of falling was leaving her, the alley and its environs coming back into focus - the lighted windows, the gate to the north, the open street beyond. "Harry, we should stop -- someone might come, and see us -"

"So what?" His mouth was against her throat, and then moving down, and she shuddered with the pleasure of it, and also with tension - she felt on the edge of panic, and wasn't sure why... why would she be *afraid* of Harry?

"So, this is private, that's what. *Harry!*" He was pushing her dress down off her shoulders. She realized that in a moment she would be just about naked. While she admired his skill in getting her laced-up bodice undone so quickly - it had taken her nearly an hour to get it on properly and he had dispatched with the whole thing in under a minute - she was more conscious of the growing fear that someone would come along - Ron, probably - and see them. "Harry," she whispered. "Not now."

He appeared not to hear her. "I've missed you," he whispered back. "I've missed you so much," and she felt herself tense as he captured her mouth with his again. His hands were on her skirt, gathering the material with his fingers, sliding the dress up over her thighs. The chill air struck the bare skin of her ankles, then her calves, and now she was shaking with more than just the cold. He was touching her in ways he never had before, and suddenly a strange sense of wrongness shot through her veins, frightening in its intensity. Kissing Harry, touching him, had always been like coming home to a familiar and beloved place; now she felt suddenly as if she had opened the door to her own house and found it inhabited by strangers. Without even thinking about what she was doing, she put her hands flat against his shoulders and pushed him away, hard.

Harry looked shocked. He stared at her for a moment, the dizziness fading out of his eyes. She was reminded of the way he was just after winning a Quidditch match - it took him a moment to come back down to earth, even after he had landed. She supposed, in a way, he had just been flying - only she had not, this time, been flying with him. "Hermione," he said. "What's wrong?"

He didn't know? He really didn't know? She realized she couldn't tell him. Instead, she said the first reasonable-sounding thing that came into her head. "Missed me?" she whispered. "How could you have missed me - I've been right here with you all this time."

"You've been here." Harry reached for his sweater, took it, and pulled it back on over his head. She wondered if it was busying his hands so he wouldn't have to look at her. His cheeks were scarlet and, she suspected, not just with cold. "I haven't."

"And now you are?" she replied. She had crossed her arms over her chest,

covering herself, but she was still cold. "Or are you just drunk?"

Harry bent down and picked up her white cloak, which had fallen on top of his black one. He held it out to her, and she took it, wrapping it around her shoulders. "Maybe I'm a little drunk," he said, very quietly. "But it's not as if I wanted...wanted to be with you because I'm drunk. I always love you. It's just, usually - lately, anyway - I can't say it."

She shook her head. Her hands, lacing up the bodice on her dress, were shaking. "Why can't you say it?" she asked. "Have you changed your mind? Do you feel differently now? Are you...ashamed of me?"

"Ashamed of you?" He laughed; it was a painful sound. "Me, ashamed of you. That's funny. Sort of." He bent down again and retrieved his glasses, which were streaked with snow. He began to clean them on the hem of his shirt. He looked different without them. Older. It emphasized how his face had thinned, becoming more handsome, less soft and childlike. Harder. "Why would you even say that?"

"You don't kiss me or touch me in public, but back here in this alley, you're all over me. What does that say, Harry? I always said I wanted to wait, so it would be really special when we finally were together, but I get the feeling you'd be perfectly happy to just get drunk and do it against a wall."

"Hey!" said Harry sharply, and slid his glasses back on. "*You brought me here. And then you kissed me, and what am I supposed to think? You're my girlfriend! Of course I want to--you know. And - and I'm all right now.*"

He had gone slightly scarlet. Hermione was briefly amused. She had a feeling the Dursleys had probably been very peculiar where it came to sex education. "Yes, but that doesn't mean that..." She broke off. She knew what she wanted to say, could hear the words in her head. *You're all right now, because you've been drinking. And you're all right when you're flying. And if we had sex, you'd probably be all right for that too, because it would be just another drug to kill the pain of whatever's bothering you. But I don't want any part of that. Because it wouldn't last. And then I would have given you everything, and it still wouldn't have been enough.*

But of course, she couldn't say *that*.

"Well, what did you want to come back here for, then?" Harry demanded, looking honestly confused.

Hermione covered her face with her hands, embarrassed. "Well, you were flirting with Blaise, and I..."

"Flirting?" Harry looked amazed. "I was not flirting!"

"Oh, you certainly were."

"With her? She's a Slytherin! And she's Draco's girlfriend, and anyway, she despises me."

"She does not, she said you were gorgeous and she could eat you up with a spoon and...why did I tell you that? It was yucky the first time I heard it."

Harry was staring at her in frank amazement. "You made that up," he said.

"I did not."

"Bet you did."

Hermione sighed. "Harry, you idiot -- half the girls in this school are in love with you."

Harry started to laugh. "What, only half?"

"I think you lost the other half to Draco. But hey, they're mostly Slytherins anyway." She shook her head. "I can't believe you never noticed, but then, that's just typical. You don't know how cute you are and that is the cutest thing about you. Girls adore that - and now I think I've said too much."

"Ah, so this is top-secret not-to-be-shared-with-the-male-gender information?"

"Yes. Now I have to kill you before you go tell Ron, or God forbid, Draco."

"Right, I suppose that they don't know how cute they are either."

"Well, Ron possibly not, but Draco? I hate to break it to you, but Draco knows exactly how cute he is."

Harry grinned. "Yes... kind of revolting, isn't it?"

"Well," she said. "*Revolting* isn't exactly the word."

Harry snorted. "Well, if you mean that - *ow!*"

Hermione jumped. "Harry, what?"

But Harry was already stepping back, brushing snow off the shoulder of his cloak. "Someone threw a snowball at me -Ron!" he yelled, and burst out laughing. Hermione followed his gaze and saw Ron standing at the alleyway entrance, holding his hands up as if to say, "Who, me?" But he was grinning. Behind Ron she could see other dark shapes, hurtling to and fro: the seventh-year boys Blaise had been talking about, who were throwing snowballs at snogging couples.

"I didn't have a choice!" Ron yelled back. "Neville and Dean would have done it if I hadn't!"

But Harry was shaking his head. "You...are...going...to...*die*," he shouted, and then raced towards Ron, who bolted away, laughing. Hermione stared after them for a moment, thinking, *What are they, twelve?* She walked towards the alley entrance slowly, arriving at the main road just in time to see Harry jump on Ron, knock him over, and begin stuffing snow into his shirt. Ron yelled, and began scrabbling in the snow with his fingers in an attempt to make another snowball. Looking at them, she suddenly saw another image superimposed over this one: she saw the two of them rolling over and over in the snow with her when they were all fourteen and it hadn't mattered that she was a girl, she had still been fair game to have her shirt pockets stuffed with ice, and she missed that suddenly - suddenly and piercingly. They had been so happy together, the three of them, a perfect unit. Stealthily, she bent down and gathered up a handful of loose snow, which burned her hand with its coldness. She crept up behind Harry, who seemed gleefully intent on shoving snow into Ron's

ears, and very carefully dumped the lot of it down the back of his shirt.

The yell that greeted this sally was instantaneous and very gratifyingly loud. Harry fell sideways into the snow, yowling, while Ron, sitting up with his red hair full of snow, was speechless with laughter.

Harry looked at her reproachfully. "Hermione! Cheating!"

"Don't be a sore loser, Harry Potter," she replied, scooped up a handful of snow, and hurled it at him. Harry reached out and grabbed for her leg, and she slipped and fell sideways onto Ron, who commenced stuffing snow into the bodice of her dress with an apparent total disregard for niceties. Hermione shrieked and wriggled away, grabbing for Harry with icy fingers. Shouting with laughter, they all three rolled to the bottom of the hill, tangled together, finally fetching up against a large boulder. Hermione sat up first, spitting snow out of her mouth and holding her chest, which was beginning to hurt from laughing. Her dress was soaking wet and her hair hung in wet, ratty tendrils all around her face, but she didn't care. She watched as Harry and Ron sat up as well, both as thickly covered with snow as if they had been rolled in icing sugar. "Well," said Harry, taking off his glasses, which were almost unrecognizable, and squinting at them. "That was -"

He was cut off as Hermione leaped forward and threw her arms around them both, hugging them tightly. Both Ron and Harry seemed astonished at this sudden display of affection; Ron patted her gently on the back. Finally she pulled back and looked at them - covered in snow, both soaking, their fancy dress clothes drenched in water and sticking to their skin. They could almost have been the two boys who had collapsed on the floor of a wet bathroom after saving her from that troll so many years ago.

"I just want you to know," she said suddenly, surprising herself, "that I love you - I love you both, no matter what ever happens to us, ever."

Ron looked at Hermione, and then at Harry, obviously very embarrassed indeed. "Been at the gin again, has she?" he demanded.

Harry nodded. "It's becoming a problem."

Hermione held out her hands. "Oh come on," she said, and without being told what to do, each of them took one of her hands - Ron the left, and Harry the right. "We'll always be together," she said, her voice firm. "Won't we - won't we?"

Harry and Ron looked more embarrassed than ever. "Well, not always," said Ron. "I think I'm going to need a hot bath when I get back to the castle, and I plan to do that on my own, thank you."

Harry grinned at him. "What you don't need anyone to scrub your back?"

Ron wiggled an eyebrow. "You offering?"

"Nah," said Harry. "I was thinking of Myrtle."

"Oh shut up, you two," Hermione interjected despairingly. "Look - just promise me we'll always be friends, won't you? Because it's Christmas, and because if you don't, I will personally tell Myrtle that you both love her, and she'll never leave you alone again. Okay?"

"Okay," said Harry, laughing. "I promise."

"I do too," said Hermione. "I promise."

She looked at Ron; they both did, and it seemed to her that he looked oddly moved, as if somehow her pronouncement had made him sad. "I promise," he said. "We'll always be friends."



"Resistance is useless," purred the voluptuously evil Lady Stacia, her vast bosom rising and falling above the material of her leather corset like a temperamental soufflé. "You are mine now, Tristan. Forget Rhiannon. I, and I alone, can take you to the snowy peaks of ecstasy."

Tristan set his jaw. He would have folded his manly arms as well, but he couldn't because Lady Stacia had tied him to a pole. "Rhiannon is my one true love, and I shall never forget her. Never!"

Lady Stacia shrugged, and from her thigh-high leather boot drew a long phoenix feather, with which she commenced tickling the helpless Tristan all over his bare chest. Tristan began to suspect that she would not rest until she partook of his manly charms. Well, perhaps Rhiannon wouldn't mind if it was just this once, would she? Anyway, she had been carried off by pirates. Who knew when he would see her again?

Ginny dropped *Passionate Trousers* into her lap and stared disconsolately at the cover. It was blank at the moment - the illustrated versions of Rhiannon and Tristan had vanished, presumably in order to have some privacy. Well, Ginny thought darkly, at least *someone* was having fun tonight. And of course Tristan in the story was deserting Rhiannon for the umpteenth time - because, she reasoned, kicking the book off the bed, men were worthless.

Or not. She felt a pang, remembering - she had come running into the Great Hall after leaving Draco, all her nerves on fire and her skin tingling, and she had seen Seamus, standing and talking very pleasantly with Charlie over by the wall, and she had felt her stomach drop out. Seamus was so sweet, and so well-meaning, and what was she doing but treating him absolutely dreadfully? He had looked up and smiled at her then, and it had taken every bit of her willpower not to simply run out of the room. Instead she had gone up to him and begged off the rest of the evening, claiming a sick headache. He had walked her to Gryffindor Tower, unfailingly kind as always, and the last she had seen of him had been his tow-blond hair disappearing into darkness as she mounted the steps to her empty dormitory room.

She sighed, and lay back down on the bed, burying her face in her arms. She felt dreadfully guilty about Seamus, deprived of his Pub Crawl, and could not shake the feeling that she had been messing about behind his back. Of course, she had not meant to kiss Draco -

She rolled over then, and stared up at the ceiling. Who was she kidding. As if she'd gone outside for any other reason. She had looked up while she was dancing with Seamus and seen Draco standing by the Great Hall doors, watching her. From that distance she could not see the expression on his face, only his silver hair and pale skin printed against the darkness behind him. But she could see the angle of his shoulders, the way he stood, and knew he was watching her, and saw him walk away. And there was no power on earth at that point that could have prevented her from going after him.

Hence, she thought, the guilt, and the pounding headache. She sat up, wondering if she should go for a Pain-Relieving Charm, when she realized

that the pounding sound she was hearing was not, in fact, the pain in her own head. It was someone banging on the dormitory door.

She stood up slowly, wrapping her arms around herself - she was wearing her jeans and a maroon sweater than had once belonged to Ron; the sleeves were so long that they entirely engulfed her hands. With a sigh, she went across the room and opened the door, wondering if it was Elizabeth or Ashley, too tired to remember how to work the doorknob.

But it was Seamus. He had changed out of his fancy dress clothes, and was in jeans and a dark yellow sweater with a black stripe across the front. His feet were bare, and his hair was a mess, and he looked as if he'd just spent at least twenty minutes screwing himself up to do something unpleasant. "Hey," he said, his eyes searching the room behind her to see if there was anyone else there. Satisfied that the room was empty, he turned his gaze back to Ginny. "I was hoping I could talk to you."

Ginny sagged against the doorframe. "Oh, Seamus. Whatever it is, don't say it. I can't cope. Not right now."

Seamus shook his head. "This is ridiculous," he said.

"I know. And I'm sorry. I ruined your Yule Ball, and you could have gone to the Pub Crawl, and I feel awful. I hate myself. I am so, so sorry."

Seamus looked exasperated. "That is not what I meant," he said. "I meant you...you letting yourself be miserable. I don't care about the Yule Ball or the Pub Crawl or any of it! But I care about you, Ginny."

She looked at him in surprise. "Seamus..."

"I do," he said quickly. "I have for a long time. When you came back this year, after you'd been away, it was like... you were a whole new person and I couldn't believe I hadn't noticed you before. You're beautiful, you're clever, you're a fantastic Quidditch player, you're funny, your friends obviously adore you..."

Ginny looked at him with her mouth open. "I'd no idea."

"Well," said Seamus. "Now you do."

She shook her head. "Don't...don't be all sweet and nice. I don't deserve it." She leaned against the doorjamb, feeling hopeless. "I can't do this. It would be a mistake, and -- and I can't do this again."

Seamus looked surprised. "Again? You dated me before?"

Ginny laughed despite herself. "No, I mean... look, Seamus, I like you, I really do, and you're charming and sweet, but I've discovered that it's a really, really bad idea to go against my instincts. The last time I did that - well, it didn't work out so well for me."

Seamus nodded. He had put his hands in his pockets. "I just saw your brother come back from the Pub Crawl with Harry and Hermione," he said. "They didn't even look surprised to see me sitting by myself in the common room. It made me wonder what they know that I don't know. Ginny..." he paused. "What exactly did Malfoy do to you? I won't say anything - or judge you - I just want to understand."

Ginny bit her lip. "You couldn't possibly..."

"I could if you *explain it to me*," said Seamus, his voice very firm.

Ginny hesitated, looking at him. He had a kind, honest face, made more boyish by the smattering of freckles across his nose. He looked steadfast and loyal and stalwart and all those things she associated with her brothers, with all the men in her life really - except for one. She couldn't imagine upending all the trial and darkness and misery of the last six months, the confusion and the pain and the victory and the disappointment, on top of Seamus, and having him be able to even begin to understand.

But maybe she was selling him short. Maybe he could take it. If nothing else, he really seemed to want to understand. Maybe he could.

And maybe she just really needed somebody to talk to.

She stepped back, away from the door, and motioned for Seamus to come in. He looked at her in surprise, wise-eyed and hesitating. "Come on in," she said. "Come on in and I'll tell you whatever you want to know."

He had been waiting so long there in their meeting place that he was about to give up when she finally appeared.

She looked pale and tired, and her robes were in disarray. "Ron," she said, and he saw she had his folded parchment in her hand. "I got your message." She made no attempt to come across the room towards him, only leaned back against the closed door. "What did you want to see me about? You know this isn't a good time."

He looked at her with slight incredulity. "It's been days," he said. "I can't go that long -"

"Well, you have to," she replied abruptly. "There are more important things in life than sex, Ron."

"That is *not* why I wanted to see you!" He was gripping the table with his hands so hard that they hurt. "I missed you."

She flushed beneath her pallor. "You saw me today. And yesterday. And the day before. And -"

"But not like this," he said. "Not like this," and he walked across the room and took her by the arms, and kissed her. Or tried to. She turned her face away from his, and would not look at him. "Why?" he said. "Why are you doing this?"

"I'm afraid," she said quietly.

He shook his head. A strange ache had begun in a place below his ribs. It was hard to breathe. "I won't let you shut me out - I'll tell everyone -"

She jerked in his arms as if he had dug a knife into her skin. "No! No, you promised!"

"And you said you loved me! Or were you lying?"

She laughed; it was a brittle sound. "I lie to everyone else. Why not you,

too?"

"There's a simple solution to that," he said. "Tell them the truth."

She seemed to droop in his embrace. "I'm not ready yet."

"When will you be ready?" He searched her face with his eyes. As always, in the faint and colored light of the meeting room, she looked spectral, her features dimmed to ghostliness. He could almost believe she was not quite real, a figment conjured up by his own importunate yearnings.

"New Year's," she said suddenly, surprising him. But then, she always surprised him. He recollected how astonished he had been the day she first summoned him to this place. He had thought it was a joke. "New Year's Day, Ron, if that's what you want."

"It's what I want," he said, and touched her cheek with the tips of his fingers, very lightly. She had let her head fall forward onto his shoulder, her hair covering her face. He remembered that she had been the one to kiss him, first, hooking her arm around his neck and drawing him down to her and he had let her, out of astonishment as much as anything else. Now she seemed shy, her hands knotted into fists against his chest. "Put your hair back," he would say to her sometimes, when they lay together on the ground. "I can't see your face."

And she would laugh. "I can always see yours. You can't hide."

"Yes," he would say. "I know."

"Go away, Potter," said Draco. "I'm tired. I'm really, really tired. I don't need this right now. It's four a.m."

Harry, who had been hopping up and down excitedly in the hallway, stopped and looked vexed. "Come on, Malfoy! Didn't you hear what I said?"

"I heard you," said Draco, leaning against the door jamb and regarding Harry in a pained manner. Usually he was happy to see Harry, but at the

moment he mostly wanted to be alone. His head had been pounding ever since he had come back inside from the rose garden. He kept seeing Ginny's face printed against the backs of his eyelids: the incredulous look in her eyes shattering into anger, and hatred. She hated him. *Right*, he told himself, *and that was what you were after. So congratulations.* "I heard you," he said again, pitching his voice low - it was late, but there were still students making their way up and down the corridors, returning from the Pub Crawl. Although Harry had come down to the dungeons in the Invisibility Cloak, he had taken it off as soon as Draco had opened the bedroom door. Had taken it off, and held out his hand to Draco. A hand clutching a silvery-gray box which contained a Portkey. "You stole the Portkey from Lupin's office. Nice work and all that, but, you know, he was going to give it to us next week anyway. Bit like breaking into Gringott's and emptying out your own bank vault, in my opinion."

"But I want to go *now*," said Harry, his voice fired with a passion that he usually only displayed when playing Quidditch. His eyes were bright with anticipatory excitement. "We can use this Portkey and have it back in Lupin's office by tomorrow morning. No one need ever know."

"What about Hermione and Ron? Won't they notice you've gone?"

"They're asleep. I left Hermione off at her room, and that was ages ago. If we get back by 9 o'clock tomorrow, nobody will ever notice we've gone. That gives us four hours. Plenty of time."

"I thought you liked Professor Lupin," said Draco.

Harry looked taken aback. "I do, of course I do," he said. "But this is important." He paused, and darted his eyes sideways. "Hold that thought," he added quickly. "Someone's coming."

"What? Oh -bugger this," said Draco, reached out, grabbed Harry by the front of the shirt, and hauled him inside. He pushed the door shut after him, and leaned against it, his eyes on Harry. He had rarely seen Harry like this; every line of his frame seemed to almost vibrate with suppressed excitement. "I don't know, Potter," he said. "Stealing, sneaking around - isn't this my area?"

Harry laughed. "Right," he said. "Sometimes I forget you haven't known

me that long."

"I've known you six years."

"You know what I mean, Malfoy." Harry paused, his eyes raking Draco's clothes - he had not yet changed out of his fancy dress. "You can't wear that. We're going to have to take Muggle transport. Put on some jeans or something."

Draco looked at Harry irritably. He hadn't noticed what Harry was wearing before, but now he did: his Quidditch cords, a heavy dark wool sweater and a black jacket, and lace-up boots. He did indeed look dressed for reconnaissance. Draco found it inexplicably annoying. "I'll wear whatever I bloody well please, Potter. If I choose to wear a fruit-covered hat, I don't see where it's your business."

Harry looked at him hard. "Tell me I've gone mad," he said, "But I'm sensing that you're sort of ambivalent about all this."

Draco shrugged. It hurt. "Well, I am and I'm not."

"Very funny." Harry widened his eyes. "Don't you trust me?"

Draco sighed. "Lately I've been having this dream," he said. "Where you come to my room and tell me that you just killed someone, and you need me to help you hide the body. So I do it. But I wake up very annoyed."

"What's your point?"

"My point is not just that you keep asking me to do things without explaining exactly why I have to do them, but that the last time I took a risk and broke the rules, someone tried to kill me."

"Oh, I know," said Harry quickly, "and I completely understand."

"That's great, because I'd hate for my little untimely horrible death concern to be ambiguous."

"I won't *let* anything happen to you!" said Harry, looking exasperated.

"That's touching," said Draco, "in a dumb, blustery, overconfident Gryffindor sort of way."

Harry blew out an aggravated breath, which made the fringe of hair falling over his eyes fly up. "Malfoy..."

"All right," said Draco. "I'll go, and I'll even shut up about it, too. On one condition."

"And what's that?"

"Tomorrow, when we get back, you tell Hermione exactly where we went. I won't tell lies to her, not even on your behalf."

Harry's head went up quickly, his eyes searching Draco's face. For someone who so often these days looked distracted or distant, Harry's eyes could cut like knives when he wanted them to. Draco fought not to look away, and didn't. "Fine," Harry said quietly, after a short silence. "I'll tell her tomorrow."

"Okay." Draco went over to his wardrobe, and selected a long charcoal-colored overcoat of silk-lined dragonsuede. He threw it on over his clothes and turned back to Harry, who was watching him with barely controlled impatience. "Ready," he said.

Harry held out his left hand, the box containing the Portkey in it. It shone bright silver in the dim light that came through the window, and Harry's eyes shone, as if they had been minted out of some glowing green alloy. His mouth was hard and set with determination and for the first time in a long while, Draco recollected why the thought of Harry Potter had once made him afraid.

He went towards Harry, and stood beside him. "Hold on to me," Harry said, and Draco took hold of the sleeve of Harry's jacket, and held fast. He saw Harry tip the Portkey from the box into his open right hand, and then the familiar whipping tug took him, hurling him forward into gray oblivion, Harry at his side.

References: "May I remind you," said Draco, "that detention is a time-honored form of punishment." – Buffy

"When life gives you lemons, make lemonade, and then throw it in the face of the person who gave you the lemons until they give you the oranges you originally asked for." NewsRadio

"It isn't my fault if you choose to be all buddy-buddy with an overgrown gingery lummo who'd lose a battle of wits with a stuffed iguana." – Red Dwarf

"I'm pretty sure that's what evil tastes like." Friends

"Captain Cardboard" – Buffy

"I'd hate for my little untimely horrible death concern to be ambiguous."
Buffy

Draco Veritas Chapter Five: The Bone Orchard

With one hand on the hexagram and one hand on the girl

I balance on this wishing well that all men call the world.

-- Leonard Cohen

"What do you mean, there's no train?"

"What I said. There's no train until six in the morning." Harry shrugged, and rubbed his black-mittened hands together. His cheeks were scarlet with the cold, and he looked mildly embarrassed as he avoided Draco's gaze. "I guess we'll have to wait."

"I bloody think not," said Draco, hopping down off the bench where he'd been sitting. He glanced around in restless annoyance. "I should have known that when you said you had a plan, what you meant was that you had a half-arsed plan."

Harry said nothing. His eyes were roaming up and down the outside of the deserted train station. As it had turned out there was no train station whatsoever in Shepton Mallet proper; they'd had to walk to a nearby town which reportedly had one. And it did have a station -- but it was closed, and locked as tight as the forbidden third floor corridor at Hogwarts. Harry had gone to look around while Draco, miserable with boredom and cold, had flopped down on an empty bench and tried to read a Muggle newspaper that he'd found blowing about. Privately, he rather thought that due to Harry's years at Hogwarts, the other boy had probably forgotten more about Muggles than he remembered. "Look, Potter. If we wait until six in the morning, there's no way that we'll be back in time for classes, and I thought that was the whole point of all this."

Harry shrugged and glanced around. He looked small and cold and defenseless, which made it difficult to stay angry with him. "Well, what do you suggest then, Malfoy?"

"We could just use the Portkey to go back," Draco said. "Where does it take us? Lupin's office? Good enough for me. I might even be able to get almost an hour of sleep in."

"No!" Harry exclaimed, and then more quietly, "No. There must be another way."

"There is," said Draco, and Harry looked at him in confusion. Draco raised his left hand and snapped his fingers, and as he did so he saw Harry's expression of confusion clear, to be replaced by what looked like panic.

"No, Malfoy! Not the --" He was cut off by a loud squealing and roaring noise as the huge, hideous, triple-decker purple bus with its splashy gold lettering roared to a stop in front of them. The driver honked the horn, which sounded like a parakeet being strangled. Harry sighed in defeat. "Not the Knight Bus," he said wearily. "What if they tell someone they saw us?"

"Oh, bloody hell, Potter, quit thinking you're the biggest news story since ... well, since you, but I'm not sure 'Harry Potter Takes The Bus' is going to move a lot of copies of the Daily Prophet."

Harry looked from Draco to the hideous purple bus, and sighed. "I hope you're right."

"I'm right. I'm always right! Now get on the bus, you're giving me a headache."

Draco was so exhausted that he barely took note of the pimply-faced young man who took his money, and was too cold to complain about the fact that he then charged him a ridiculous two galleons for a bottle of water and a chocolate bar. Draco paid, then went directly to the back of the bus, which was deserted, and flung himself down onto an empty four-poster bed. Then he sat up, and looked around him with concern.

"What is it, Malfoy?" Harry asked, taking the bed next to Draco's and lying down in it. "You look worried."

"Malfoys," said Draco tightly, "do not sleep on municipal beds. How many other people do you think have lain on these sheets? It makes my skin crawl just thinking about it."

"I've seen you sleep on concrete floors," Harry pointed out. "Surely this can't be less comfortable?"

"It's not an issue of comfort," said Draco irritably, took his coat off, flung it on the bed, and lay back down on top of it.

"You're such a prima donna, Malfoy," said Harry, who had curled into his favored sleeping position -- on his side, with his head pillowed on his left arm. His green eyes watched Draco with friendly amusement. "I can't believe you didn't bring your own 350 thread count cotton percale sheets on this little camping trip."

"I could Summon them," said Draco agreeably, but Harry leaned quickly across the space between them, and caught at his wrist.

"No," he said. "No more magic -- please. Especially not wandless magic. I really don't want to be noticed."

"I was just joking," said Draco, and Harry let go of his wrist slowly, and lay back down. "They're satin sheets anyway," Draco added, very quietly, a few minutes later, but Harry couldn't have heard him regardless; he had fallen fast asleep.

"So Harry is the Heir of Gryffindor?"

"Right," said Ginny.

Seamus sat still a moment, re-digesting this information. "And you....you're the Heir of Hufflepuff?"

Ginny nodded. "Right," she said again, cocking her head worriedly. Seamus, sitting on the end of her bed, had picked up one of her woven throw pillows and was busy pulling threads out of it at a rapid pace. She doubted he realized what he was doing, but was beginning to worry that the story she was telling was a bit too much for him. He looked as if his mind were running in circles.

"And Malfoy..." Seamus paused, his blue eyes clouded. "Malfoy died?"

"Only briefly," Ginny replied, as helpfully as she could. "He got better right away."

Seamus shook his head as if to clear it of cobwebs. "And ... Harry and Malfoy can talk to each other telepathically? They like each other?"

"That last part's up for some debate," Ginny said with a sigh, "but basically yes."

Seamus stood up hurriedly, dropping the pillow as he did, and began to pace barefoot up and down at the foot of the bed. Ginny sat up against the pillows and watched him, with some anxiety. She hadn't meant to tell him quite so much, but once she'd started talking it had all come out in a headlong rush. And she couldn't deny that there had been an intense pleasure in finally telling someone else everything she'd been holding inside for so long.

"Seamus," she said finally. "Talk to me. Are you all right?"

He glanced at her, almost as if he were surprised she was still there. "I don't know what to say. About any of it. Malfoy ... saved Harry's life?"

Ginny laughed. "Which time are you asking about? They're always saving each other's lives. Look..." She sat forward on the bed, fixing Seamus with a hopeful look. "They're not like other people..." she began.

"What about Quidditch?" Seamus said suddenly.

Ginny blinked at him, caught off guard. "What?"

"Do they talk...in their heads...during matches? Because I'm pretty sure that's cheating."

Ginny was outraged. "Of course not! Harry would never do that! Neither would Draco!"

Seamus gave a dry laugh. "Sorry," he said. "I'm not exactly used to the image of Malfoy as a paragon of virtue."

"He's not," Ginny said patiently. "He's just changed, that's all. He's still arrogant, and stubborn, and mean sometimes, but...he wouldn't lie, or

cheat, or do anything underhanded like that. He has a rigid moral code, in his own weird way. Look, if you knew him..."

Seamus gave another dry laugh. "I can't believe this," he said. "You're defending Malfoy. To me."

"But Seamus..." Ginny sat back on her heels. "You said you wanted to know what happened between us."

"But that's because I thought..." Seamus raked a hand through his tangled dark blond hair in exasperation. "I thought he'd done something awful to you! Followed you around, tried to force himself on you, seduced you, betrayed you..."

"I see," said Ginny coldly.

Seamus looked as if he knew he'd just said something stupid. "I wasn't--"

Ginny's voice was like ice. "I'm sorry that the reality isn't colorful enough for you, Seamus. I'm sorry I wasn't abused, or abandoned, or --"

"It's not that..." Seamus interrupted urgently. "I thought I could help you -"

"Well, I don't need your help!" Ginny almost shouted. "I don't need you to race in on your big white horse and rescue me, Seamus Finnigan. In fact, I don't need you here at all. I let you in here because I thought you would make me feel better. But all you're doing is making me feel worse!"

A hurt look flashed across Seamus' open, gentle face. He came and sat down on the bed next to her, and tried to take her hand. She allowed him to lift it, but let it lie there in his grasp like a dead fish. If she'd had a real dead fish on hand, she would have whapped him across the head with it. She wasn't sure why she felt so annoyed with Seamus, but she did. The Weasley temper...

"Ginny," Seamus said after a long silence. "I..I really like you. I do. But I get this feeling that you don't really want me around. So..." He laid her hand down on the bed. "So I'm just going to go. Unless..." He stood up, his hands stuffed in his pockets. His wide blue eyes pleaded with her to say something -- to ask him to stay. "Unless you want me not to."

Ginny took a deep breath. "Just go, Seamus," she said wearily, picking up her damaged throw pillow and cradling it to her chest. "Ashley and Elizabeth will be back any minute and it would probably be better if you weren't here."

He nodded, and bit his lip. "Will you be --"

"I'll be fine."

She watched him walk to the door with an odd ache in the back of her throat. If someone as kind and sweet and generous as Seamus couldn't be understanding about this, then maybe she'd been right - there was nobody who could. He opened the door and paused there, looking at her, handsome in a boyish way with his tousled hair and tired, sleepy blue eyes. "I won't repeat anything you told me," he said, his voice very serious. "I promise."

She nodded, holding her pillow, not trusting herself to speak as he went out and shut the door behind him.

"Potter! Potter, wake up!"

Harry struggled groggily into a sitting position. "Are we there?" he demanded, reaching into his pocket and pulling his glasses out. He put them on, and blinked as the blur in front of him resolved into Draco, sitting on the end of his bed looking agitated, and waving something in his hand...a rolled-up newspaper. "You going to hit me with that?" Harry asked, hauling himself into a sitting position. "If so, what did I do exactly?"

"I want you to look at something," Draco said, pulling up his legs to sit cross-legged on the bed, and spreading the newspaper open on his lap. He jabbed at an article with his finger. "Stupid Muggle papers...the photos don't move...but I recognized it anyway."

"Recognized what?" Harry cocked his head to the side, examining the indicated article, capped by a prominent headline:

The Art of Art Theft

Art theft is no longer just an elitist crime funded by unscrupulous collectors, but has become a billion dollar industry linked to crime cartels and illicit arms dealing. The theft of a collection of priceless medieval antiques, including a mirror, reportedly valued at as much as £500,000 (pictured, at left) and believed to have belonged to Louis X of France, from Sotheby's earlier this week is believed to be the latest incident in this trade, now worth more than £3 billion annually.

There have been a spate of raids on European art collections in the past year, with the total value of art and antiques stolen estimated at 300 to 500 million. The raids have often been violent; early last year robbers tied up the night watchman at Frankfurt's Schirn Gallery before taking paintings with a combined value of ... ("Okay," Draco interjected, "I'm skipping this bit because it's boring...") ...By contrast, the robbery at Sotheby's apparently took less than ten minutes to execute and was entirely bloodless. Within a ten minute period between routine sweeps by security guards, the priceless artifacts simply disappeared. The prevailing theory remains that either the robbers must have been very organized, or they must have had help from inside. "We will be questioning our staff very closely," asserts Sotheby's head of security Keith Fraser, visibly distraught by the recent events. "It is impossible that these robbers could have evaded our security systems without considerable assistance from someone possessing inside knowledge." When asked if there was another way the security could have failed, Fraser was indignant, "Well, I suppose they could have used magic!"

Draco crinkled up his nose in confusion. "Wait, I thought they didn't know about magic..."

"He's being sarcastic, you tit," said Harry, craning his head over Draco's shoulder to get a better look at the paper. "And I still don't get why you wanted me to look at this."

"See the mirror there, Potter?" Draco demanded, jabbing his finger at a color photograph of what looked like a silver hand mirror, very old-looking. The handle and back of the mirror were elaborately carved all over with birds, flowers, and graceful whorls of silver. It reminded Harry a bit of the work on his Gryffindor scabbard, if slightly less colorful.

"Yeah?" Harry looked sideways at Draco. "So what?"

"So, *that* is the mirror from my dream, that's what," Draco said, staring at the photo. "It's unique - I'd recognize it anywhere."

"From your dream...oh. That dream."

"Yes, *that* dream. As far as I'm concerned, this clinches the question of whether the dreams are real. In the dream, Wormtail told Voldemort that he'd only gotten the mirror that day...and this robbery was a few days ago. The question then becomes, why does the Dark Lord want this mirror so much? If he's sending his henchwizards out into the Muggle world to get it, he must need it for something."

"You don't think he just wants to admire himself in it?" Harry asked.

Draco snorted. "No, he has minions for that. 'Oh, Voldemort, your skin is such a luminous shade of green today, and your eyes are so radiantly red.' Potter, he wanted that mirror for something, and knowing him, it probably wasn't a gift for his dear mum."

"Well," said Harry, and yawned, "if you want to know what it was about, you know what to do."

"What?"

"Go to sleep and have another dream about it."

Draco looked offended. "I can't just dream on command, you know."

"No? Not a very useful talent, then, is it?"

"You just want to nap. Despicably lazy, you are," said Draco, and turned to look out the window. "Fine, we can talk about this when you're awake, then."

Harry followed Draco's gaze through habit, and saw the outside world flashing past at dizzying speed, trees and buildings bending to get out of the way of the Knight Bus. Only the night sky seemed to be remaining still, high and cold and as clear and transparent as a sheet of black glass. Harry almost imagined he could look into it and see no end. He spoke then, without thinking.

"Do you believe in God, Malfoy?"

Draco started, and turned to look at him in disbelief. "Do I what?"

"You heard me," said Harry, uncomfortably. "Do you believe in God - at all?"

Draco looked dubious. "I guess I believe in God," he said. "Sometimes I think he has some pretty strong reservations about me, though."

"What about heaven? And hell?" Harry asked.

The other boy shook his head. "What is this about? Anyway, of course I believe in hell...we saw Slytherin get dragged off somewhere by those demons. Where did you think they were taking him? All-expenses-paid balloon tour of the Urals?"

"What about heaven?"

Draco shrugged again. Harry had a feeling he was making the other boy very uncomfortable. "Stands to reason there's a heaven, if there's a hell."

"Well," said Harry, sitting forward, "what do you think it's like?"

Draco leaned back against the wooden post of the bed, his mouth a crooked line of bemusement. "You're asking me what heaven's like, Potter? Come on, you've had your name down for entry there since before you had your name down for Hogwarts. Whereas I..."

"Whereas you are going to hell in a handbasket, I know," Harry interrupted. "In the meantime, use that ferocious imagination of yours for a second, will you? I really want to know what you think."

"Do you?" Draco's eyes were the color of quartz crystals, and about as readable. "I think heaven would be different for everyone who goes there. For you, it's probably bunnies and Christmas and optimism and everyone shoving flowers in their ears."

"And for you?"

Draco was silent a moment, looking out the window at the dark world flashing by. "A place to rest, I think," he said finally.

"You tired, Malfoy?"

Draco turned his gray gaze back to Harry. "Always," he said. "Aren't you?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't think I get to be tired."

"Yeah," said Draco, looking back out the window. "Maybe you don't."

The bedroom was full of pale dawn light. Ron sat in the window seat, and looked out. Just above the eastern line of trees sunrise was unraveling like a red seam along a pale gray cloth. It touched the Forbidden Forest with its light and the trees seemed to burn as if they had caught fire. The unmarked snow beneath the Quidditch pitch shone like a crystal dipped in scarlet ink. It was a beautiful new day, and Ron regarded it with almost no interest whatsoever. The deepening sky above the treetops made him think of a slit throat gushing blood, and his head ached and pounded as if it had been trapped in a vise.

He was tired, physically exhausted from lack of sleep compounded with stress and tension. But he had gotten used to that. What gnawed at him was the anxiety. When he was with her, he was happy; when he was not with her, he wondered if he would see her again and that made him miserable. She had been the one who had come to him first, but somewhere along the way, the balance of power had shifted, and what had seemed like a game had become something else instead. Initially, it had seemed like a convoluted way of getting his own back -- a revenge for slights real or perceived, it hardly mattered. But it was not that now -- not for him, anyway. For her, he could hardly guess. She was risking a great deal, he knew. Maybe more than he imagined. He had thought that made him safe. But she had come to him knowing the answer to the question in his eyes and willing to give it, and in taking from her he somehow found he had given her everything. The keys to his locked-away secrets, the hopes buried at the back of his mind. The deepest and most desperate desires of his heart. She knew them all now. He could not have answered honestly that he knew the same about her. Sometimes she seemed to be hiding purposely, keeping him at a distance, and in public, when she looked at him, her eyes said nothing at all; this other life of theirs might as well not exist. It made him want to yell and throw things; to hit her, just to get a reaction. Assuming even that would get one.

Harry had once told him that the worst feeling imaginable was to find yourself hating the person you loved best in the world; he wondered now if this was only because Harry had never known what it was like to love someone and realize you could not trust them. Surely that was worse.

It had to be.

When the Knight Bus finally came to a careening stop, it was nearly dawn. The sky had lightened enough to reveal heavy clouds, and the air tasted of impending snow. Draco was only too happy to disembark from the bus, and stood next to Harry, who was putting on his gloves and scarf, as the Knight Bus roared away into the distance.

They were on a country road, a slender lane of ice-dusted paving stretching away between black lines of bare trees. Along the left side of the road ran a high stone wall topped with spikes. The graveyard, Draco assumed.

Harry finished pulling on his gloves, and started off down the road. Draco followed, enjoying the cold air. He had always liked low temperatures. The wall soon ended in a metal gate, chained and padlocked shut.

Draco watched Harry as he thoughtfully took his right glove off, and touched his hand to the lock. "*Alohomora*," he whispered, and the padlock sprung eagerly apart under his hand. The two boys stepped back as the gate swung open, with a faint creaking sound. When they were through, Harry chained the gate behind them.

They were farther south than Hogwarts, and here it had snowed much less. It dusted the tops of the headstones with a layer of fine powder, and sugared the bare black paths between the graves. Draco had not been in a graveyard before; the Malfoys were all buried on the grounds of the Manor, with cenotaphs erected over their bones. Something in the back of his mind, his old self, revolted at the thought of being buried like this, among strangers not of your own blood.

He glanced sideways at Harry. "You know where you're going?"

Harry nodded. It was still too dark for Draco to see his face properly, although the eastern sky was beginning to brighten with a few gray streaks of light. Dawn was coming. Harry raised a jacketed arm and pointed: "Over there."

They went, their boots crunching on frozen dirt, and then, as Harry left the path and cut across towards the cemetery's far side, on frozen blades of grass. The only sign that this was a wizarding cemetery was the flowers that bloomed, unfaded and unfrozen, on each of the graves as they passed. Draco barely registered the names on the headstones as they walked by; he was looking at Harry, who seemed stretched taut with a sort of nervous anticipation. His gloved hands were balled into fists in the pockets of his jacket, his shoulders tense and set.

He stopped walking. "All right," he said, in a quiet voice. "We're here."

And Draco, his heart jumping with adrenaline for some reason he couldn't define, stopped with him, and looked.

There were tall mausoleums in the graveyard, carved all over with angels; there were cenotaphs covered in Latin writing and crowned with statues of Merlin and other famous wizards: But they stood in front of a plain gray doubled headstone adorned only with names. Lily Potter, said the name on the right; the one on the left: James Potter. Under the names was a carved a Latin motto, *Amor Vincit Omnia*, and under that the date of death. October 30, 1981.

He chanced a look at Harry, who had gone very quiet. In the blue-white dawn light, his face was finely etched with shadows, his mouth an uncompromising straight line. He was very pale, as if a light shone somewhere in him, beneath the skin. His eyes had changed again. There was a far-off look in them, as if he gazed into some other landscape, another world dimly seen beyond this one, a look like blindness.

"Harry," Draco said slowly. He wanted to say something profound and interesting, something comforting, something about the nature of life and death and the importance of closure. However, no words came to his mind. He hesitantly took his hands out of his pockets, vaguely thinking that he should touch Harry on the shoulder, make sure he was all right.

"Malfoy?" Harry said into the silence. His voice was very quiet, his eyes now fixed on the headstones.

Draco stood up a little straighter. "Yeah?"

"If you don't mind," Harry said, his face still averted, "I'd like it if you left me alone here for a little bit."

"Oh," Draco said. "Oh. Right." He put his hands back in his pockets, feeling suddenly very awkward. "Sure. I'll just...come back later."

The other boy didn't reply. Draco turned then, and left Harry standing there by his parents' graves, in the pale light of the chilly dawn.

Harry waited until the sound of Draco's footsteps crunching ice had faded into silence before he got down on his knees by the side of the grave. He looked at the headstones for a moment from his position there on the ground. His father's name and his mother's beside it looked as if they had been scarred into the stone. He read the Latin words under their names. *Love conquers all*. He wondered who had picked it out. Someone who must have thought it was true, which, of course, it wasn't.

He could feel his own heart beating, hard, against his ribs, and a dryness in his mouth. But other than that he felt nothing. Nothing at all. He had wondered if he might cry, but he did not feel like crying. All his thoughts were focused on the task at hand. He suspected that he had not that much time before Draco came back. He pulled his gloves off, laid them carefully on the ground, and began to scrape away the layer of snow that covered the graves.

He had not realized that the ground beneath the snow would be frozen so hard. But it was. He scrabbled at it with his fingers, but was like trying to dig into iron. He wished he had brought something with him he could scrape at the earth with, or knew a spell that might work, but then again he suspected that it would not be wise to use magic here. Eventually he unfastened the belt from about his waist, removed the scarlet charm that hung there, and used the diamond-hard edge to scrape at the grave soil. When he had enough dirt to fill his cupped palm, he dropped the runic band, took a small vial out of the inner pocket of his jacket, and filled it

with the half-frozen soil. Then he capped it tightly, and put it back in his pocket.

He stood up, suddenly dizzy. He wasn't sure if it was because he'd been holding his breath, or just a reaction to where he was. The carved names on the gravestones seemed to be leaping out at him, printed blackly against his inner eye. He heard Draco's voice in his head, speaking to him in the corridors under Slytherin's castle. *There's nothing you can do and there's no way to avenge them and they'll be there forever and you'll never see them again, not even if you die.*

He realized he didn't want to be looking at the graves, didn't even want to be near them, and he began to back away, moving quickly, until he rounded the corner of another mausoleum and was out of sight of them.

He found that he was standing in a grassy square between four towering stone cenotaphs. He leaned against the side of one, letting his heartbeat slow. The sun had continued its swift and steady eastward rise and the snowy grass all around, the pale stone of the mausoleums, were tinged with a deceptively beautiful rosy light. Headstones stretched away in the distance, an unmoving and unbroken line, until he realized that in fact there was movement there - someone was coming towards him along the path between the graves. Someone not Draco. A girl.

Rhysenn.

Harry straightened up and stared. He remembered having seen Rhysenn descending the stairs at the Manor with Charlie on her arm, and thinking at the time that she was very beautiful, if much older, one of those women so elegantly dressed that she seemed more like a doll than a person. Now, however, she looked...very different. She wore a short, pleated gray skirt and knee socks, black patent leather sandals, and a soft blue sweater set. She must, he thought, be freezing cold, although she gave no sign of it. Her glossy black hair was wound into long plaits that fell nearly to her narrow waist, tied at the ends with incongruous bright blue bows. Her face was scrubbed clean of makeup, her eyes very bright. She looked fifteen - at least, her face looked like a fifteen-year-old girl's even if it did seem to be attached to the body of a twenty-five year old woman. "I suppose you wouldn't believe me if I said I was just in the neighborhood?" she said, still walking towards him. "Would you?"

"No," he said, and took another step back. This brought him up against the side of the mausoleum, and he was forced to stop retreating. "If you want Draco, he isn't here. He took a walk."

"How fortunate that I wasn't looking for him, then," she said. "How fortunate that I was looking for you."

"Me?" said Harry. She was very close to him now, and was coming still closer. "Why me?"

She was only about a foot away from him now, so close that her face seemed to fill the field of his vision: her bright red lips and depthless tunnel-like gray eyes drew his gaze. He wanted to look away, and didn't want to look away. "I just wanted to talk to you," she said, her scarlet mouth curving up. "That's all."

Her eyes told him something else.

"What...about?" Harry was aware that his voice sounded a full octave higher than usual.

She laughed. "How would you react if I told you that it's because I haven't been able to stop thinking about you since your birthday party, and that I just had to see you again?"

"I don't know," said Harry, very nervously. "Why, is it the sort of thing you're likely to say?"

Rhysenn chuckled, reached up, and stroked his cheek. She let his fingers linger there, and he felt himself shiver uncontrollably as if he were cold, although he wasn't. "You're awfully cute," she said, the low timbre of her voice sending a pulsing vibration into his ears. "Did you know that?"

"I've been told I don't," said Harry, and glanced around even more nervously. "Isn't it rather bad taste to be hitting on someone in a graveyard?"

"Well," said Rhysenn, and shrugged, "Look at it this way. You were depressed a minute ago, weren't you? And now you're not."

"No," Harry agreed, "Now I'm afraid."

"I get this feeling," she said plaintively, "that you don't trust me."

"I don't." He tried to take a deep breath, but her heavy perfume seared into his lungs and throat, and he coughed. "Why should I? And, more to the point, what do you care what I think? I thought it was Draco you were supposed to be bothering."

"Bothering?" she snapped, and pouted. "You call this bothering? I'm trying to be helpful."

"You could be very helpful by going away."

She lifted her huge gray eyes to his. "You don't really mean that," she said, and Harry was unpleasantly surprised to find that he didn't. No part of his mind trusted or liked her, but something in the buried, reptilian part of his brain was urging him to let her stay and keep touching him with those hands that seemed to lace a shivering cold pleasure across his skin. He thought of Hermione, and what she would think, and felt terrifically guilty and ill all at once. "And why do you believe what Draco tells you?" she whispered.

"Because I trust him," Harry said shortly. He realized he was quite wedged into the doorway of the mausoleum at this point and could not possibly escape without pushing her away. And somehow the idea of putting his hands on her body, even to shove her away, seemed like a bad one.

"Are you sure that's wise?" Her breath ruffled his hair, and his shivered, his thoughts flying every which way like startled birds. This had never happened to him before - usually when faced by danger or uncertainty his mind sharpened to alertness. Now his thoughts felt fuzzy and muffled.

"What..." he began groggily. "What are you trying to say?"

"I told you all your friends would betray you," she whispered. "Don't you remember?"

"Draco," he said a bit groggily. "He wouldn't....and he can't lie to me."

"Are you sure?" Her hand was softly stroking his cheek now.

He nodded, which was not a good move because it brought his face into further contact with her hand. "I'm sure."

"And what makes you so sure? That he's trustworthy? Do you know something special? Something that other people don't?"

Harry tried to reply, but his voice had dried up in his throat.

"Are you feeling all right, Harry?" she asked. Her eyes, again, spoke to him, saying very different words, words that he could almost hear inside his head. *I know what you'd really like...we could go somewhere, somewhere quiet, and if you liked, we could have sex.*

Harry jumped away from her so violently that he banged his head on an ornamental carved angel. "Ouch," he exclaimed. "What did you say?"

"Oh, your poor head," she said, her eyes dancing with suppressed mirth. "Let me see," and she closed in on him and touched her fingers to his temple, and stroked the skin there. Harry winced, and tried not to breathe, but even with his mouth clamped shut he seemed to be inhaling the perfumed scent that rose off her hair - it was like jasmine and sandalwood mixed with something stronger. She wasn't beautiful, not really, but it didn't matter; he found that his heart was pounding like a jackhammer in his chest, and his throat was dry. He was very conscious of her shoulder brushing his, the swell of her breasts under the tight material of her top, the soft dent in the center of her bottom lip...

"I..." he began hopelessly. "I don't think I..."

"Shhh, Harry," she whispered, moving even closer, and he felt her exhale against him, her breath stirring his hair. If she got any closer, he thought half-hysterically, they wouldn't have to go anywhere to have sex. There was a tightness inside his chest that seemed to be growing and growing in intensity, and a radiating darkness behind his eyes. He felt ill and weak and at the same time conscious of a painful excitement. "I won't hurt you, Harry. You'll like it..."

"Get away from him," said a sharp voice, cold and irritable, cutting through the gray fog in Harry's brain. "Right now."

Harry opened his eyes (he hadn't even realized they were closed, but they were) in time to see Rhysenn take a step back and turn around, her dark braids swinging. "Oh dear," she exclaimed, sounding like a little girl deprived of a birthday treat. "Draco."

Harry dragged his gaze up and away from Rhysenn. He was not surprised at all to see Draco standing a few feet away with his hands in his pockets, looking very annoyed indeed. His light gray eyes were fixed on Rhysenn. "Honestly," he said. "Have you no shame?"

She smiled. "Are you jealous?"

"No," he said shortly. "Just short on patience."

"I was only having a little fun," Rhysenn said cheerfully, flouncing towards Draco with her skirt swinging. This was a great relief to Harry, who found her continued proximity unnerving at best. "I was looking for you. I wanted to thank you. You saved my life."

Draco gave her an irritated look. "It was a reflex," he said. "Anyway, I thought you were immortal."

"I am, but I can bleed. I can feel pain. I can feel a lot of things."

I bet she can, Harry thought irritably.

Yeah, and you were really fighting her off, Potter, Draco muttered back. *You shut up and let me deal with this.*

Rhysenn's dark eyes narrowed. "Are you two...talking in your heads? I heard you could do that, but I never thought --"

"Who told you that?" Draco snapped, looking suddenly fierce.

"It's not true," Harry interjected - his voice came out on a gasp, but at least the dizziness in his head was fading.

Draco shot him a look, and then returned his gaze to Rhysenn. "Why did you follow us here, Rhysenn?" he demanded. "Did you get bored standing around in your little cage? Voldemort not pushing enough food pellets through the bars?"

The bright color in Rhysenn's cheeks vanished. "What did you say?"

"You heard me." Draco began to walk down the steps, and Rhysenn almost took a step back before she seemed to recollect herself. "Call me crazy, but I think if you had a little wheel installed so you could run around in there, you wouldn't be so driven to chase teenage boys around the British Isles. You could work off some of that excess energy."

The color had come back to her face in a flood. "*That cage does not hold me,*" she hissed, his voice a flat whisper.

"I notice you don't deny you work for Voldemort," said Draco coldly. His eyes were chips of gray ice. He looked, Harry thought, rather like his father. "Want to tell us a little about that?"

"Who has told you these things?" she demanded. "Where did you learn them?"

Draco shook his head. "I'd tell you that, see, but I really don't want to."

Rhysenn's fingers curved into claws. "You stupid boy," she snapped. "The Dark Lord will destroy you, and whatever minion betrayed him to you!"

"In that case, I'll just tell him it was you, shall I?" Draco suggested equably. He cocked an eyebrow, and glanced up at the lightening sky. "The sun's coming up," he added, his voice deceptively soft. "Shouldn't you..."

With a scream of rage and whirl of black hair, Rhysenn disappeared, vanishing without even the soft * pop * that usually accompanied a Disapparation.

Draco stood where he was, staring at the spot where she had disappeared. There were no marks in the snow where her footprints should have been; it was easier to see that now, in the gathering light. The advent of the rising sun striped the far horizon with bars of rose and gold, sparkling over the icicles, over Draco's icy-colored hair.

"Hey," said Harry uneasily. Draco's set expression was unsettling, to say the least. "Malfoy... thanks."

"Thanks?" Draco jerked his head up and looked at Harry as if he were the most pitiful thing he had seen in a lifetime of pitiful things. "What was that? I never picked you for the easily-swayed-by-feminine-wiles type."

"I'm not," Harry replied. He wished he could be a bit more eloquent, but he was having trouble catching his breath. There was also a strange, whirling feeling in the pit of his stomach, as if he'd just been dropped from a great height.

Draco rolled his eyes. "If I hadn't come back..."

Harry's stomach lurched. "I had it under control," he gasped.

"Oh, yes, that's what it looked like. Hey, with some luck, you could have drowned her in drool."

Harry's stomach lurched again, this time as if it were trying to turn itself inside out. He took a few staggering steps, nearly crashed into a tombstone, fell to his knees, and was violently and thoroughly sick on the grass. His body shook. He'd only been this sick once before, after drinking too much. Waves of nausea coursed over him, almost painful in their intensity. Finally they subsided, and he sat back on his heels, gasping in air.

"Hey." It was Draco's voice, much gentler now. Hands closed around Harry's upper arms, helping him up to his feet. "Harry...what happened?"

Harry shook his head. "I think...I need...some water."

Quickly, Draco produced his bottle of overpriced water from a coat pocket, and handed it to Harry. Harry drank most of it, then splashed the rest on his face and hands. It helped: his mind was starting to clear, and the world was coming back into focus.

"Can you stand up on your own?" Draco asked.

Harry nodded, rubbed a sleeve across his damp face. "I'm all right," he said. "Must have been all that jouncing around on the Knight Bus."

Draco released his hold on Harry's arm, looking thoughtful. "I don't think so. I think it was something to do with Rhysenn."

Harry laughed shakily. "I don't think she'd be too happy to hear that."

"Well, she seems to have a hell of an effect on you. I thought you were going to keel over and pass out before."

"I was trying to push her away," Harry said.

"Yeah," said Draco. "Maybe you were."

"I tried," Harry said again. "I tried, and I just couldn't. I wanted to, but..."

"Hey, you know, it happens to every guy," said Draco with mock sympathy.

Harry choked. "Oh, shut up, Malfoy."

Draco chuckled. "We should get out of here," he said. "The sky's getting light."

"All right," Harry said, and took a step towards him. Then he paused. "My gloves - and the bracelet. I left them back at the - back where we were."

Draco took hold of the back of Harry's jacket, steering while they walked back to the Potters' graves. Harry didn't mind the mild guidance; he was still a little shaky on his feet. "Bracelet?" Draco echoed.

"My runic band - I wear it on my belt. For good luck."

"Oh, right. That red band. Why'd you take it off?"

"No reason," Harry said shortly, stopping to pick the bracelet and his gloves up. Draco didn't press him, as Harry knew he wouldn't. He stood quietly as Harry gave the headstones one last look. Then he took the box containing the Portkey out of his pocket, and opened it. The Portkey glimmered silver in the morning light, for it was now full morning. He turned to Draco.

"Hold on to me," he said, and tipped the Portkey into his hand. The world upended itself, and then he was whirling away, shooting through a gray fog, Draco's hand knotted tightly into the back of his jacket.

Draco landed on a hard stone floor with enough force that he lurched forward into Harry, whose jacket he was still clutching. He let go and staggered back into an upright position, glancing around nervously.

They were in Lupin's office. Dust motes danced in the shaft of light that spilled in through the half-open windows, illuminating the desk piled with books, the chair pulled to the fireplace which was empty and cold. He glanced at Harry, who looked slightly dazed. "Put the Portkey back and let's go," Draco whispered urgently.

Harry dropped the box onto the table, but as he did so, there was a faint noise - Draco turned and saw that the handle on the office door was turning slowly, slowly -

Harry had gone white, and was staring at the door. My cloak - it's back in your room!

Draco grabbed the back of Harry's jacket again, and yanked him towards the fireplace. He pointed his left hand at the empty grate and muttered *Incendio!* Blue-white flames instantly wreathed the logs there; Harry, realizing what Draco was trying to do, grabbed the box of Floo Powder that rested on the mantel, and threw a liberal handful in. He leaped after the powder just as the door opened, and Draco followed him, grabbing onto Harry's jacket again so they wouldn't be separated. He heard Harry yell a destination as the powder spun them away, or at least he assumed that's what Harry was shouting - he couldn't tell. Other fireplace grates flashed by, some lit and some dark, and then the whirling forward propulsion of the Floo magic spat them both out like objects hurled from a catapult. They rolled across a painfully hard stone floor, finally fetching up against something hard. Draco heard Harry yell in pain. who lay sprawled on the ground in a pitifully coughing heap. Draco raised his head slowly, blinking away dizziness, and saw Harry looking back at him; Harry was covered with soot, his shirt and jeans blackened in long streaks, his hair matted with dust.

"You all right?" Draco asked, propping himself painfully on his elbows.

"I'm fine," Harry said, still coughing, "get your bloody leg off mine - ow!"

"Stop shoving," Draco replied irritably. "And stop waving your arms around - you're getting soot in my eyes."

"Well, good morning," came a bemused voice. "Nice of you two to stop by."

Both Draco and Harry whirled around and stared. Draco saw blue-jeaned legs first, then, as he trailed his eyes upwards, dark blue work robes, also dusted with soot, a pair of leather-gauntleted forearms, crossed over a broad chest, and a very disapproving face capped by a mop of bright red, instantly recognizable hair...

"Charlie," said Harry weakly, and then succumbed to another coughing fit.

Draco rolled away from Harry and scrambled up to his knees, his eyes flicking around their surroundings. They were in Charlie's office - he recognized the bright Romanian embroidery on the walls, the bucket of dragon food, and, in its iron cage on the desk, the dragon itself, looking very annoyed indeed that its morning feed had been cruelly interrupted. "I can explain..." Draco began.

Charlie shook his head. Draco could see reflected in the mirror behind him exactly what Charlie was seeing - both boys covered in soot, Draco's hair black with it, their faces streaked, their boots muddy, both in Muggle clothes, both looking very guilty indeed. "You know what?" Charlie remarked in the general direction of the ceiling. "I don't want to know. I don't even want to know."

"Ron, eat something," Hermione said irritably, "you're giving me a headache, picking like that."

Ginny glanced over at her brother, who was indeed picking halfheartedly at his cold beans on toast. He also looked tired and slightly woebegone, his eyes darkly shadowed, his mouth downturned. "Pre-game nerves?" she asked curiously; Ron was rarely, if ever, significantly nervous before a game.

"Stomach ache," he said briefly, and looked up. "Where is Harry?"

"He wasn't there this morning," said Seamus helpfully, and immediately all eyes turned to Hermione, who blushed the color of Ron's hair.

"I haven't seen him either," she said quickly, "he must have had an errand to run before breakfast or something."

"Well, if he doesn't show up for the game, I'll skin him alive," said Ron, looking mildly thunderous. "It's not like anyone could be a reserve Seeker..."

"I bet Ginny could do it, she's fast enough," said Seamus equably, "and then we'd just need someone as Chaser - Parvati, didn't you Chase fifth year?"

Parvati looked down the table at Seamus and sniffed. "Jean-Yves would never let me do that now," she said, referring to the son of the French Minister of Magic, whom Parvati had been dating for nearly two years. In September, he had given her a sapphire ring the size of a pigeon egg, sparking much speculation among the Gryffindor girls. "He thinks Quidditch is unfeminine."

"And we think his accent is unbelievably girly, but do we say so?" asked Ron, rolled his eyes, and went back to picking at his bacon. "Honestly, what the hell is up with..."

"Harry!" said Hermione, dropping her fork with a clang. Ginny twisted in around in her seat to see that Harry had indeed arrived, late, at the breakfast table. He flopped down in the seat next to Hermione, who was staring at him in amazement. Ginny found herself staring too: Harry was filthy. His normally jet-black hair was powdered even blacker with soot, and streaks of soot decorated his nose, cheeks, and chin. His clothes were a disaster, and when he reached for the pumpkin juice, Ginny saw that his fingernails were gray with dirt. "Harry," said Hermione in disbelief. "What happened to you?"

Ron's eyebrows had shot up to his forehead. "Let me guess," he said, looking Harry up and down. "You may be a tiny chimney sweep, but you've got an enormous..."

"Appetite," said Harry cheerfully, grabbing for a plate of eggs and shoveling them onto his plate. "I'm starving."

They all stared at him in amazement. It had been months since Harry had done much more than pick at food during mealtimes. "Harry dear," said

Hermione, making an evident effort to sound patient, "is there any particular reason why you're so..."

"So what?" Harry asked, glancing up and grinning. His teeth looked very white against all the black dirt smeared across his face.

"Dirty," said Hermione, with finality.

Harry looked at her for a second. Then he leaned across the table and kissed her soundly on the cheek. When he drew back, there was an enormous sooty mark on the side of her face, and her eyes were bright with surprise.

"Hermione," said Harry firmly, "just don't worry about it, okay?" He flopped back down in his seat, and attacked a slice of bread and butter with vigor. Hermione looked at him, shook her head, and hid a smile.

"It's good to see you eating, Harry," said Ginny, eyeing the Boy Who Lived as curiously as everyone else now was, "especially with the game coming up."

"Although I hope you wash up beforehand," said Ron, looking dubiously at Harry's filthy appearance. "The way you look at the moment, the Slytherins will be laughing too hard to play, and we'll forfeit."

"Hmm," said Seamus, leaning over to get at the butter dish, "you mean this soot business isn't meant to be a clever attempt at camouflage, Harry? I thought maybe it was a new strategy we were working on."

"Ah, you're all so amusing," said Harry, who had moved on to the bacon. "That famous Gryffindor humor I'm always hearing about...oh, wait, no I'm not."

"Home of the brave, Harry," said Seamus, waving his fork. "Not the witty. We're just the cannon fodder. 'Slowing down evil by getting in the way.'"

"Now there's a winning attitude," remarked Ron. "Note to self: Do not put Seamus in charge of pre-game pep talk."

Ginny giggled, and Seamus looked over at her and then looked away without smiling, and she felt an unexpected pang. She glanced down sadly

at her toast. Seamus...he was so nice and so sweet and she had treated him so horrifically badly. And he didn't even know it, not really.

When she looked up again, she saw to her surprise that Harry had paused with his fork halfway to his mouth, and was looking over at the Slytherin table. Draco was standing there, next to Blaise, and while he was not nearly as dirty as Harry, Ginny could see that his robes, too, were streaked with soot. He was looking over Blaise's head at Harry, very intently, as if he were trying to communicate something - which he probably was.

Harry put his fork down carefully on his plate, and glanced at Hermione, who had propped against the juice jug and was turning the pages between bites of her toast. "Hermione," he said, very softly, "could I talk to you for a minute?"

She didn't glance up. "Yes, of course."

"No, I mean..." His voice dropped even lower. "Alone. Outside?"

Now Hermione did look up, a look of slight surprise in her eyes. "Sure," she said, tucking a dark curl behind her ear, "we could take a walk, I suppose."

Ginny knew what that meant; they would go down to the lake, as they always did. She could not count the amount of times she had looked out a classroom window during her third year, and even her fourth, and seen Harry and Hermione walking together along the narrow path that circumnavigated the lake. They would walk very close together, shoulders not quite touching, in perfect alignment, always in step.

Harry pushed his chair back and stood up. "Let's go."

Hermione, gathering her books into her bag, glanced over at Ron. "We have that meeting today, don't we?"

Ron nodded. "Yeah, right after lunch. You plan on attending this time?"

Hermione made a face at him, and reached to take Harry's outstretched hand. Then she paused, shook her head, took her wand out of her pocket, and pointed it at her boyfriend. "*Detergere*," she said, and the soot

vanished from Harry's clothes and hands, leaving just a grimy streak across his left cheekbone. Harry grumbled.

"Honestly," Hermione said, putting her wand away, "you'd think you wanted to be filthy."

"I thought it looked dashing," said Harry, and took her hand. "Come on - let's go." And as they walked away, Ginny realized that she was staring after them, and returned her eyes hurriedly to her plate - only to realize that everyone else at the table was staring after them as well.

"I think there's something actually going on between Ginny and Seamus," Hermione said conversationally, as Harry tugged her along the path. "Elizabeth said she saw Seamus coming out of Ginny's room at four in the morning. That's good, isn't it? I mean, Seamus is a nice guy, right?"

Harry didn't reply. They were at the perimeter of the lake now, on the narrow path that wound in between the stands of leafless trees. Bare and black, the branches rose into the sky, piled with icing sugar snow. Hermione wondered briefly where the giant squid went in the winter, when the snow drifts blew across the thick glassy ice and everything seemed so cold and so dead.

"Did you hear me, Harry?"

Harry dropped her hand and turned to face her, standing at the lake's edge. The iced-over water behind him was spangled with glittering snow, the sky very silver. Against it, Harry's black hair, the red in his pale cheeks, the dark burgundy and gold scarf, stood out like splashes of paint on a white canvas. His breath came out in puffs of white frost when he spoke. "Yes, I heard you. And Seamus is a great guy. Spectacular. I'd date him myself. Whatever. Just - there was something I wanted to talk about with you, and it wasn't Ginny or Seamus."

Hermione blinked in surprise at his stern tone, then shrugged. "All right. I wanted to talk to you anyway."

"Did you?" His green eyes were serious. "All right, but let me talk first, will you?"

She nodded, a feeling of foreboding tightening her stomach. "All right, Harry." She sat down carefully at the base of the nearest oak tree, wrapping her cloak around her knees. "What is it?"

Harry hunched his shoulders inside his cloak, and was silent for a long time. Hermione sat where she was, letting him think. It always paid to be quiet and let Harry talk when he wanted to. "I've been thinking," he said finally, in a very quiet voice. "And wanting to talk to you, but I wasn't sure when would be a good time."

Hermione looked more closely at him, a bit startled. His face was set, unexpressive. She had seen that same look on his face before. She remembered Slytherin's castle, Harry chained to the wall, refusing to tell her what Draco had said to him that was terrible enough to shatter an adamantine door. I'll just tell you that it was something really, really terrible. Something I won't forget. Ever. Something ... unforgivable.

"I know I've been...distant lately," he said finally, in a low voice, shoving his balled fists into his pockets. She wondered suddenly if he had brought her out there to break up with her, and the thought made her stomach lurch crazily in protest. I knew it, she thought, I knew it. "Harry..." she whispered.

He went on as if she hadn't spoken. "I wish I wasn't, but...I don't know how else to be right now. When I was..." He hesitated a moment, seeming to gather himself together, then went on with the air of someone falling into a bottomless black pit. "When I lived with the Dursleys, when I was a kid, I used to imagine what my parents might have been like, if they'd lived."

Hermione's lips parted in surprise. Harry never talked about his childhood before he had come to school. Never. "Well, of course, anyone would --"

"No," he said, cutting her off, although not unkindly. "I really imagined it. I didn't know what my parents had looked like. The Dursleys told me they'd been ugly, low-class, but I never believed that. I assumed my mother had been beautiful, that my father had been handsome, and that, of course, they'd loved me more than anything in the world."

Hermione felt the back of her eyes sting. "I'm sure they did," she said softly.

"I didn't know what color hair my mother had. I thought maybe she'd had black hair, and I'd inherited it...I thought maybe my father was blond, I pictured him being tall and strong. I thought about that car accident they were supposed to have died in. I wondered where they'd been driving from, where they'd been going. I told myself that they'd been spies, working for the government, that they hadn't really died, they'd just been forced to go underground and leave me behind because the work they'd been doing was so dangerous. I told myself they'd be back to get me one day. I knew where we'd live together, what the house would look like - blue, with every room painted a different color, because everything at the Dursleys was the same shade of gray..." His voice cracked a little, as it had when it had been changing. "I furnished every room inside my head. I knew where all my toys would be. The names of the pets I'd have. I wrote everything down so I wouldn't forget. I didn't live in that dark closet under the stairs. I lived in that house, with my parents."

Hermione realized she was crying. She ducked her head so Harry wouldn't see. She wanted him to go on.

"I used to write everything down in an old notebook of Dudley's," said Harry quietly, looking out over the lake. "And one day of course, I was careless, and my uncle found it and read it. He dragged me out of the broom closet and shoved me up against the wall and I still remember what he said to me. 'Your parents are dead, boy. They're not spies, they're not working for the government. They're dead. They'll never come to take you anywhere. They died stupid, pointless deaths, and they lived stupid, pointless lives, and I'd be glad they were dead if it hadn't landed us with you. And all your dreaming won't bring them back.' And that was that." He paused. "That was when I was eight years old."

"Your notebook..." Hermione whispered.

"I burned it," said Harry flatly. "I knew my uncle was right. I couldn't bring them back."

"You believed him? That they were dead?"

"I knew it. I could see it in his eyes. He looked triumphant. He wouldn't have looked like that if he'd been lying." Harry's voice was thick with loathing. "He really was glad they were dead. I despised him. But I never thought about that house again. It was ruined. And it was hard. Like losing my parents again." His words came out clipped and staccato. "And then I came here, and I had another home - a real one. And I saw what my parents really looked like. And I knew that they had loved me. Would have been proud of me. Were proud of me. A world where ghosts walk and talk...I just assumed they were somewhere, watching me. That my father could see me fly. That my mother knew I'd faced a dragon. That they knew that everything I did, every day, was in some way an effort to redeem the sacrifice they'd made to keep me alive."

"Oh, Harry," Hermione whispered. "Oh, darling, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry." The snow crackled under her feet as she stood, almost slipping in her haste to get near him. He stood and watched her, very alone somehow as if he had created a space around himself, specific and inviolable. She paused just outside it, hesitant to touch him, although another part of her ached to put her arms around him and hold him tightly. "You don't have to do this," she said. "I know you're trying to tell me why you've been distant lately - I know you've been thinking about your parents - and how could you not? I've been so selfish, thinking about graduation and moving on and how all that affected me, and I never even thought about what it must be like for you, knowing they won't see you graduate, get recruited for a team, go to Sirius' wedding...oh Harry, this is the most important part of your life in a way, and if you're missing them more now..." She let her voice trail off. "Is that what you were trying to say?"

He looked at her, his green eyes were haunted by a darkness she could not name. "Something like that," he said, and she had a feeling, from the tone of his voice, that she had gotten entirely the wrong end of the stick, and didn't understand what he was trying to say at all. She felt bitterly inadequate, incompetent even - and somewhere in the back of her mind a voice told her that she could not be expected to heal that darkness in him: she was too young, and the pull of the darkness too great. Surely if she loved him properly, loved him enough, she would be able to help and to understand, she told herself. But already she loved him more than she could imagine loving anything, and it was not enough.

"Hermione," he said, and his voice was oddly distant. "What are you thinking?"

She took a deep breath. "Just that...all those years with the Dursleys...it wouldn't be at all surprising if you'd turned out mean-spirited, or selfish, or self-centered. Or terribly angry, or vengeful - and you aren't. You have every right to be angry and you so rarely are; and every right to have self-pity, but you don't pity yourself. That childhood - it could have turned you into an awful person. Instead it turned you into the best person I've ever known. No -- you turned yourself into that person. I meant what I said first year. You are a great wizard, and - and more important, you're a good human being as well. I admire you, Harry. I always have."

He ducked his head, and she did not see the expression that passed across his face. "No," he said, in a slightly husky voice. "I'm not as good as you."

She laughed. "You remember." She took a step forward, and he raised his head and looked at her. She reached out and touched his face, as she had been wanting to do - lightly touched his cheek, and he leaned his head against her open hand, as if he were tired. "I was so worried about you then - I didn't want you to see I was crying, but I was."

"I know," he said, very quietly. "You're the first person in my life who ever cried because they loved me."

She shook her head. "No, not the first, I'm sure."

"The first I remember." He closed his hand around her wrist and held it tightly. "I don't know what I would do without you," he said. "What would I do?"

The tone of his voice made her afraid. She tried to look up into his eyes, but he bowed his head down onto her shoulder as if he were tired, and would not let her see his face. She kissed his temple, the only part of his face she could reach, and the black hair that covered his face and spilled down onto her hands. Soft hair, like black silk. "Harry," she whispered. "You never would have to be without me...never."

She felt him tremble under her hands, and then he lifted his face off her shoulder, and was smiling at her. She did not quite believe the smile, although she could not have said why. "I know," he said. "But...I have to

get down to practice. We're not as prepared for the match today as I'd like us to be and...I should go."

"All right," she said, and let go of him reluctantly. "There isn't - anything else?"

He shook his head. "No. And you, didn't you say you had something to tell me?"

She swallowed past the lump in her throat. "It was nothing. Just..."

"Yes?"

"If I don't see you before the game," she said, hating herself, "Then - good luck."

He looked at her, knowing she was holding back - and she returned his gaze, knowing the same thing was true for him. The chasm was still between them: unbridged, uncrossable. He leaned forward and kissed her cheek. "I'll see you later, then," he said.

"See you later," she whispered, and closed her eyes so as not to watch him walk away.

"And I think that's just about it," Ron said, flipping over the parchment he had been looking at and clearing his throat. "Unless anyone has any questions?"

Pansy Parkinson's hand shot up. "What about our Books?" she demanded, as the spinning orb turned green.

Ron blinked at her, then back at the parchments on the table. "Books...?"

"Leavers' Books, Ron," said Hermione, resisting the urge to pat him on the arm. He looked awfully distracted, poor dear, she thought. He had seemed to be having a hard time concentrating lately, and had nearly forgotten all about the Secret Wizards game that they were supposed to be playing for Christmas, in which every seventh-year student had to buy a gift for another student whose name they picked in a random drawing.

Fortunately Pansy had already brought a box filled with slips of parchment to the meeting, thus saving the situation. "We have to decide on the design for our Leavers' Books. They're important, after all."

"Oh. Right." Ron rubbed the back of his hand across his eyes. Obviously, he was wishing he was elsewhere. Hermione's eyes slid past him, over Justin Finch-Fletchley, who looked bored, and Padma Patil, who was industriously sucking a sugar quill. Next to her was Draco, lounging back in his chair as usual. Feeling her gaze on him, he raised his eyes, and their gazes locked; after a moment, he winked at her. Hermione smiled, her thoughts only half on the business of the meeting. "We need a motto to be engraved on the cover of the books," Ron was saying, "and traditionally every class chooses its own motto. Now, we have plenty of time to think of one, but if anyone has any suggestions..." Ron, seeming to intercept the look between Hermione and Draco, cocked an eyebrow. "Malfoy? You had a thought?"

"A what?" Draco started slightly, then subsided with a faint smile. "Well, we've got loads of mottoes in my family, but I don't think they'd be anything you'd be interested in."

"Try me," said Ron, not pleasantly.

"Well," said Draco, leaning forward and putting his chin on his hand, "there's 'Always pillage before you burn', that's an old one, and then one of my dad's favorites, which was 'money can't buy you friends' -"

"Money can't buy you friends?" Ron echoed with a disbelieving laugh.

"...'But it does buy you a better class of enemies.'" Draco's eyes trawled insolently from Ron's shoes to the tip of his nose, gone slightly pink with annoyance. "Obviously that last one isn't true in all cases..."

Ron slapped his wand down on the table. "You think you're funny, don't you Malfoy?"

Draco shrugged modestly. "Well, I try not to fly in the face of public opinion."

Hermione then did the worst thing she could have done, and laughed. Ron shot her a very angry look, and she slunk down low in her seat. It

didn't help, she thought irritably, that across from her Justin Finch-Fletchley and Padma Patil looked as if they were trying hard not to laugh as well. In fact, oddly enough, the only people who looked unamused were the Slytherins - both Pansy and Malcolm Baddock were stony-faced and glaring.

"Malfoy," said Ron, in a voice like shards of ice, "I want to talk to you in the corridor. NOW!" he added, and everyone jumped. Hermione looked at him in surprise: his blue eyes were burning, and he looked well and truly furious.

"Ron..." she began uncertainly, but he didn't even look at her, he was glaring at Draco, who was getting to his feet with a slow insolence that Hermione couldn't help thinking was a bad idea at that moment. He sauntered towards the door and Ron followed after, slamming the door behind them both.

Ron banged the door shut behind him and spun to face Draco, who was leaning against the opposite wall of the corridor, looking cool and unruffled, as if any moment he might start examining his nails or checking his cuffs for minute specks of dust. If he'd had a mustache, he probably would have twirled it.

"Malfoy," Ron barked, and Draco looked up. His face was open and inquiring, his eyes wide and clear. He smiled at Ron politely, which only served to annoy Ron further. "What the hell are you playing at?"

"I was actually hoping to get a chance to talk to you alone," said Draco calmly.

"And trying to embarrass me during a prefects meeting is your idea of how to do that, is it?"

"No, that part was just for fun."

"Maybe Harry thinks that sort of thing is funny. But I don't. I think you're an ass, Malfoy. A smirking, two-faced, insufferable ass."

"Two-faced?" Draco laughed, not kindly. "You should talk. I wasn't born yesterday, Weasley..."

"More's the pity," snapped Ron, "we could have started your personality over from scratch."

Draco looked at him, a small smile playing around his mouth. "I see the way you look at her," he said, apropos of nothing. "Do you think I'm stupid? Do you think we all are?"

For a moment, Ron just stared at him. The blood had begun to pound in his ears, and his mind hummed with disbelief. Surely Draco hadn't just said what he thought he'd said. "What did you say, Malfoy?"

Draco slowly unhitched himself from the wall and stood looking at Ron with consideration. His eyes were an almost lucent gray in the faint light, the color of a knife edge, and as cutting. "I was watching you this morning," Draco said. "I've been watching you for a few days now. Honestly, Weasley. What do you think you're playing at?"

Ron felt as if his blood had thickened and it was taking huge, convulsive efforts of heart and breath to continue pushing it through his veins. Everything seemed dizzy and distant and painful. He heard his own voice say, "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I think you do," said Draco, even more quietly. His voice was sugar syrup poured over shards of ice. "I think you know exactly what I'm talking about."

"I don't see," said Ron, fighting down the urge to back away, "where you get this idea you have some insight into my private life -"

"You think you can make me look stupid? You think I'd let you?" Draco interrupted, his very slow and soft. "Your *private* life is hardly going to stay private the way you've been behaving. Luckily for you I'm more observant than most, but even the most clueless Hufflepuff would figure you out eventually. You wear your heart all over your face, Weasley. Which, in your case, is a bad move."

"Just because you're a liar, Malfoy, doesn't mean everyone is," Ron snarled. Rage was beginning to take the place of the shock that had

paralyzed him. He spoke without thinking or stopping to consider the fact that Malfoy was right.

"I'm not talking about everyone - I'm talking about you," Draco said. "You saved my life - and I owe you."

"You've a funny way of showing it," Ron muttered, perplexed by this new turn the conversation had taken.

"I'm trying to help you, Weasley," Draco said. "That's why I'm telling you that I know."

"There's nothing to know!" Ron half-shouted.

"Not yet," said Draco, and Ron felt a whoosh of relief in his stomach that was almost painful. *So he doesn't know, not really.* "You do know what I'm talking about," Draco added. "Let me offer a little guidance. Forget about it."

Condescending bastard, Ron thought, staring at the blond boy, whose attitude had settled into a smug sort of curious calm. *Why doesn't he just forget about my sister, then, if it's meant to be so easy?*

"Go on and glare at me like you hate me," Draco added with a shrug. "Doesn't matter to me, as long as you take my advice."

"Why do you care?" Ron heard his own voice crack, rage making his skin prickle all over. "You don't give a fuck about me, Malfoy, and you never have. Am I supposed to believe this show of solicitude is for my benefit? First off, you're a liar, and second off, you're wrong, and third off - third off, you have no idea what you're talking about. So just...sod off, will you? Go mope around after my sister or whatever the hell it is you do for fun."

A look of astonishment flashed across Draco's face - he had not expected Ron to react this way, and Ron felt a vicious jolt of pleasure at having surprised him. The astonishment was gone in a moment, and Draco's mouth settled into an even thinner line. "Fine, Weasley," he drawled. "I suppose it's as I long suspected, and your sole purpose in life *is* simply to serve as a warning to others."

Ron glared at him. "Twenty points from Slytherin," he said.

Draco's mouth opened in surprise. "For what?"

"For interrupting the meeting," Ron said savagely, "and for just generally being a grade-A, all-around arsehole. I'm going to go back in there now, and you are going to come with me, and I swear to Merlin that if you say one more word, I'll take a hundred points from Slytherin. Let's see how the rest of your house likes you then."

Draco lowered his eyelids, hiding his expression. "I guess absolute power really does corrupt absolutely," he said, and there was an undercurrent of mirth in his tone that made Ron itch to smack his face. Instead, he spoke quietly but firmly.

"One hundred points," he repeated.

Draco said nothing after that, and followed Ron to the door without making another sound. Ron wanted to feel triumphant as they reentered the prefects' meeting room, but all he felt was an odd sense of...disappointment. For an insane moment there he'd thought that Draco really did know everything, but he hadn't, not really, and the burden of secrecy felt even heavier than it had before. He almost would have preferred it if Draco had in fact hauled off and punched him in the face, which would not have been unexpected. With a sigh, Ron picked his wand up, and began to speak.

"Who did you get?" Hermione asked of Draco as they filed out of the prefects' room. The other students were pouring off down the hall, glad to be done with the meeting, chattering amongst themselves as they opened up the parchments that would tell them what student they would be buying a gift for. Wanting to wait for Ron, who was gathering his Quidditch things together, she paused outside the door. Draco leaned against the wall beside her, and looked over her shoulder as she unfolded her own piece of parchment and glanced at it. "Oh, I got Ron. That'll be easy."

"Yes, a large pair of pliers to remove the stick from his --"

She interrupted him hastily. "Who did you get?" she repeated.

Draco unfolded his parchment, looked at it expressionlessly, folded it back up, and shoved it in his pocket.

Hermione looked at him curiously. "Oh, come on, aren't you going to tell me?"

Draco shook his head slowly. "Life is a meaningless lottery of chance," he said. "I just keep telling myself that."

Hermione snorted. "I'm getting this feeling you got Seamus Finnigan."

"Bingo," said Draco briefly.

Hermione burst out laughing.

Draco looked cross. "It isn't funny."

"Uh-huh," replied Hermione agreeably. "What's important is that you believe that."

Draco was spared answering by the meeting room door banging open - it was Ron, looking businesslike with a sheaf of parchments under his arm, and Pansy, carrying the empty box that had held the students' names. She looked as sour as she always did. Ron nodded at her briefly, and she headed off down the hallway. Ron looked at Hermione and rolled his eyes.

"Having fun with Pansy?" Hermione said, her mouth curving into a sympathetic smile.

"She's a regular breath of vile air as usual," said Ron with a shrug. "At least she agrees to head up practically every committee known to man. Makes my job easier."

"Yes, thank God she's agreed to lighten your load of crushing responsibility," said Draco sarcastically. "And once again, I wonder why they ever let you have this position in the first place. Was it one of those 'Collect twelve crisp packets and become Head Boy' mail-in deals?"

Ron ignored him, and spoke to Hermione. "I'm off, actually -- I've got to head into Hogsmeade. You need anything?"

Hermione shook her head. "No." She smiled. "If I don't see you by the match, good luck and all that."

"Thanks." And Ron jogged off down the corridor, vanishing from sight amongst a knot of approaching Ravenclaws. Hermione looked after him thoughtfully, then turned back to Draco.

"I've been doing that research we talked about, and I found out some things I think you might want to know," she said, pitching her voice low. "Do you want to hear something really weird?"

"I always want to hear something really weird."

Hermione smiled. "Can you come to the library with me?"

He nodded, and they walked to the library in silence, keeping a good distance between them so that it was not obvious to the casual observer that they were together. Only when inside the library did Hermione relax. She was always comfortable there, in her safe, known place. It was decorated for Christmas now, as was the rest of the castle, the long dark wood tables adorned with tiny Christmas trees bearing singing sugar angels. Tiny red, gold and green circular lights levitated in the air like will-o-the-wisps, darting back and forth above their heads. She looked over at Draco, who was watching the flitting lights with Seeker-like concentration, the gold, scarlet, and emerald colors reflected in his eyes. He glanced sideways, as if he felt her gaze on him. "So, what did you find out?"

"Look at this." Hermione reached into her bag, withdrew a small gilded volume, and spread it open on the table in front of her. She flipped to a bookmarked page, and tapped it excitedly with her finger. "Does she look familiar?"

Draco leaned close and whistled. The page showed a woodcut engraving, very detailed and lifelike, of a young woman in dark wizarding robes. Her hair was also black and cascaded nearly to her feet: her pale oval face was familiar, as were the upturned eyes and the smiling mouth. Hermione remembered her as the girl who had walked downstairs with Charlie Weasley at Harry's birthday party; Draco obviously remembered her rather better. The girl held a wand in her left hand, and what looked like a jewel on the end of a chain in the other. Along the bottom of the

illustration wound six words in block calligraphic letters: **Rhysenn Malfoy. In the Year 1357.**

"Six hundred years," said Draco, and laid a hand on the page. "Well, she said she was older." The engraved Rhysenn stretched and winked at him, swinging her jewel on its chain. "In fact, she said she was immortal."

"That's a bit odd," said Hermione, "because here it says she died when she was twenty."

"Did she?"

"Yes, of goblin fever. Before that, though, she was engaged to be married..."

"Ha!"

"...To Nicholas Flamel."

Draco blinked, looking as if were grasping at strands of memory. "And he was...?"

"A friend of Dumbledore's. He created the Sorcerer's Stone." Hermione shook her head. "I never would have thought he would have been the sort of person who would have married a Malfoy."

Draco looked injured. "Why not a Malfoy? We're extremely personable, you know. And then there's the sex-appeal..."

"Oddly, her biography here doesn't say anything about sex-appeal."

"They probably called it something different back then," said Draco unflappably.

Hermione snorted. "Like what? Ye Olde Sex Appeal?"

Draco ignored this. "Well, I suppose it helps to know who she was...even though I don't think that the woman I've been talking to really is Rhysenn Malfoy. At least, not this same girl. Could they have brought her back from the dead, I wonder..."

"Shhh," hissed Hermione, although the library was deserted. "Ugh. Necromancy? That's the worst magic there is. Anyway, it never works properly. There'd be...bits falling off her and things. Are there?"

"What? Bits falling off her? No. She's...complete." Draco looked thoughtful. "She's pretty spry for a corpse, in fact. Prettier than most live girls."

"Hmmpf," said Hermione, and shut the book. "I'll keep looking for information on her. Now that we know when she lived, I can cross-check her in the Flamel biographies."

"Thanks," said Draco, glanced up, and with a quick Seeker's precision, caught a glowing red light that was whizzing by in his cupped hand. He held it for a moment, the illuminated globe throwing a rosy shadow over his face, then let it go. He reached into a pocket then, drew out a folded square of newsprint, and handed it to her. "Take a look at this," he said.

"A Muggle newspaper? Draco, where did you get this?"

"Never mind that. Look at the picture." Draco came to stand beside her, glancing down at the newspaper as well. "That mirror, the one that was stolen. That was the mirror in my dream."

Her head snapped up, and she stared at him. He was still looking down at the photograph, his profile intent and serious. His eyes were lowered, the long lashes casting longer shadows over the pronounced cheekbones, like fine pen strokes. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," he said, and explained, swiftly but thoroughly, the means by which he had assured himself it was the same mirror, and his conviction that Voldemort had sent Wormtail to steal it. "Now the question is, what does he want it for? Obviously it can be used to see me with, but there must be a bit more to it than that. Any mirror could be tuned to see me, if he really wanted to make the effort. Why that one?"

Hermione shook her head. "I don't know. The workmanship looks rather like the workmanship on Harry's scabbard, doesn't it? I know I can check back to see who made that, see if the maker ever created any other enchanted objects. This mirror must be special somehow."

"And if Voldemort really wants it," Draco said, straightening up, "then we should know why."

"Right." Hermione took the piece of newspaper, and slid it into her bookbag. "I can get some books out now and bring them to the match." She glanced around. "At least, I can if Madam Pince ever comes back."

Draco followed her gaze around the deserted library, and a thoughtful look came into his eyes. "There's one more thing I wanted to show you," he said. "It's a bit strange..."

"All right," she said, and glanced around again. "There's no one here..."

"No." He clamped his hand around her wrist. His fingers felt warm against her skin. "Someone might come in...here, come with me." He drew her after him, past the stacks of books, and into a shadowy alcove lined with small volumes. The hovering lights were the main illumination here, casting distended shadows of emerald, ruby and gilded light against the stone walls. Draco let her wrist go, and she drew it back, instinctively clasping her hands together. She wasn't sure why she felt uneasy: perhaps it was Draco's set, tense expression, or the fact that it was so cold in the library, or something else altogether.

"Draco, what is it? Are you all right?"

His gray gaze slid over her face, almost as if he were calculating, evaluating something. Testing her. Whatever it was, he seemed satisfied. He took a step away from her, reached down, took hold of the hem of his black sweater, and pulled it off over his head in one quick motion. He was wearing nothing under it.

Hermione heard herself gasp, and she stepped backwards so quickly that she hit her head on the stone wall. Wincing, she exclaimed, "Draco! What are you doing?"

He looked at her in surprise, and then his lips curled into an amused smile. "I said I wanted to show you something."

She regarded him with deep mistrust, trying not to look at the way his narrow waist flared up into a broader chest, at the flat planes of his torso, the faint tracery of muscles under the skin. Harry had much the same

build, of course, light and lean, a Seeker's body. "You didn't say you were going to get undressed," she hissed under her breath.

"I need your Medical Magic expertise," he said straightforwardly. "I want you to look at my shoulder."

"At your shoulder?"

"Here," he said, and indicated his left shoulder with a touch of his hand. "Do you see it?"

She shook her head. "I don't see anything."

"From that distance, you couldn't see anything without Omnioculars." He raised an eyebrow at her. "Is something wrong?"

"No," she said, flushing pink. "Nothing," and she took a reluctant step closer to him, and examined the indicated shoulder. Within a moment she had forgotten her discomfort in curiosity. "Is this where the arrow went in? The other day?" He nodded, looking down at his shoulder. There was a starlike scar just below and to the right of his clavicle, quite healed - when Hermione touched it lightly, he did not wince. "It doesn't hurt?" she asked.

"No," he said. "But...you see?"

She nodded. "It's glowing. Sort of silver. Turn around." He turned around, and she saw the scar on his back where the head of the arrow had exited his body, slightly smaller than the scar in front, but glowing with the same faint and phosphorescent radiance. She put her hand against his shoulder blade. The skin there was very white and smooth to the touch, a shade lighter than the skin on his hands and face. She could feel the slight roughness of the scar under her hand. It felt cold. "It's the same here." She stepped back, and dropped her hand. "You're sure it doesn't hurt?" she asked anxiously.

He turned around to face her, and to her relief, picked up his sweater and drew it back on over his head. The resultant static electricity turned his silver hair into a crackling halo. "It doesn't hurt," he said, pulling the sweater down. "But it's awfully weird. I'm not happy about it."

"I haven't heard anything about injuries that glow, in Medical Magic," said Hermione anxiously. "Are you sure Madam Pomfrey --"

"No Madam Pomfrey," said Draco with such unutterable finality that she knew it was hopeless.

She sighed. "All right," she said. "I'll see what I can find out, Draco. But If I don't find anything out..."

"Then I will continue to read in bed using only my shoulder for illumination," he said lightly. He glanced towards the clock on the wall. "I have to head down to the pitch," he added. "The game..."

"I know," she said. "I'd wish you luck, but..."

"But I don't need it?"

"But I really want our team to win," she replied, and made a face at him.

His eyes lit up and he laughed: a real laugh, not a snide one. "Thanks," he said. "For helping out," and before she could say that he was welcome, he had walked off. She watched him make his way out of the library, and a moment later followed after, emerging from the stacks into the lighted main room to see that Draco had been right : someone had come into the library after they did.

Pansy Parkinson was sitting at one of the long tables, a book open in her lap, but her eyes were fixed on Hermione. There was a look of such loathing in them that Hermione, struck speechless, could only stare. Pansy stood up, almost knocking her book over, and stalked stiffly out of the room, her back rigid with disdain. Hermione watched her go, feeling weak in the knees. She had always known that Pansy didn't like her, but what had she ever done to make the Slytherin girl hate her so much?



Draco didn't know it, but his opinion that Dumbledore's office was possibly the most interesting room in the school was one that was shared by Harry. Draco stood in the center of the room and waited; the Headmaster had not arrived yet and so he was at leisure to examine the fascinating objects that were everywhere. The antique claw-footed desk was littered with items of interest: there was a pile of Chocolate Frog cards (Draco noted that Dumbledore had apparently amused himself by drawing green mustaches on most of the famous witches and wizards, including himself), a Pocket Sneakoscope, an empty Pensieve, a collection of singing mechanical canaries, a Broomstick Trajectory Calibrator, a blank FiloParch, and a sleeping dormouse. Draco moved around the desk, not touching anything, and then his gaze fell on a stand behind the desk, on which rested an immediately familiar worn, patched, pointy-topped hat. The Sorting Hat.

He stood and stared at it for a moment. Then, without knowing that years ago Harry had once done much the same thing, he reached for it and with

trepidation, lifted the hat and put it on his head. Darkness enveloped his vision as the hat fell forward to cover his eyes. The hat had a musty, familiar smell, and he immediately remembered the moment he had sat on that tall stool in front of the assembled students, his whole mind a tight ball of determination focused on just one goal: *Slytherin, Slytherin, let it be Slytherin.*

The hat stirred on his head now, and a voice spoke in his ear. *What have we here...It seemed to hesitate. You're older, it went on, then my usual subjects, but I can't say I recognize the shape of your mind. Have we met before?*

Yes, Draco thought, perplexed. You Sorted me...into Slytherin.

Into Slytherin? The Hat sounded amused. How very curious. Do you mind...if I look a little deeper into your thoughts?

Draco hesitated. *No. I don't mind,* he said, then felt a shiver run down his spine as a most curious feeling took hold of him, as if something inside his head were fluttering.

The voice spoke again. *Why, you're a Malfoy!* It sounded amused now. *You're Draco Malfoy...I recollect you well. And yet, how you've changed. You're almost a different person now, aren't you? As if there were another person inside your head.*

Something like that, Draco muttered, thinking of Harry.

Yes, another personality, as strong as your own. So what have we here? A good mind, sharp as a quill and twice as cunningly crafted...Quite a lot of arrogance and a nice dose of insecurity to match...bravery, oh yes I see that...you've known loss, then...and disappointment. And loyalty....as strong as iron. You would never desert anyone you loved, yet those you don't care for might as well not exist to you. And you're not above using them to get what you want. Ha! Draco jumped as laughter sounded in his ear. *You're a bundle of contradictions, young Malfoy...and the most interesting mind I've seen in years.*

"Thanks," said Draco, without much feeling. "So would you still, I mean...would you..."

Would I what?

"Sort me into Slytherin?"

I might. You're cunning enough for it...at the same time, clever enough for Ravenclaw, loyal enough for Hufflepuff, and brave enough for Gryffindor. So the question is, my boy...would you still want to be Sorted into Slytherin?

"I don't know," Draco whispered, and added with a sharp flash of annoyance, "It's your job, isn't it, not mine!"

What is?

"To know where I belong!"

When you're a child, you need someone to tell you where you belong, perhaps, said the Hat. *At your age you should know it for yourself.*

"Well, I don't," Draco snarled, and yanked the Hat from his head in a fit of vexed disappointment. "I suppose I should have known better than to look for help from some stupid piece of talking haberdashery," he added, and drop-kicked the Hat across the room.

It landed at the feet of Albus Dumbledore, who had come in very quietly while Draco was distracted. "Oh dear," said Dumbledore mildly. "Not much point taking things out on the Hat, really. It doesn't feel pain."

Draco looked guiltily at the serene-looking headmaster. "You wanted to see me, Professor?"

"Yes. Why don't you come sit at my desk?" Dumbledore said, and Draco did as he was requested to do. He sat down as Dumbledore settled himself into the dark-blue high-backed chair behind the desk, and templed his hands beneath his chin. Draco did his best to return the Headmaster's gaze steadily, but found he couldn't - Dumbledore's eyes were too piercing; it made him feel as if his own head were made of glass. "Young Mister Malfoy," Dumbledore said. "I know better than to assume you will tell me why you went to the top of the North Tower, or who you were meeting there. No -" he held up a hand as Draco began to speak. "I am

well aware you weren't meeting Harry. I understand all that, and that is not why I called you here."

"Oh..." Draco said slowly. If there was one person in the world who robbed him of his ability to make smart comebacks, it was Dumbledore. "If you're not going to ask me about that...what are you going to ask me about, Professor?"

"I was going to return something to you," Dumbledore said. "Something you lost."

Draco's eyes widened. "Yes?"

Dumbledore stretched out his hand, and Draco's eyes widened further. In the center of his wrinkled palm something glittered blackly: a signet ring, carved out of onyx, in the shape of a griffin. "My seal ring," he said blankly, and reached for it. "I thought I'd left it somewhere..."

"You did," said Dumbledore. "At the top of the North Tower."

Draco's hand closed spasmodically around the ring he had just retrieved. I shouldn't have admitted it was mine...

"I knew it was yours, Draco," said Dumbledore, as if reading his mind. "The moment Charlie brought it to me...How many times did I see that ring flash on your father's hand when he was at school, and on your grandfather Julius' hand as well. Your father especially was always so particular about wearing it...I am surprised he would have taken it off."

"He said it was time for me to wear it," said Draco, sliding the ring back onto his finger. "He said I had become a true Malfoy at last."

Dumbledore sat forward slightly. His eyes were very kind. "Is there anything you want to tell me, Draco...anything at all?"

Draco hesitated. Then he shook his head. "No, Headmaster."

"Then I suppose it falls upon me to ask you questions," said Dumbledore. His light blue eyes had gone very grave, wise and kindly, but penetrating. "I assume that you have noticed a certain...change in Harry?"

Draco looked down at his hands. In the faint light coming through the window, the bones seemed highlighted through the skin. He thought of the way Harry had looked earlier in the graveyard, as if a light were shining through him. "I've noticed it," he said, and felt an internal wrench, as if he were somehow betraying Harry but admitting it out loud. "But you might want to talk to someone else about that, like Hermione or Weasley, someone a bit closer to him."

"There is no one closer to him," said Dumbledore. "Not in the way you are. Although I am sure they would protect him if they could. Would you?"

"Protect him? Against what?"

"Does it matter?"

Draco raised his eyes from his hands. "I suppose not," he said. "Yes, of course. I'd do whatever I had to do." He shifted slightly in his chair. "But I've tried talking to him, and what he says...well, I don't know what I can do. If there was something I could do, I would do it." He looked directly at Dumbledore, who alone with Sirius knew what he had seen when he had died, and Sirius did not know the details. "*I caused this, didn't I?*"

"You did not cause the situation, only revealed it. And perhaps you think because of that you should be able to mend it, but you cannot, and he would not welcome it if you tried. You cannot come between him and his suffering. It is too complicated and too unique to Harry. One happiness is much like another happiness, but each great sorrow is profoundly different. You might know the loss of a parent, in fact, like Harry, in some way you know what it's like to never have really had parents at all. But you cannot know what it's like to have adored those lost parents, to have turned them into the idealization of everything good in this world. And then to discover that they, to who you owe so much, are in torment and it rests upon your shoulders to save them from that state, and yet you have no idea how such a thing might be accomplished."

"Don't," said Draco, anguished, and stood up, knocking his chair over. "Don't - it's my fault."

"I wondered if you thought that," said Dumbledore gently. He waved a hand at the chair, and it righted itself. "I suspected you might, and

because of that I have held back perhaps longer than I should have in telling you something I have long wanted to tell you."

Draco blinked. "Something about me? Or Harry?"

"Something about neither of you, and at the same time something intimately connected with both of you."

Okay, Draco thought, could you be a little more vague about that? But...he didn't say it out loud. "Is it important?"

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "It is important."

Draco's heart had begun to beat hard in his chest. He had a feeling that "important" meant "bad," and the look on Dumbledore's face only confirmed this. "Is it going to hurt Harry?" he asked rapidly, "because if it is, I'd rather not know, if you don't mind."

Dumbledore looked surprised. "Wouldn't you? Why not?"

"Because I don't want to have to decide whether to tell him or not." He stood for a moment with his hands in his pockets, looking straight at Dumbledore, before he burst out, "Hasn't enough happened to him already? Does there have to be more?"

Dumbledore sat looking at Draco quietly. Finally, he said, "Harry is strong, and can endure much. And for what he cannot endure alone, he has you."

"And Ron and Hermione," said Draco, "And Sirius..."

"But this particular secret is not their legacy. It is yours." Dumbledore waved a hand towards the chair, and Draco paused. "Sit down please, Mister Malfoy, and listen to me," he said, and Draco sat. "Now," Dumbledore went on. "Before you go haring after Harry on this quest of his for personal vengeance, there is something you should know..."

The Gryffindor team had been waiting just outside the changing rooms for almost ten minutes after the game was supposed to start when Harry slipped off to talk to Madam Hooch. He was back in a moment, looking slightly ruffled. He glanced around at his jumpy-looking team - they were

all standing around in the ankle-deep snow off the clean-scraped path. They couldn't see the pitch from here; it was blocked by the fence that surrounded it. Seamus was leaning up against the wall of the hut in which the changing rooms were located, looking bored. Ron was snapping his wrist guards on. "Game's on hold," Harry said briefly. "One of the Slytherin players isn't here yet."

Colin snorted. "Don't they have to forfeit, then?"

Harry shrugged. "Madam Hooch says we wait. So...we wait."

Ginny squirmed irritably. She already felt tense enough, standing here with the other players, only a few feet away from Seamus, who wasn't looking at her. Elizabeth, Dennis, and Colin were standing together, discussing Transfiguration. Ron was busy snapping on his wrist guards. "I wouldn't want to forfeit anyway," he said. "I want to beat them."

"That's the spirit," said Harry, looking weary.

"Ron's right," said Ginny. "Especially after last time." She scanned the team and noted how bored everyone looked. "I think we need a pep talk," she said, and winked at Harry.

He looked put upon. "You guys don't need a pep talk," he said. "We're the unbeatable team already. All we need to do is go out there and play, and we'll win. We don't know the meaning of the word *defeat*." Ron made a muffled choking noise, and Harry grinned at him. "Well, we know the meaning of it - we're not stupid - just, you know, not in this context." Harry's eyes scanned the room. "So, was that peppy enough?"

Elizabeth looked up from her conversation with Colin. "Sorry, Harry, did you say something?"

This time Ron's laugh wasn't muffled. Harry turned to grin at him, and paused. "Hey, Ron..." he said, his green eyes lighting with a sudden curiosity, "what's that on your neck?"

Ginny turned around and so did Seamus and Elizabeth, in time to see Ron look startled, and put a hand to his neck. "What...?" "You've got a bite mark," said Harry, hugely amused, "right there," and he poked Ron in the side of the neck with his finger.

Ron flushed as scarlet as a sunset, and clapped his hand over his neck, but it was too late.

"Ron's got a hickey," Seamus announced delightedly. "Unbelievable!"

Ginny stared at her brother in astonishment. How on earth....? Well, not that she expected any of her brothers to tell her everything, or even most things, about their love lives, but Ron...well, Ron had always seemed to her to be a bit of a romantic, a dreamer. Un-serious snogs were not in his nature. And he'd never have a girlfriend and not tell Harry, and it was very evident from Harry's expression that he was as surprised as everyone else.

"So, Ron," said Seamus, leaning on his broomstick, "who's the girl? I don't quite recognize the teeth marks."

Ron was still scarlet. "There's no girl," he said, looking at the floor.

"A boy, then?" Seamus was grinning. "I'd no idea!"

"No! It's just - I walked into a door," said Ron, rather desperately.

"With your neck?" Harry demanded, his eyebrows rising.

"Yes," said Ron firmly.

Ginny snorted. "Ron Weasley," she teased in a superior tone. "After living in a house with Bill, Charlie and the twins, if you think I don't know what a hickey looks like..."

"Ginny..." Ron began in a warning tone, rounding on his sister. As he did, she got a good look at his neck. Heavens above, it *was* a bite mark.

"Bill, Charlie and the twins?" Seamus echoed. "What, Percy never got any action? So much for power being an aphrodisiac."

Ron looked as if he were going to have a coronary. "I do not have a hickey!"

Harry grabbed Ron by the arm. "Okay, then, if you want to be like that," he said. "Sod waiting for the match to start - we're having a little talk," and with that, he frog-marched Ron several yards away, to the shade of a

leaf-bare oak tree. Ginny followed them with her eyes, fascinated, as Ron pulled his arm out of Harry's grasp and stood, looking stony, while Harry spoke animatedly with - or rather at - him.

"Well," she murmured, half to herself, "at least they're talking..."

"So they are," said a voice behind her. Seamus. She didn't turn around. "Maybe we should too?"

At that, she did turn, and looked at Seamus properly for the first time since she'd arrived at the changing rooms. He was looking at her very steadily, his expression serious and his blue eyes doubly so. Cloudy blue, the color of winter sky. She nodded at him. "I guess we should."

He took her arm and drew her towards the side of the changing hut, out of sight of Harry and Ron. He let her go immediately, and faced her, looking determined. "Ginny," he said. "I wanted to apologize."

She had expected him to say several things; this was not one of them. "For *what?*" she demanded, astonished.

"For not being understanding before," he said. "Last night - this morning, I guess it was. What you had to tell me was, well, overwhelming, and I wasn't sure how to respond. And you were right. I was thinking I was going to have to rescue you from Malfoy somehow, and when it turned out I didn't I guess I was ... disappointed."

"Disappointed?" Ginny echoed, but without any anger. She was, if anything, impressed by Seamus' honesty. It couldn't be easy to say the things he was saying. "But why, Seamus?"

"Because..." He exhaled and leaned back against the wall of the hut. His cheeks were very red, with cold and with, she suspected, embarrassment. He had pulled his hands inside the overlong sleeves of his red and gold sweater, and it gave him a boyish, almost childlike aspect. "Because at least in that scenario I could imagine that there was something you needed from me." He shook his head. "I like you, Ginny, but you're a mystery. And I know every beautiful girl probably has guys lining up to tell her she's a mystery, but you really are. I think that you must be -" But Seamus never got to tell Ginny what she must have been, because at that

point she took several steps towards him, leaned up on her toes, and kissed him.

The first thing Draco would have done, she knew, was kissed her back fiercely; the first thing Seamus did was catch at her elbows, steadying her against him. Only then, when he was sure she was securely placed, did he bend his will to kissing her back. His hands slid from her elbows to cup the back of her head, his fingers tangling in her hair, and his lips on hers were cool, almost cold, gently exploratory. He tasted vaguely of hot cocoa. She found that she was shivering hard in his embrace, and no sooner had she noticed that then he broke off the kiss, leaning back just far enough so that he could see her face. "Ginny," he whispered, "are you all right?" She looked back at him, seeing the dazed, dazzled expression in his eyes; the expression she'd seen on her brothers' faces when they got some Christmas present they especially wanted, the expression her mother sometimes wore when she welcomed a child safely home. The way Harry looked at Hermione and the way that Draco had never looked at her. It made her want to cry.

"I'm all right," she said, and she put her arms around him. He was warm and solid, the heavy jumper making him bulky although underneath it, he was lithe and almost thin. "Seamus - can we stay still for a second? Just like this." As if he understood, he put his arms around her and held her and she rested her head against his chest, hearing the thickly muffled beat of his heart through the wool sweater, as regular as the ticking of a clock.

Draco walked out of Dumbledore's office and began to make his way down the hall. If he could have seen himself, he would have been surprised at how slowly he was moving, and how very white his face was. As it was, he was entirely unconcerned with how he might look, which was unusual for him. He was not in shock precisely, but stunned, his mind whirling. Everything around him seemed to have taken on a precise and sharp-edged clarity. He could still hear Dumbledore's voice in his ears. *Some of this I know for fact, and some is hearsay but we know enough, at this point, to be fairly sure of the basic facts. Of course this was years ago, many years it would seem to you. Almost twenty years...*

He was on the stairs now, walking down them. He had his broomstick in his hand. He was glad he had not forgotten it. *I must talk to Harry.* If there was one thing he had learned, it was that hiding things from Harry that might potentially upset him was, in the end, a terrible idea. Besides, it was hard to predict how Harry would react to this information. He also could not help but wonder why Dumbledore had told him alone and not told Harry; then again, he suspected that he could guess.

He was on the front steps now, and they were cold and slick with ice. He sped down them and took the short cut down to the Quidditch pitch, the one that cut alongside the lake and down past the west side of the pitch, where the Gryffindor changing rooms were. As he neared the pitch, he saw that the stands above were filled with people; the grounds around the pitch seemed deserted though, but as he quickened his pace his gaze fell on a splash of gold and red by the side of the Gryffindor hut. A person. No, not one person, but two people. Two people clinging very close together as if against a cold wind, two sets of arms in their red and gold sleeves wrapped around each other, two faces pressing blindly towards one another. A tousled, sandy head. And a waterfall of familiar scarlet hair. Seamus Finnigan and Ginny Weasley.

Well, what did you expect? said a knife-sharp voice in his own mind as he stopped, and stared, and then forced himself to move again. He averted his gaze as firmly as he could, rounded the edge of the pitch, and stalked towards the Slytherin side of the pitch, where his teammates waited. He could not quite rid himself of the feeling that Ginny had *known* he had passed by, had even looked up and seen him, but of course she hadn't; she'd been very, very occupied. *Be happy,* he told himself, *it was what you wanted,* and then as he neared the Slytherin team they saw him and let out relieved cries of welcome. He hoisted his Firebolt in the air and walked forward to join his team.

"Ahem," said a voice; Ginny let go of Seamus and turned around to see Harry standing by the door of the changing rooms, his broomstick in his hand. He dropped her a wink before Seamus turned around as well. "Hate to interrupt, but the game's starting."

Ginny dropped her head to hide a smile, and felt Seamus squeeze her hand. "Sorry, Harry," she said, not exactly sure what she was apologizing for.

"Perfectly all right," said Harry cheerfully, and stepped back to let Seamus, who was blushing very faintly but looked pleased, walk past him towards the changing rooms. Ginny moved to follow him, but paused to fall into step with Harry, consumed with curiosity.

"Did Ron tell you anything?" she demanded, resisting the urge to poke Harry with a finger. "Has he been snogging someone on the side?"

Harry gave her a lopsided smile. "He really wouldn't say," he said, shrugging. "He kept saying it was some girl he met at the Pub Crawl, and they had a bit of a snog, and first he said she was a Hufflepuff, then he said she was a Ravenclaw. Then he said she was in a higher year, and I pointed out there aren't any higher years, and he got a bit quiet. Then he said he couldn't say and I'd just have to trust him on it."

Ginny gave a little excited hop as they entered the changing room. She grabbed for her wrist guards and began buckling them on. Ron and the others had already filed out onto the pitch, it seemed, since the room was empty. "God, do you think it was someone really dreadful and now he's embarrassed?" she said, fascinated. "Maybe it was Milicent Bulstrode or something!"

Harry made a dreadful face. "She'd have taken a much bigger bite out of his neck, I'd wager."

"Tess Hammond? Pansy Parkinson?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Not even if he'd drunk sixty butterbeers."

"Someone with a boyfriend, then? Maybe he's afraid he'd get in trouble."

Harry cocked an eyebrow. "That could be. I'm afraid I feel unprepared to even venture a guess. I'll ask Hermione after the game. She's spent more time with him than I have lately."

Ginny chuckled softly. "Ron's got a mystery girl!" she said cheerfully. "I love it."

Harry grinned at her. "Maybe Seamus is right and it's a mystery boy," he said. "Ever think of that?"

"Well, I don't see why he'd bother hiding it," said Ginny, tucking her broomstick under her arm and heading with Harry towards the doorway that led to the pitch. "I mean, Mum and Dad thought Percy was gay for ages, and they were fine with it. Kept blanketing him with leaflets and trying to get him to open up about his feelings."

Harry laughed. "Percy? Really?"

"Cor, yes. They were quite disappointed when Penelope showed up," she added, and ducked under the ropes that cordoned off the pitch. The rest of the team was there, waiting, including Ron, who had pulled the collar of his sweater up as high as it would go and now resembled a turtle of some sort. She chanced a wink at him and he colored.

"Your parents really are amazing," said Harry, and Ginny turned to add a smiling affirmative, but was arrested by the look on Harry's face. Always, before every game, he scanned the stands for Hermione, and she could tell by his expression that he had just found her. She followed his gaze and saw Hermione sitting between Jana and George, a pile of books in her lap, looking down at the pitch and waving. As Ginny watched, Hermione made a sign at Harry with her hand - it wasn't anything Ginny recognized, but it was obviously some sort of signal between them, because Harry smiled, a brilliant smile like breaking sunrise.

A creeping sadness invaded Ginny's bones. Secret signals, shared jokes. It always seemed that she was on the outside - on the outside of the tightly knit group of Harry, Hermione and Ron; outside Draco's relationship with Harry and Hermione as well, on the outside as the only girl in a family of boys. She turned away from Harry and caught Seamus' eye, and he smiled at her, the sweetest smile. She smiled back, and moved to stand next to him as the team mounted their broomsticks. Harry stepped past her then, heading towards the pitch to shake hands with Draco, who had already walked out there. Perhaps, she thought, not looking towards the pitch but instead at Seamus, perhaps things were finally changing for her after all.

The match was starting quite late; the rumor was that one of the Slytherin players was running behind schedule. Hermione, sandwiched between George and Jana in the stands, Fred sitting behind them (Angelina had not come, opting instead to take Oliver Wood on a walking tour of the factory. On this topic, Fred had no comment) was quite sure that Draco's meeting with Dumbledore had run overtime, and found herself wondering what exactly they were talking about. She would have given a great deal to be a fly on the wall in the Headmaster's chambers, or even a beetle Animagus like Rita Skeeter.

Vaguely, she was aware of Jana saying soothing things to George, who was growing more and more impatient as time ticked by. Hermione herself was not bored; she had brought an absolutely massive book on *L'Histoire des Quatres Objects de Pouvoir* with her, and was busily reading the relevant chapter, her Translator Quill held at the ready for any words she did not understand. A tight knot of foreboding was growing in her stomach as she read on about *les quatres* - the Mirror, the Dagger, the Cup and the Scabbard, otherwise known as the Four Worthy Objects. She had heard of them before; in fact, they had been on the homework assignment Lupin had given them. Even before that she had known that they existed in myth, but had never known why they were Worthy or what use they were meant to be put to. The more she read, the less she liked what she was reading. She ached to race off and find Harry and tell him what she had so far discovered, but of course she couldn't -

"And about time!" muttered George, as the changing room door opened and the teams spilled out onto the field, the Gryffindor team rushing and the Slytherin team, although they were the late ones, sauntering insolently. The teams paused as Harry and Draco walked towards each other and shook hands, holding the grip, it seemed, only as long as necessary. Hermione, who knew better, saw through her Omnioculars how they leaned instinctively towards each other, and saw the wry smile Harry offered Draco as their hands met. A shaft of light broke through the clouds then, and she took the Omnioculars away from her eyes, blinded; when she looked again, they were walking away from each other, back towards their respective teams.

Madam Hooch blew the whistle, and the teams launched themselves into the sky. George and Fred both yelled, and Jana, looking bored, went for her knitting - she was in the process of making a rather hideous orange

muffler which Hermione secretly suspected was a Christmas present for Ron, who would look wretched in such a color. Hiding a smile, Hermione put her Omnioculars down and divided her attention between reading her book and watching the game as it unfolded in the sky above.

She had once detested Gryffindor-Slytherin matches, but now she liked them, although she wouldn't have admitted it. Quidditch bored her and always had, but she liked watching her boys fly - Harry with his arrowlike grace, Ron with his straightforward determination, and Draco's showy stylization that masked a real skill. She watched them crisscross each other in the sky, and cheered when Gryffindor scored a goal, mostly because everyone else around her was cheering. But she enjoyed the sheer beauty of flight, something no Muggle sport really offered. Watching Draco and Harry speed away from and towards each other was like watching two streaks of green and red light.

The others weren't bad either, of course. She'd been surprised by how well Ginny played when she'd first joined the team this year. She was fast and her aim was excellent. Hermione watched now as Ginny shot past Malcolm Baddock to capture the Quaffle, performed a hairpin turn, and raced towards the Slytherin goal. The Slytherin Beaters wheeled to follow her, but before they could, Blaise Zabini shot between them like an arrow, seized Tess Hammond's bat out of her hand, and whacked the nearest Bludger as hard as she could towards Ginny. It slammed into Ginny's shoulder and her broom spun in a circle, as the crowd below yelled and George broke into a stream of colorful profanity. Ginny righted her broom, but dropped the Quaffle, which Blaise dived for and captured; the Slytherin girl spun to hurl herself back towards the Gryffindor goal but Seamus Finnigan was blocking her, looking incensed. As her broom's path crossed his, Seamus reached out, grasped hold of the trailing end of Blaise's sleeve, and *shook* her, hard. With an infuriated screech, Blaise swung around, her free hand clawing at his face, and as Seamus ducked out of her grasp she dropped the Quaffle -

Madam Hooch's whistle blew furiously. "*Gryffindor fouls! Quaffle goes to Slytherin!*" she called firmly.

There was a faint groan from the Gryffindor stands. "What the devil was Seamus thinking?" Fred demanded, craning his Omnioculars upward. Hermione, following his gaze, saw Blaise catch the Quaffle as it was tossed

to her by Madam Hooch. She paused for a moment to spit at Seamus, then took off like a rocket towards the Gryffindor goal.

"I know what he was thinking," said George, amused, his gaze on his sister, who was chasing the Quaffle with a determined look. "Hee. Hee."

Fred shot a disgusted look at his sibling. "Did you just say 'hee hee'?"

"So what if I did?" said George cheerily, "at least my girlfriend isn't off faffing about with Oliver Wood."

Jana looked annoyed. "Oh, that's right, make it sound like Oliver Wood wouldn't have me."

"Now, dear, that's not what I meant," said George hastily. "I'm sure he would have you."

"And I suppose you'd let him!" Jana sniffed, hands on her hips. "George! How could you!"

"Of course not," George protested. "Darling...I would never..."

"Hee hee," said Fred.

"Oh, be quiet the both of you," said Jana, then broke off as there was a roar from the crowd - Slytherin had scored, Blaise having hit the Quaffle towards the Gryffindor goal hard enough to nearly knock out one of Ron's teeth. George made a snarling noise. Hermione had a feeling the odds of Blaise being invited to any upcoming Weasley family gatherings was likely nil. George and Fred were grumbling again, and when the Quaffle was returned to play, Ginny dove at it with a singleminded fierceness, cutting in front of Blaise as she did so, and driving it towards the Slytherin goal with such determination that Hermione found her eyes riveted on Ginny, and she barely noticed the twin blurs of green and scarlet streaking by just at the edge of her vision.....

A dull roar went up from the crowd. Ginny paused on her broom and wheeled around; Hermione could see the astonished look on her face. Hermione looked up, brushing a stray curl away from her eyes, and saw that the air was no longer full of movement: the players were still, staring

towards the west side of the pitch, where Harry sat atop his broom. Something glimmered in his hand. It was the Snitch. The game was over.

Madam Hooch's voice broke the silence. "*A victory for Gryffindor!*"

The stands around Hermione erupted into fierce cheering. Students were on their feet, their scarves flying like red-gold banners in the wind. Hermione did not get to her feet; she was still looking at the field, at Harry, who stared at the Snitch in his hand, then twisted around on his broom to look towards Draco. Draco was at least twenty feet away, sitting very still on his broom, and the look on his face - it wasn't an expression Hermione had ever seen on him before, half rage and half bewilderment. He pointed his broom violently downward, and landed hard on the frozen ground. Harry followed, landing much more slowly, and now the rest of the Gryffindor and Slytherin teams were landing as well, blocking her view of the boys. She cranked the focus on the Omnioculars and looked again at Harry; the rest of the team was landing around him, crowding to get near him, but they seemed strangely somber. The usual hugging, jumping dogpile was missing. She could tell why, too; it was Harry. He looked neither pleased nor victorious, merely surprised and almost irritated as he glanced from the Snitch in his hand over towards the Slytherin team, who were departing swiftly through the doors to their changing rooms. Draco was already out of sight. Hermione could tell that the Gryffindor team was having a hard time rejoicing normally, given the somber mood of their captain. Moving uncertainly together, they gathered up their brooms and headed off the pitch, led by Harry.

The Gryffindor spectators seemed to have caught the somber mood of the team; in silence, everyone in the stands began to gather up their things, and as Hermione moved to close the book she had been reading, and put it in her bag, her glance fell on an illustrated page. She stood very still for a moment, staring, then raised the book and looked more closely. A few moments later, she was running down the stairs at a mad clip, George and Fred staring after her, pelting as quickly as she could towards the Gryffindor changing rooms and Harry.

Harry walked back towards the changing rooms, vaguely conscious of the excited chatter of the rest of the Gryffindors rising and falling around him. Over and over in his mind he was replaying the last few seconds of

the match - chasing the Snitch, the wind in his face, waiting for, and rather expecting, Draco to cut in front of him on his broom, as he always did. Harry knew what flying Seeker against Draco Malfoy was like; he had done it for six years. They both had their tricks, though they tried to vary them. They both had their individual styles. Draco's was elegant and almost lazy, until he actually saw the Snitch, and then he would drive after it like the point of a knife blade driving home. Harry had learned to expect his responses and anticipate them; somewhere in his heart he felt confident that he was a better player than Draco, although not so much better that he could ever afford to be lazy. They'd lost their share of matches against Slytherin in the past, some quite unexpectedly. But one thing he had never come to expect was that Draco would ever *let* him catch the Snitch - and he was quite sure that that was what Draco had done this time. Draco hadn't even seemed to be making an effort at all; when Harry'd gone for the Snitch, he'd noted that Draco wasn't pacing him, and when he'd caught it and turned the other boy had been many feet away. That had *never* happened before. It wasn't like Draco not to make even the slightest effort, Harry thought, banging the changing room door shut behind him (and almost whacking Colin on the nose, although he didn't notice that.) Obviously Draco had let him win, but why would he do that? Was he feeling sorry for Harry now because of their visit to the graveyard earlier? Well, thought Harry, dropping his broomstick and stripping off the leather shin guards, screw that, he didn't want anybody's pity, least of all Draco's.

Harry had at this point managed to work himself up into a state of affronted pique that, had he bothered to think about it, was out of proportion to the cause, but he didn't bother to think about it. Instead he tossed his wrist guards into a corner and stalked out of the changing room, ignoring Ron's attempt to stop him.

He took hold of the Epicyclical Charm around his throat, concentrated a moment, and then marched up the path to the castle, his booted feet cracking the ice beneath them in a satisfyingly loud manner. He threw the double doors open, strode through the entryway, and turned down the left-hand hallway, the one that led to the Slytherin dormitories. He rounded the first corner and there was Draco just ahead, walking away from him, halfway to the tapestried door leading down to the dungeons. He was walking quickly, tearing at the leather wrist protector on his right wrist with his other hand; as Harry watched, Draco got it free, and in a

gesture very unlike him, paused, and threw it hard against the opposite wall. It hit the stone with a soft thwack, and fell to the floor at Draco's feet.

"Malfoy," Harry said.

Draco didn't move, just stood where he was, staring at the wall. There was an odd dejection to the set of his shoulders, as if he had realized something painful...

"Malfoy," Harry said again, more tightly, and when Draco still didn't turn he did something he'd sworn he wouldn't do, and sent an arrow of thought winging at the other boy's mind - he threw it as he would throw a dart, sharp and hard and direct. *Malfoy! Turn around and talk to me!*

Draco tensed, as if he had been struck, and spun around. Harry quailed slightly - Draco's eyes had gone nearly black, which only happened when he was very angry indeed. "What the hell do you want, Potter?" he asked flatly. He was tearing at the other wrist protector now; he got it off, and dropped it on the floor at his feet. "Why are you following me?"

Harry took a step forward. "What happened out there?" he demanded.

Draco's eyes went narrow. The torchlight threw its flaring light across his face, washing out the color, making the lines hard and angular. "You won," he said flatly. "Go and bloody celebrate, why don't you?"

"I meant what happened to you. You gave up on that game, Malfoy - it's the only explanation -"

"I did not give up!" The words came out on a shout. "You won!"

"We didn't," said Harry.

Draco looked even angrier. "I thought Gryffindors were supposed to be above bloody gloating about this sort of thing -"

"I am not gloating," said Harry through his teeth. "Do you think I give a damn about winning a game you let me win?"

"I did not let you win!" Draco yelled. "That was the best I could do!"

"Well, it was *pathetic!*" Harry snapped right back, and immediately regretted what he had said.

"Why, thank you," Draco snarled, his voice gone flat and cold. "Thank you for that assessment, Potter, you self-righteous, stuck-up, unbearable bastard!" Harry took a step back - Draco looked almost feral in his rage, his shoulders set, even his silver hair seeming to crackle with angry energy. His hands were fisted at his sides. "You think you can come along and judge me -"

"If you let me win because you think I -" Harry began, but broke off as a voice exploded inside his head, with the force of a bomb going off - he felt as if his skull might shatter apart as he staggered back against the wall.

I DID NOT LET YOU WIN!

Harry gasped out loud, and put his hands to his head, which was aching now as if someone had struck him a hard blow across the back of his skull. "Ouch," he said weakly, and looked up at Draco - who was staring at him in utter astonishment, his hands slowly loosening at his sides. "All right, all right - I believe you, Malfoy, you didn't have to yell like that." He took his hands gingerly away from his temples and stared at them, almost expecting to see blood. "You trying to give me brain damage, or what?"

"I..." Draco began, uneasily, still looking surprised. "I didn't know it would ... I've never..."

"Well, now you have," Harry snapped, repeating something Draco had said to him not long before. Then he hesitated. "I'm sorry," he said slowly, his eyes on Draco's face now. "For what I said...you weren't pathetic."

"Oh, no," Draco said, gritty-voiced, and very pale, "I was. I was pathetic."

Harry suddenly felt terrible, as if he'd kicked a kitten. He stared at Draco. Over the months he'd come to be able to read the other boy's expressions, although they were subtle. And he could still feel a little of what Draco felt sometimes, if he was feeling it strongly. He felt it now, and saw it in Draco's face, bewilderment...and fear. *Fear?*

"Malfoy," he began --

"*Harry!*" it was a breathless voice, one Harry recognized instantly; he spun around and saw Hermione, standing ashen-faced in the doorway. Ron was behind her, and so, he saw, was Ginny. And behind her was Seamus Finnigan. Hermione held a book in her hands, clutching it so tightly that her fingers were paper-white. "Harry..." she said again, and trailed off, and then her eyes went to Draco. Relief brightened them, lighting her expression. "Oh, thank God, you're both here. I need to talk to you." She looked down at the book in her hand, and then back at Draco and Harry. "It's important. Can we go to the library and talk?"

Harry looked at her, trying to focus his eyes, but it was Draco who spoke. "Not if he comes," he said, and pointed past Hermione at Seamus, who was standing beside Ginny now.

"Anything I can hear, Seamus can hear," said Ginny loudly. "I already told him everything."

Draco raised an eyebrow at her. "Everything?" he said.

"Everything," Ginny replied, raising her chin.

Seamus looked very much as if he wanted to be elsewhere, but he stood firm.

"Then you're a silly bint," said Draco coldly. "And untrustworthy."

Ron looked murderous, as did Seamus. Hermione frowned. "Draco, don't be difficult," she said. "This is *important*."

Draco folded his arms. "Either Leprechaun Boy over there walks away, or I do."

Harry cleared his throat. "Look, Seamus..." he began.

"Right then," said Seamus. "I don't want to cause any problems. I'm going." He leaned over and very deliberately kissed Ginny on the cheek. "I'll see you later," he said, and walked away.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "If the immaturity contest is over..."

"The immaturity contest is *never* over," said Draco, with a sideways smile at her. She shook her head. "All right," she said. "Come on - let's go to the library."

"There are four Worthy Objects," Hermione said. "And they're very old. There's a dagger. A scabbard. A mirror, that one in the photograph that was stolen. And a cup." She sighed and looked up from the parchment she was reading. "Draco saw every one of them in Voldemort's possession, in his dreams, except one. The cup."

They were all in the library, sprawled around a round table: Ginny and Ron, Hermione and Draco, and Harry beside Hermione. Hermione had books and parchments spread out on the table in front of her, and her silver-rimmed reading glasses propped on her nose. She'd been talking for a while, and her voice was beginning to sound scratchy.

"Each of these objects is very powerful, magically," Hermione went on. "It's elemental magic, which is hardly ever practiced these days, but was pretty popular around Nicholas Flamel's time. Each object corresponds to an element - but," Hermione added hurriedly, seeing everyone's eyes glazing over, "that's not important. What's important is that these four objects are like four parts of a puzzle. They have to be brought together for the magic to work. And when they're together, then a ritual can be performed."

Harry cleared his throat. "I don't like the sound of that. What kind of ritual?"

Hermione bit her lip. "It's what the Objects were created for, to facilitate this ritual. It's called just that, the Ritual, and...and it takes five people to perform, four to manipulate the objects and a fifth..." Hermione wrinkled her nose, "to give his or her blood. It's totally unclear how the ritual works, apparently the instructions are contained in a set of four books, of which there is only one copy of each in existence. However, what is clear is the result of the ritual. When it's done properly, an image will appear in the surface of the mirror. That image is the Tetragrammaton."

Draco's eyes widened. Everyone else looked quite blank. "That's a myth, I thought," Draco said.

"Oooh, Draco knows about it," said Ron. "I'm betting it's a nasty thing in that case."

Draco yawned. "You forgot to call me Malfoy," he said. "You're slipping, Weasley."

"The Tetragrammatron," said Hermione firmly, "is a word. One word. But speaking that word aloud gives the speaker power over all living things, power over men and animals, and power over life and death. *That's* why Voldemort wanted the mirror, and that's why I'm sure he wants the cup. It was the only object that Draco didn't see that he already had, and anyway I already looked into it. The cup is in the Museum at Stonehenge, in the Antiquities section. If he he wants to perform the ritual, he'll have to try to get it. But he mustn't...he can't be allowed. We can't let that happen." Ron looked shocked; so did Ginny. Harry wondered if he looked shocked as well. He didn't feel shocked. He felt a weary sort of *oh, this again? The end of the world? Yippee!* instead.

Draco didn't look shocked either. He looked resigned. "And what do we propose to do about it?"

"I don't know," said Ron dubiously. "This all seems like fantasy to me. I mean, some dreams, some photos, a myth...it might well be nothing."

"It might," Hermione agreed, "but I'm not sure it's worth that risk. Right now the cup is safe in a warded display case in the Museum, but for how long?"

Ginny stirred restlessly in her chair. "Do you think going to Dumbledore might be the answer?" she asked.

"Only if the question is 'What's the most asinine thing we could possibly do?'" said Draco shortly.

Ginny shot him a glare. "I don't see why."

"Well, first off, there's no explaining how we came by all this information," said Draco shortly. "Second off, he's not likely to act on the evidence that I had a dream about something, is he?"

"Well, where did you come by all this information?" Ginny snapped.
"Where'd you get a Muggle newspaper anyway, Draco?"

Draco looked at Hermione, but she looked quite blank. Harry tensed as Draco turned his gray eyes towards him, and narrowed them. *You didn't tell Hermione where we went yet, did you?*

No. I know I said I would, but...I couldn't. Harry winced and slunk down in his seat. *Don't...not right now.*

Draco's eyes trawled back to Ginny, and he smiled. "Found it," he said. "In the infirmary."

Ginny looked unconvinced. "Sure you did."

Hermione cleared her throat. "I agree with Draco," she said, somewhat unexpectedly. "Dumbledore understands that some things we have to take care of ourselves. Sometimes he can't act, but knows that we have the tools we need to act instead. You know what I mean?" she added, and looked at Harry, her eyes wide and dark.

He thought of the Time-Turner, of their third year, of the thin gold chain looped around both their necks. Remembered how determined she had been their second year, solemnly handing pastries to him and Ron and telling them to go off and drug their fellow students into unconsciousness. *Do you want this plan to work, or not?* "I know," he said, and smiled at her.

She smiled back at him, briefly, before her smile wavered and she looked back down at the table. "I think it's pretty obvious what we have to do," she said, and sighed. "I don't like the idea, but..."

Ron waved a hand. "I'm not following," he said. "What do we have to do exactly?"

"We have to steal the cup before the Dark Lord can get it," said Hermione, as if it was obvious. "We're going to have to rob the museum."

References: Well, I try not to fly in the face of public opinion-
Blackadder

we could have started your personality over from scratch – Blackadder

We don't know the meaning of the word *defeat*." Ron made a muffled choking noise, and Harry grinned at him. "Well, we know the meaning of it - we're not stupid - just, you know, not in this context." - The Tick

Draco Veritas Chapter Six: This Perfect World

Hermione had taken to calling it The Plan; Draco called it Just Your Run of The Mill Bog-Standard Scheme For Robbing A Museum And Stealing A Priceless Artifact, What? Harry didn't call it anything; he just rolled his eyes when they talked about it, and capped that off with a shrug. Not that he wasn't nervous, or determined – he was, Ginny thought, just as nervous and determined as the rest of them. He just wasn't spending as much time in the library as the rest of them were: Draco, Hermione, Ginny were there for hours every day, and even Ron, who evidently disliked having to spend so much time around Draco, was quite patiently putting up with it – Ginny was proud of him. It had been two weeks since they'd begun carving out The Plan, and he hadn't complained once.

They had commandeered a corner library table where they would not be disturbed, and in between classes Ginny knew Hermione would always be found there, usually with Draco sitting across from her. Most of the books that Hermione had wanted were not available in the Hogwarts library, not even in the Restricted Section. Books on dismantling Ministry wards, *A Thief's Guide to Looting and Plundering*, books on how to conceal the trace evidence left behind by theft spells – Hogwarts carried none of them. Draco had to Summon them for her from the bookshelves back at the Manor, which he did, along with something that had made Hermione shout in glee: the blueprint floorplans for the Malfoy Wing of the Stonehenge Museum. It amused Ginny to see the way Hermione tackled this project with the same gusto with which she had attacked their exams the week before.

“You should have seen her second year,” said Ron, chin on hand and pointed nose stuck inside a tome entitled *How To Get Away With Practically Anything*. “I remember her handing me and Harry two drugged

pastries and ordering us to go off and knock out Crabbe and Goyle for her. She was a terror.” He looked up and over at Hermione, “Isn't that right?” he asked, but Hermione was not paying attention. She had just leaped out of her chair with a shriek. Hands on her hips, she shook her head in annoyance. “Draco! *Honestly!*” She glared down at the blond boy, who as looking up at her with large, innocent eyes and holding something quite revolting-looking in his outstretched hand.

“I Summoned it from the Manor this morning,” Draco said, waving what looked like a mummified human hand at Hermione. “I almost forgot to give it to you.”

“Well, I wish you had forgotten,” Hermione said, wrinkling her nose up. “What *is* it?”

“It's a Hand of Glory,” said Harry, appearing out of the shadows between the bookshelves. “Best friend of thieves and plunderers, right Malfoy?”

Draco twisted around in his seat and looked at Harry. “I wouldn't have expected *you* to know that, Potter.”

Harry smiled faintly. His cheeks were flushed as if he had been outside in the cold, and his scarf was wrapped around his neck. Ginny wondered where he had gone after breakfast while the rest of them had trooped up to the library. Classes were over for the term while everyone studied for exams, but Harry these days often seemed to have all sorts of places to be that he just had to go to alone. “You'd be surprised what I know, Malfoy.”

“Would I?” said Draco, a small smile playing about his mouth. “What's all this about you knocking out Crabbe and Goyle during second year, then?”

Everyone looked horrified. Ginny, who vaguely recollected hearing this story from Ron during her third year, choked on a giggle.

Draco raised an eyebrow politely at Ron. “You want to elaborate, Weasley?”

Ron had stuck his nose back in his book, but the tips of his ears were red. “Not really.”

Draco gave him a measuring look, then put the Hand of Glory down on the table. It scabbled across the table like an oversized spider and fell into Ron's lap. With a yowl like a scalded cat, Ron leaped to his feet, brushing frantically at the hand clinging to his belt. It fell to the floor, and Ginny put her foot on it. "Malfoy!" Ron choked, looking furious.

Draco grinned lazily. "Oh come on, Weasley. Like that isn't the closest to a sex life you're ever going to get."

Ron picked up his copy of *How to Get Away With Practically Anything* and threw it at Draco. Draco ducked, and the book bounced off the back of his chair.

Draco sat back up, and dusted off his shirtsleeves ostentatiously. "You know, Weasley," he remarked, poker-faced, "violent hostility is just sublimated sexual attraction."

"Ah, well," said Ron bitterly, "I suppose that explains why you always hated Hagrid, then."

Draco actually flushed, and once again Ginny choked on a giggle. Harry cleared his throat with an impatient noise. "This," he said flatly, "is accomplishing nothing – are we going to have to split up so we can work on this?"

"No," said Hermione unexpectedly, standing up. "We're done for now."

Everyone blinked at her. "Done for now?" Ron echoed, forgetting to be furious.

"With the research part, yes," said Hermione firmly. "I just need something to Transfigure, like I said last night. Harry?"

Harry shrugged slightly. "You said you didn't need it until this afternoon."

"Yes," said Hermione, her voice tense. "And it's three o'clock."

"Fine," Harry said shortly. "I'll go get it. Ron, can you come with me?"

"With pleasure," said Ron, shooting a nasty look at Draco, and getting to his feet. He picked his scarf up off the back of his chair, and stomped after Harry – had Ginny been a less generous sister, she would have said he was flouncing.

Apparently Draco had a similar thought. "Drama queen," he remarked coolly as the library door shut behind Harry and Ron.

"*Don't* start," said Hermione, sounding thoroughly exasperated. She reached out over the table and began shoving parchments and maps into her ever-straining bookbag. "Really, Draco, if you two won't try to get along, can't you just go out in the woods and poke each other with sharp sticks until you figure out who the dominant male is?"

Draco chewed thoughtfully on the end of his quill. "But that would be so much less fun."

"Fun? This is your idea of fun?" Hermione began winding her hair back into a tight bun, and ruthlessly jammed a hairpin into it to hold it in place. "Why do you have to keep poking at Ron? Be a man. Just ignore him."

"I don't want to be a man," Draco said, tilting his head back and lazily slitting his eyes like a cat in the sun. "I want to be a depressed, angst-ridden teenager who can't confront his own inner demons, so takes it out verbally on other people."

Hermione sighed. "It's too bad you weren't born a girl," she said. "Otherwise all you'd have to worry about is whether you were the prettiest one in school."

"Hey," Draco said. "I *am* the prettiest one in school."

Hermione flopped back down into the chair next to Draco and disconsolately surveyed the papers that still littered the table. "This is just too stressful," she said in a weary voice. Ginny resisted the urge to reassure her; she had the feeling that both Draco and Hermione had forgotten that she was there several minutes ago. "I can't do this all by myself, and Harry *won't* help, and you and Ron keep fighting, and I've been up for three days straight. And my hair is starting to frizz up again,

did you know that?"

"Some days it's all I can think about," said Draco gravely.

"Oh shut up," said Hermione, but she smiled.

"I'll make you a deal," Draco said. "I'll go through the rest of the anti-alarm-spell book if you tell me what that business about knocking out Crabbe and Goyle second year was."

Hermione's smile deepened. "Deal," she said, sounding relieved.

Ginny cleared her throat loudly and stood up. As she had expected, they looked at her with identical pairs of startled eyes: one pair dark brown, the other silver. "I have to go," she said.

Hermione's smile vanished. "Ginny –" she said. "Oh, I – I mean, thank you for helping out –"

"No problem," said Ginny stiffly, picked up her bookbag, and walked out of the library. Only when the door had shut behind her did she allow her shoulders to slump. Was she doomed to be invisible forever? Was it some kind of Weasley Curse? Then again, Bill and Charlie had always been anything but invisible, nor were the twins, or even Percy in his own annoying way. Perhaps it was simply the two youngest Weasleys who were doomed to feel always overlooked.

With a sigh, she set off down the corridor. She clattered down the stairs that led to the second floor, turned several corners, and found herself at what looked like the dead end of a hallway. It wasn't, as Seamus had shown her the week before. If one walked all the way to the end and then turned sharply to the left, a small open stone archway was revealed.

She ducked through it. Beyond it was a small oval room, the walls and floor of which were honey-colored blocks of stone. There was no furniture. The west wall was a leaded glass bay window, fronted by a ledge just wide enough to be a window seat. Curled up on the seat, legs folded under him, head bent over the book in his lap, was Seamus. His hands were pulled inside the sleeves of his dark red pullover, and the cold winter sunlight filtering through the window turned his dark blonde hair

to a fringe of golden grass. "Hey, Ginny," he said, without looking up.

She laughed. "How'd you know it was me?"

"Know your footsteps," he said. He put the book down and smiled at her. "Come over here."

She came and sat down next to him on the ledge, feeling slightly nervous. In the week since she had kissed Seamus on the Quidditch pitch, he had not tried to kiss her again, or indicated that he was awaiting a repeat performance. Instead he was simply quietly present much of the time, walking with her when they had classes near each other, bringing her hot tea in the common room. She had begun to expect to see him when she came out of class: she wondered how she had never really noticed he was around before. There was something oddly appealing about Seamus, something about his generous nature and uncomplicated smiles. They held hands now when they walked in the hallways. It felt easy, natural. She tried not to think too much about what she was doing. She didn't want to analyze it.

"Are you going on the Stonehenge visit?" he asked.

"Mmm." She nodded, playing with the cover of the book he'd been reading, *Dream Country*. Seamus was obsessed with comic books, both Muggle and normal ones. "Are you?"

"Yeah, I thought I would. I'm not in History of Magic but Binns said it would be fine. There's an exhibit on archaic Quidditch that I've been wanting to see." Seamus put his hand over her hand where it lay on the book cover, and cleared his throat. "I was wondering..." He looked as nervous as he ever looked, which meant his blue eyes darkened to a slate sort of color and his mouth tightened. "About Christmas holidays. I'm going to be at the Manor for the wedding, of course...and so will you...but after that we've got two weeks of holiday before term starts up again, and I'll be going back home to Glyn Caryn..."

"That's nice, Seamus," said Ginny agreeably. "I've heard it's lovely there."

"I want you to come with me," he said.

Ginny stopped playing with the book cover and stared. "What?"

"I think it would be fun," said Seamus determinedly. "We've got a castle, you know – nowhere near as big as this one, but quite sizeable, and you wouldn't have to see me for days if you didn't want to. I've got tickets to the Puddlemere/Cannons game in Dublin, and we could go to that, and there's ice skating on the grounds and tobogganing..." he sighed and tugged distractedly on a loose curl of his hair. "You know, this sounded a lot better when I was rehearsing it in my head than 'Come to my house; I've got a toboggan.'"

Ginny, who had been looking at him wonderingly, laughed. "You rehearsed this in your head?" she demanded. "Why?"

"Because I think you really need a holiday," he said. "And you're not going to get one with the friends you've got – they're mad."

"I thought you liked Harry and Hermione," said Ginny.

"I do, but they're mad and these days all they do is glare – don't give me that look, everyone's noticed. And your brother spends most of his time sulking as well. Go ahead and tell me that spending time with them is a crazy whirligig of fun, but I'm not going to believe you."

"And I suppose if I go visit you in Ireland, that would be a crazy whirligig of fun?"

"I can promise you fun," said Seamus. "Crazy whirligig might be pushing it."

She grinned. "Will you show me your action figure collection?"

Seamus looked airily at the ceiling. "I might do."

"Have you got the Harry and Draco ones they made over the summer?"

Seamus nodded, his eyes glinting. "I've got two of the Malfoy one – one in its original packaging and one for decapitation purposes."

"Seamus, that is just wrong."

“I'll glue his head back on if you come to visit,” said Seamus contritely.

Ginny hesitated. “I don't know,” she said slowly. “I do have to check with my parents, but I can't see why they'd say no. I – I'll think about it, Seamus.” She checked herself as his blue eyes darkened. “But I want to – and I appreciate it. I really, really do.” She leaned forward and kissed his cheek, and then put her head on his shoulder, closing her eyes. Of course, she thought, if the great museum caper didn't go as planned, she wouldn't be able to make it to Ireland anyway – not without a side-trip to Azkaban for a few years beforehand.

“You know, I've missed this,” said Ron in a conversational tone, as Harry tried the door of the Trophy Room.

“Missed what?” Harry asked, his mind only half on what Ron was saying. The Trophy Room door tended to squeak when it was opened, and although Harry had the Invisibility Cloak in his pocket he didn't feel like using it. He pushed down slowly on the handle and the door slid soundlessly open. Harry slipped through, and turned to wait for Ron to follow him.

But Ron was lingering in the doorway. “Missed *this*,” he said, and gestured from himself to Harry and back again. “Missed you and me.”

Harry cocked his head to the side. “That's...” He chanced a tired smile. “I didn't know you cared.”

But Ron didn't smile back. He looked grave. “Maybe you don't know what I mean,” he said. “I mean us, sneaking around, going on missions, getting in trouble...like we used to.”

“We're not in trouble,” Harry said. He didn't know why he was refusing to acknowledge what Ron was really saying, but he was. “Although if you keep standing in the doorway...”

Ron's mouth tightened. He came into the room, and shut the door behind him. “Fine,” he said. “Let's get what we came for.” He walked into the

center of the room and began industriously studying the display cases, behind which the rows of trophies, shields, and plaques gleamed dull gold and silver. Ron's hair gleamed too, a darkened bronze color in the half-light. The set of his shoulders was tense, and Harry knew of old that this meant Ron was feeling hurt. He knew why he couldn't acknowledge what Ron was saying...he didn't miss their loss of adventure the same way, because he had not really lost it. He still crept around school under the Cloak, still evaded the teachers to sneak off school grounds. He just did those things alone now. Alone, or with Draco.

He sighed. "Ron," he said slowly. "I'm sorry. I know what you mean. I've missed it too, I've just been ... caught up in other things."

Ron glanced back at him. The faint light washed the blue out of his eyes. "I've noticed," he said. "I've offered before, but if you want to talk about it..."

Harry walked across the room, to the largest display case, and looked into it. There was the gold shield that bore his father's name, and his house and position: Gryffindor Seeker. "If there was something I could tell you," he said, seeing Ron's face reflected in the display case glass, "I would."

"Is it about Hermione?" Ron asked diffidently, looking down at his feet.

Harry twisted around to stare at him. "About Hermione?"

"Let's just say I can see why you're wearing your scarf indoors," Ron said. "The climate between you two is somewhat arctic."

"Yeah," Harry said. "She feels neglected."

"That would be one of those funny side effects of neglect," said Ron. He raised his eyes from his shoes. "Do you not love her any more?"

Harry started, as if Ron had pricked him with a pin. "Do I not what?"

"You heard me." Ron was looking at his feet again. "Sometimes you, ah, just stop feeling a certain way about a person, and there isn't anything you can do about it. But you should, you should tell her, because it isn't fair to make her wait around and wonder what's going on with you, and

not tell her, and –”

“Is this sentence going to end anytime soon?” Harry said rather sharply.

Ron swallowed his next words, looking mutinous. “You should tell her,” he said again.

Harry shook his head. “If there was something to tell her,” he said quietly, “I would. But I love her, and I always will love her, and to tell her anything else would be a lie.”

Ron looked surprised, so much so that Harry in return was surprised. “But lots of people do...just stop feelings things,” he said. “Don't they?”

“Do I look like I've got the faintest idea what lots of people do?” Harry rubbed his hands over his face. He felt tired again. Tired and worn down. “Look,” he said, more quietly. “I appreciate you looking out for Hermione, and for me as well. I know how it looks from the outside. I'm sure it looks bad. But of course I still love her. In fact sometimes I worry...”

“Worry what?” Ron said quickly.

“That she doesn't love me.”

“Oh,” said Ron, and then again, “Oh.” He paused. “I'm sure she does.”

“I know.” Harry raised his head and looked at Ron, really looked at him, for the first time in days. At the steady blue eyes, the set mouth, the familiar face. “It's just that I can't talk to her about my parents,” Harry heard himself say.

“Your parents?” Ron looked astonished. “Did something...happen with your parents?”

No, Harry thought acidly, *they're still dead, thanks for asking*. But he didn't say that. “Not exactly. I've been thinking about them a lot, and I guess that's what's been on my mind. And I know it seems like I should be able to talk to her about that, but I can't...and I'm not the only one who's been distant lately,” he added firmly. “She seems distant too. Distant and kind of...strange.”

“Strange?” Ron echoed.

But Harry didn't want to elaborate. His gaze had lit on what they had come to the trophy room for. “Hey, there it is.”

“There what – oh, right,” said Ron, and got down on his knees just as Harry did. Harry reached out and flipped open the glass case in front of him, and took out a tall bronze-colored cup, to the front of which was affixed a shield inscribed in flowing script: **For Special Services To the School: Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, and Ronald Weasley.** In the year 1992. “We going to use that?” Ron asked.

“Sure,” Harry said. “It's ours...we can use whatever we want. Hermione said something that looked as much like the cup in the picture as possible, and this does.”

Ron grinned. “I was kind of hoping we could use Tom Riddle's award for special services.”

Harry laughed. “Now *that's* a brilliant idea. But...Hermione said it had to be a cup.”

“Why? What's the difference? It's getting Transfigured anyway.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, “but it has to be a very, very low-level transfiguration spell, because a stronger spell would set off the detectors in the museum. So it'll start fading over time. The more it looks like what it's supposed to be, the longer it'll take anyone to notice.”

Ron shook his head. “Does anyone have all the details of this robbery plan besides Hermione?”

Harry shook his head, standing up. “No,” he said. “But I trust her.”

An odd spasm went across Ron's face. Then he smiled, and reached out and touched the cup in Harry's hand. “I remember when we got this,” he said. “Second year.”

Harry looked at Ron narrowly; there was something in Ron's tone he

didn't like, as if his best friend were mourning some lost, elegiac Golden Age. "Yeah. I remember." He held the cup out. "You want to carry it?"

But Ron shook his head, hands in his pockets. "No. It's all right." He looked towards the door. "We should go," he said, and ducked his head as Harry swirled the cloak over both of them, and they vanished from sight.

When Ron and Harry returned to the library, Ginny had gone, and Draco and Hermione were sitting together at the table. Hermione had her head on her arms and appeared to be asleep; Draco was reading. He lifted a finger to his lips as Harry and Ron approached.

Harry looked at Draco, then set the cup down on the table and crouched down next to Hermione's seat. She was indeed asleep, her head resting on her crossed arms, her eyes shut. He could see how tired she must be: her eyelids had a waxy, pearlescent sheen, and there were shadows under her eyes. Her lips were parted softly and the tumbled hair that has escaped from its bun stirred with her breathing. He forgot that Draco and Ron were there as he knelt next to her, forgot that anyone else was there besides the two of them, and for that timeless moment hung in a space occupied only by Hermione and himself. He could never forget how much he loved her, but now he was reminded again and forcefully, and he felt it as an ache inside himself, a hard pain in the depths of his soul. *If she only knew...*

He had not spoken, but her eyelids fluttered open as if she had heard him. She smiled slowly, her clear dark eyes focusing on his face. "Harry..."

He leaned over and kissed her cheek. "I didn't realize you were so tired," he said gently. "I brought the cup."

"Oh!" she said, and sat up, rubbing at her eyes. "Thank you." She yawned, and touched the cup with a smile. "It's adorable, isn't it. What a shame we have to use it for something like this."

"It's a good cause," Draco said, without looking up from his book.

Ron was chewing the side of his lip thoughtfully. "Remind me again how

this is going to work,” he said.

Hermione looked vexed. “We're *gone* over this...”

“It's, just, won't it be surrounded by guards and things?”

“The cup? No more than any of the other objects in the museum. Remember, they don't know what it is – it's just a historical curiosity to them, not part of an immensely powerful magical equation.”

“Are you *sure*?” Ron said. “I mean, maybe they just don't want to make it clear to everyone else that they *do* know how powerful it is...maybe they're just trying not to attract any attention to it.”

Hermione blinked, and for a moment looked surprised – Harry realized that this had honestly not occurred to her. “No,” she said slowly, and then more swiftly, “No, because there's no reason then that they'd have to put it on display, they could just hide it away somewhere. It's only by chance that we even managed to suss it out. If Draco hadn't had the dreams he's had, if it hadn't connected back up to Nicholas Flamel, I'd never have twigged that the cup in the museum was one of the Four Worthy Objects.”

“*Might* be one of the Four Worthy Objects,” Ron corrected, dropping his voice.

Hermione nodded. “I know, but better safe than sorry.”

“Ah,” said Ron, nodding. “This must be some newfangled usage of the word 'safe' that I hadn't previously been aware of.”

Harry laughed. “I thought you were missing all our adventures,” he said. “If robbing a museum isn't an adventure, I don't know what is.”

Ron flushed, then grinned crookedly. “You have a point,” he replied, then glanced at his watch. “Herm, we're meant to be down in Flitwick's office going over the student list for the trip right now...”

“Oh. Right.” Hermione got to her feet, stifling another yawn, smiled at Harry, and picked up her books and cloak. “See you at supper then?” she said.

He got to his feet, and nodded. "Have fun being Head Boy and Head Girl."

Hermione made a face. "Don't knock it...we wouldn't have a museum trip otherwise."

Ron tapped his watch. "*Hermione...*"

She picked up the cup, put it in her bag, and kissed Harry's cheek. "See you later - oh, and Draco, remember what we talked about." And with that, she left with Ron, both of them chattering animatedly.

Harry looked down at Draco. "'Remember what we talked about?'"

Draco, who had his long legs stretched out on top of the table, shrugged. "We were just trying to think of different ways to create a diversion at the museum tomorrow."

"Come up with anything?"

"Few things. Probably better if you're surprised though."

Harry, accepting this, threw himself down in the chair next to Draco. "I'm flipping exhausted," he said. "I don't know about you."

"Well, six midnight meetings and intensive robbery-planning will do that to you. Fortunately, I manage to maintain my radiant glow without sleep."

"Yes, fascinating how you do that," said Harry, reaching for a thermos of pumpkin juice that Hermione had left at the table. "So, Rhysenn not bothering you in the middle of the night any more?"

Draco gave him a shrewd look. "I haven't seen her," he said. "Have you?"

Harry shook his head, alarmed. "No."

"I suspect she can't come into the castle," Draco said. "I think you're safe."

Harry unscrewed the thermos cap thoughtfully. "What do you think she

wants, anyway?"

Draco shrugged. "Ultimately that's anyone's guess. Other than wanting in your pants, apparently."

"Glargh." Harry moaned. "Don't say that."

"I'm just offended she doesn't want in *my* pants."

"Maybe she does," Harry suggested placatingly.

"I don't think she's ever really tried it on with me...not like she did with you." Draco paused thoughtfully. "Lucky me, I suppose."

"She does have quite an...effect," Harry said, feeling himself blush.

"Must be six hundred years of pent-up frustration," Draco said.

Harry choked, and spit pumpkin juice out all over the open book in front of him. "Six hundred years," he said, and goggled. "She's that old?"

"Remarkably well-preserved, isn't she?" Draco remarked. "And don't spit on that book - it's antique."

"So is she," said Harry. He bit his lip. "Not that it helps much..." He looked up at Draco with wide eyes. "*What* is she, Malfoy?"

"I think," Draco said slowly, "she's some kind of demon. Or something. She seems to have the ability to, ah...well...what exactly does it seem like to you?"

Harry felt himself turn bright Gryffindor red. "I think she's some kind of, um, sex demon," he said.

Draco looked as if he were trying very, very hard not to laugh. "Well, it could be worse," he said. "She could be a nailing-people-to-the-wall-with-sharp-spikes demon."

"I can't help thinking that'd be a bit easier to fight off," said Harry. "She just makes me feel so...*powerless*."

“Well, my dad always said when that happened you should try picturing the enemy in their underwear,” said Draco, then added hastily, “but given the nature of the problem, in your case that might not be a good move.”

“You're not helping, Malfoy...”

“All right, then, let's talk about something else. Like what I'm supposed to get Seamus Finnigan for Christmas.”

Harry smiled. “Yeah, Hermione told me you drew his name.”

“Who did you get?”

“Eloise Midgen.”

“Ah. New nose, then?”

“Shut up, Malfoy. Eloise is a very nice person.”

Draco grinned. “Guess who Blaise got.”

Harry shook his head. “Me?”

Draco looked as if he were enjoying himself. “Hermione.”

“Oh, no.” Harry shot Draco a mistrustful look. “Don't you let her get Hermione anything sharp, or explosive...”

Draco put his hand over his heart. “I solemnly swear,” he intoned.

“Thanks.” Harry's eyes went to the clock on the wall, and he sat up straight. “Time to go down to supper,” he said, and stood up, grabbing his bookbag off a nearby chair. He was halfway to the door when he paused and turned. “Aren't you coming with me?”

Draco, who was still sitting at the table, raised his head, surprised. In the half light, Harry couldn't make out his expression, only the vaguely defined shape of his face: the planes of the cheekbones, the sharp chin, the shadowed eyes. “We can't go down there *together*,” he said.

“Oh,” said Harry. “Right, we can't – of course we can't.”

“You go – I'll head down in a bit.” Draco gave Harry a curious look. “You all right? You look like you're about to sneeze.”

Harry sighed. “It's nothing. Just...”

“What?”

“Don't come down too soon after I do.”

Draco nodded. “Good point. I won't.”

“Thanks,” said Harry, and left feeling irritable, but not knowing why.

She's not coming.

He had already told himself this three times, but it didn't seem to be making a difference. Ron stood up, easing his cramped muscles, and leaned against the wall, staring sightlessly into the middle distance. It was three in the morning and he was meant to be up in a few hours. In six hours, in fact, he was meant to be robbing a museum. Right now that all seemed distant and unreal: what was real was the fact that she wasn't here, and it didn't seem like she would be arriving any time soon.

He had sent her a message...several messages, telling her to meet him in their usual place. And he had waited. The night before, and the night before that. But she hadn't come. It wasn't the first time; there had been other nights she hadn't shown herself, but never three in a row.

He took a step forward and leaned his hands on the table. The four squares of light from the colored windows: blue, red, green, and gold – splashed across the center of the room, painting the floor. They glowed all the time, even at night. There was no need for other lighting in the prefects' room, another reason it was such an ideal meeting place. And

only someone with the password could get in. Of course, there had been that unfortunate Malcolm incident...

Ron pushed that to the back of his mind. Malcolm didn't remember what had happened – an unexpected stroke of luck, that. Not that he felt very lucky right now. He had felt lucky, often, these past months, had felt he was the luckiest person in the world. But now...he looked down at his own hands, resting on the table. The nails were bitten down to bloody half-circles.

A surge of anger washed over him. He got to his feet, feeling suddenly energized by fury – she had no right to act like this. The least she could do was send him a message. He knew they were prevented from speaking about this to each other in public, but she could have scribbled a note. He grabbed at the door and wrenched it open, stepped out into the hallway – and hesitated.

The hallway was filled with faint morning light. It must be later than he had thought. In which case...well, there was no point going to bed then, was there? And if he waited...well, perhaps she might come. They'd met later than this before.

He went back into the room, and shut the door behind him.

Waking up was like swimming through black cold water towards a distant light. Draco's head broke the surface of sleep, his eyes fluttering open, and then the rest of his body followed, shuddering awake in a series of uneven jerks. He sat up in bed, , letting his breathing still slowly.

He was freezing cold. He sat up slowly, the icy air striking his skin and making him shiver even more. Lately he had been waking up soaked in sweat, his pajamas drenched and sticking to him, so he had taken to sleeping only in the thin cotton pajama bottoms he usually wore during the summer, the covers kicked down to his feet. Now, however, this was backfiring and he was frozen solid. His bones felt like ice.

He got up, and, taking the blanket with him, went to the window and sat down on the ledge. He wrapped the blanket around himself and looked

out at the cold winter night beyond the misted glass.

The world outside was white and wreathed in silver ice. It looked fragile, as if it would ring like a glass bell if struck. The hollow black sky seemed painted with a thousand diamonds, although there was no moon at all. The night was breathlessly quiet.

Draco looked down at his hands. There was a faint bluish tinge to the nails that might have been cold or shadow; he curled his fingers in against his palms. Images from the dream he had been having moved behind the skin of his eyelids: the castle again, rising from its black nest of pine trees, the diamond-like windows, the echoing empty rooms. The tower, and in the tower the shelf on which sat the mirror, the dagger, and the scabbard. Tonight, a table had been pulled up to the window and at it had sat his father, absorbed in a solitary game of chess. The chessboard was gold and ivory, and the pieces were carved out of whole rubies and emeralds: one team scarlet as blood, the other green as poison.

By the window stood Voldemort, looking out over the landscape, the trees spilling their autumnal colors down into an empty valley. "Lucius," he said. "Surely the time is nearly at hand?"

"Yes, my Lord," said Lucius, moving the bishop. "In two weeks if I am not mistaken."

"That is good news. Time hangs heavily, here. I grow increasingly bored." The Dark Lord turned away from the window and looked down at Draco's father. "I find I prefer these more old fashioned chess sets that capture rather than destroying," he said thoughtfully. "It is quite novel."

"I thought you liked killing," Lucius said, and moved a red pawn.

"Sometimes capturing is a better tactic," said the Dark Lord. "Why destroy what you can use, or make an example of?" He smiled. It was as unpleasant a sight as always. "How is the boy?"

"As well as can be expected," said Lucius, and moved the knight. "It is as I told you, my Lord. It is now a matter of waiting."

Draco was pulled out of his memories and back into the present by a

tapping sound against the glass. He realized he was shivering violently enough that his hands were knocking against the window. He pulled the blanket tighter and murmured a Warming Spell, which helped slightly – if only he could sleep, he thought, but he was wide awake. He let his head fall back against the wall, and his eyes trailed to the clock by his bed, whose numbers flared and faded in different colors every minute. Right now the violet numerals told him that it was five in the morning.

In two hours they would get up to have breakfast and go to the museum. As a prefect, he would have to be there early, waiting with the professors. Harry, Hermione and Ron were meant to meet him in the entry hall before breakfast even started. He had not expected to be so nervous about what they planned for tomorrow, certainly not so nervous that it would keep him awake. Yet he was dreading it in several ways. Certainly it was hardly the most dangerous thing he had ever done, but it wasn't from fear for his own personal safety that his anxiety sprang.

He wondered idly if Harry was awake yet, the thought lighting a flicker of curiosity in his brain. Without stopping to analyze what he was doing, he sent a tendril of thought out, searching the dark space outside himself for the familiar color and shape of Harry's thoughts. He felt nothing at first, which almost alarmed him. He let himself reach out farther, as if he were stepping from a bridge out into deep water, the darkness rising formless around him.

Then there was a burst of light. He paused, his eyes shut tight, and reached forward again. The light refracted, splitting into various colors, which pinwheeled around him like a shower of falling stars. He seemed to look through a doorway into another world: he felt heat, saw shimmering air and blue sky.

Alarmed, Draco tried to draw away, but it was as if someone had reached out and clasped his hand; he felt himself pulled forward, and then the empty space above him hollowed itself out into a pale blue sky, and the formless air beneath him became a strip of golden sand. He knew it was not real: everything around him had the soft, melting look of a dream, even the house that rose in the distance, gabled and shuttered in blue and white, looked like a dream house: faint and half-remembered. *That's it*, he thought, *I'm in a dream, Harry's dream*, and then he took a step forward and something appeared in the sand in front of him. He almost yelled out

loud.

It was a boy, perhaps eight years old, perhaps seven, kneeling in the sand, a plastic bucket at his feet. Very thin, with a shock of untidy dark hair, draped in oversized clothes from which his thin wrists and ankles protruded like bundles of twigs. Harry. A child-Harry, Harry just a few years before Draco had met him. And not just Harry, but Harry the way he saw himself.

The dream-Harry raised his head, and looked up at Draco. He looked as Draco would have imagined Harry to look at that age, but the scar on his forehead burned there like a livid brand of fire. There was a lost look in his green eyes, as if he neither knew where he was, nor how he had gotten there.

“You have to help me,” said Harry, his child's voice wavering like a voice heard under water.

Draco opened his mouth, then checked himself. Could his voice be heard in a dream, a dream that wasn't even his own? “Help you?” he asked, and to his relief, his voice was audible, if odd-sounding. “Help you with what?”

“My mother built me a castle,” said the boy who was Harry, looking around at the sand. “To protect me. But I've knocked it down, and now I can't find the pieces. Can you help me build it back up?”

Draco dropped down to his knees in the sand. It was neither warm nor grainy like real sand, but almost cloudy in its texture, as soft as dust. A dream of sand from the imagination of someone who had never been to the seaside. “I'll do whatever I can,” he said, and reached for the plastic bucket with the shovel in it; but before he could take hold of it, the dream-Harry had moved it away. Draco stared at him. He seemed even younger up close, younger and afraid; the burning mark on his forehead was almost too bright to look at. “Don't you want my help?”

Dream-Harry dropped his plastic shovel; it rattled against the side of the bucket. He shook his head. “I waited and waited for you to get here,” he said. “But now I think you might be too late.”

“Too late?” Draco asked, and then he heard something – a loud clanging

noise, like the tolling of a bell – it was a bell – some sort of alarm? An alarm clock? Was Harry waking up – and before he could even complete the thought, the sand vanished from under his feet, the blue sky spun away, and he tumbled back into himself, into his own shivery-cold body huddled in a milky spill of starlight on the window ledge in his room.

He clutched at the blanket, his heart pounding. The faint dizziness of dreaming clung to him like cobwebs. He felt strangely guilty – surely it was a violation of some sort to go walking into someone else's subconscious, even if he had been pulled in against his will. He wondered if Harry would recollect his dream in the morning, and how it might have seemed to him. It was almost as if their connection between them was growing stronger these days; he could find Harry as simply as breathing, and speak silently as easily as he could speak aloud. Perhaps it was the ease that came with practice, but it was almost beginning to be frightening. He wondered if the day would come when he could not tell Harry's thoughts and dreams from his own.

The Stonehenge Museum is one of the greatest museums of the wizarding world. It was founded by an Act of the Ministry in 1653 and is now governed under the Stonehenge Museum Act 1793. General management and control are vested in a Board of twenty-five Trustees (one appointed by the Minister, fifteen by the Ministry Board, four nominated by Learned Societies and five elected by the Trustees themselves.)

The Museum now holds national collections of antiquities: alchemical tools, enchanted curios from around the world, rare cursed objects, a library collection (Printed Books, Manuscripts, Maps, Music and Stamps), and items of historical interest to the wizarding world. Its natural history collections were transferred to South Kensington in the 1880s, becoming the J. Natural History Museum.

The main Museum buildings are unplottable. The core consists of buildings of a floor area of about 600,000 square feet, designed by Sir Sidney Smirke and erected during a long evening in 1650 after Smirke had consumed a bottle of Giant beer; some say this is why the roof lists to the east. Major subsequent additions totalling about 340,000 square feet consists of the Whisp Gallery of Quidditch History (1850s-1870s), the

Cantwell J. Muckenfuss Exhibition of Implements of Indeterminate Purpose (1884), and the L. N. Malfoy Gallery of Cursed and Abominable Artifacts. There is also the Hall of Bright Carvings (1979/80).

Guest Information: The museum is built in a circle, hollow in the middle where a small garden has been planted. In the center of the garden is the raised platform where museum visitors find themselves after being Portkeyed in; it also serves as a Portkey out. A limited amount of Portkeys are produced by the Museum, and because of this, the Museum curators always know how many visitors are in the museum, and who they are. This is for the security of museum visitors as well as the safety of the museum; security trolls patrol the corridors so it is best to stay with the guided tour group...wands are not allowed inside the museum, and are collected from patrons upon entry.

“So,” said Ron, when Hermione had paused in her reading aloud, “are you testing whether it's possible to be both panicked and bored to death at the same time, or what?”

Harry was scratching his ear in a thoughtful manner. “Hermione, darling, don't you already know all this?”

Hermione looked up from the pamphlet she'd been reading as they traipsed down the corridors of the museum. She depended on Ron and Harry to keep her steered along a straight path so that she didn't bump into the other students while she was walking. So far, they seemed to be doing a decent job, although she suspected she'd stepped on Pansy Parkinson's toe. Not that she regretted this entirely – Pansy was almost always underfoot.

“I know,” Hermione replied, “but there's no harm in being *extra* prepared, is there?”

Neither Ron nor Harry replied, and she stowed the pamphlet in her bag as the group of Hogwarts students (there had wound up being about twenty five of them in total) was instructed by Professor Flitwick to stop in a high-ceilinged room whose gold plaque proclaimed it to be the Manfred Scamander Room of Artifacts from the Natural World. She could barely

force herself to pay attention, however, as Flitwick pointed out items of interest – a knife made from dried dragon's blood, a basket of ashwinder eggs, the tailfeathers of a cockatrice, a vial containing phoenix tears. In the corner of the room stood a gray-skinned security troll, dressed in dark blue work boots the size of small boats, and wearing a grim expression. Hermione looked at it and shuddered; when she looked away, she saw Draco looking at her from across the room. He smiled faintly, and turned back to talking with Pansy and Malcolm Baddock, both of whom had come along because they were prefects, and thus required.

She cast another look towards Draco as they left the Scamander Room, because they were passing a sign that denoted that the Exhibition of Dark Age Artifacts was to their left. She knew what was in that room: the remaining three Keys of the Founders. Her Lycanthe, Harry's scabbard, and Ginny's Time-Turner. They had all of them been there at the dedication ceremony over the summer: the four Heirs, and Ron as well. But Draco did not look back at her; he was deep in conversation with Malcolm, so Hermione turned to look at Ginny instead. There she had better luck; Ginny, hand-in-hand with Seamus, returned her glance with a rueful look and a smile. Hermione winked back, and thus almost missed it as they passed under an arch which declared that they were entering:

The Cantwell J. Muckenfuss Exhibition of Implements of Indeterminate Purpose

“Ooh,” whispered Hermione, “this is IT,” and in her transport of excitement, she punched Harry in the arm.

“Some women get excited about earrings,” he whispered, wincing, “Others get excited about grand-scale larceny.”

“Hmph,” said Hermione, and fell silent as they entered the room.

The glass display cases in this particular exhibit were filled with all the magical objects the curators had never been able to identify an express purpose for. There were enchanted watches that always told the wrong

time (but why?), stone tablets engraved with magical runes that could not be translated, enchanted bells that probably did something when rung, but nobody had ever had the nerve to ring them, and a spinning pen that Hermione well knew would be spinning in perpetuity because there was a magnet in it, and not because it was magical – some wizard obviously didn't quite understand Muggle artifacts. This cheered her up, as it meant the museum curators were hardly infallible. And there – there it was, the Cup, smaller than she had imagined from the illustrations, glimmering silver behind a glass case. She detached herself from the rest of the students and went to stare at it, drawn as if in a dream. It sat between a long bone-handled knife and a stone pestle of some sort. A plaque was affixed to the base of the display case:

Cup/Goblet, Uncertain workmanship, circa 1100 AD. *This cup is believed to have belonged to Gareth Slytherin, although all evidence to that end is largely apocryphal. The cup rates a startling 8.7 on the IMP scale, although what purpose it might be put to is entirely unknown. The interior of the cup is carved with a pattern of waves and scales. It may perhaps have served as a tool for use in various alchemical preparations.*

“Come on,” said a voice, and then Harry's hand was on hers, drawing her away. The students had already begun filing out of the room after Flitwick, who was still chattering away in his clear little voice. She cast a last glance at the cup, sitting quietly behind its thick sheet of glass, and her heart quailed. She tightened her hand on Harry's, and followed him out of the room.

Drink of this

And take thy fill

For the water falls

By the wizards' will.

The inscription was carved onto the base of a stone fountain containing the statue of a bearded man spitting water. When Harry looked at him, he waggled a stone eyebrow. Harry looked away hastily, and examined the

placard at the bottom of the display, which proclaimed it to be the Fountain of Brisingamen, whose waters had magical healing properties -- and, the placard added helpfully, were rumored to make freckles vanish.

“Best not stick your head in,” he said to Ron, who was standing at his side. “We might never see you again.”

“Bah,” said Ron, by way of a rejoinder, and glanced around the room. They were in the high-ceilinged Room of Enchanted Statuary, which was pretty much what it sounded like. There were statues of mermaids singing and playing harps that actually sang and played harp music, although not particularly well, and a carving of a sleeping centaur that snored aloud, and some statues of what Ron had described as “tall Greekish looking chaps in nappies” in the corner, who had flipped their togas up at Lavender Brown and made her scream. “Those people still staring at you, Harry?”

“Yeah,” said Harry dispiritedly, changing a glance to the side. They had all assumed that the museum would be closed to everyone but students on the day of the trip, given the limited amount of Portkeys usually dispensed by the curators. But it was not empty. A visiting contingent of Canadian witches and wizards was there, and many of them had hung back from their own tour to stare at Harry with curious eyes. “How are we going to get away?” he muttered under his breath to Ron, close to despair. “They're all *staring* at me.”

Ron shrugged. “I know,” he said. “Maybe Hermione and I ought to try to get away on our own, you could give us the cloak...”

“No.” It was Hermione, coming around the side of the fountain, a determined look on her face. She joined them and continued in a whisper, “We need Harry, because he can be talking to Draco out here – you *know* we need him.”

“Well,” Ron said slowly, “and I can't believe I'm going to suggest this: we could bring Malfoy with us, and Harry could stay here. He could even create a distraction instead. Maybe he could start handing out autographs.”

“No,” whispered Hermione, “the second Draco left, Pansy and Malcolm

would notice.”

“And nobody's going to notice we're gone?” Ron asked.

Hermione gave him a dark look. “That's why we need Draco to distract them.” She looked at Harry. “Can you talk to him for a moment for us?”

“To Malfoy?” Harry looked past her, towards the far end of the room, his eyes seeking a familiar lankily graceful form, crowned with silver-tinsel hair. He immediately found where Draco stood between Pansy and Malcolm Baddock, staring at a row of unicorns carved out of marble. “Yeah,” he said. “I can talk to him.”

He shut his eyes and reached out; because Draco was so physically close, contact was instantaneous. *Malfoy?*

Uh-huh.

I think it's distraction time.

How distressing. I was really enjoying this exhibit.

Oh. Harry checked himself. Well, we could wait...

Something bubbled like soda water in the back of his head. Belatedly, he realized it was Draco laughing.

You must be nervous, Potter. Normally you wouldn't be such a pillock.

Of course I'm nervous. We're about to rob this museum, you know.

Pfft. Draco actually shrugged, without turning around. And you call yourself the hero of the wizarding world.

I never call myself that! Harry began indignantly, then cut himself off as something poked his ribcage. He looked down and saw that it was Hermione's quill.

“Harry,” she said warningly. “Do *not* get sucked into an argument please.”

Harry made a face at her, and she smiled angelically. “I mean it,” she added.

So, Malfoy. About that distraction – Harry began, but was interrupted by Professor Flitwick, loudly calling the students over towards the doors to the room that contained the Cursed Artifacts exhibits. The students began to move quickly towards him; this sounded like interesting stuff. Pansy and Malcolm detached themselves from the railing they had been leaning on and Draco followed them, hands in his pockets, not looking to the side.

Hermione looked at Harry. “What did he...?”

Give me five minutes once we get into that room, Draco said. Then put the Cloak on and run like hell.

Harry looked at Hermione and Ron, and, inexplicably, felt himself begin to smile. “We're on,” he said.

Eager to see the Cursed Artifacts exhibit, the students crowded through the doors, laughing nervously and bumping against each other as they pushed to be first. Draco insinuated himself into the center of the tight knot in the doorway, brushing past Lavender and Justin, moving towards the red-headed girl towards the front of the pack. As he brushed by Ginny, he whispered under his breath, so softly he was almost afraid she wouldn't hear him: *“When you get in there, go and look at the book display.”*

Her huge dark eyes flicked towards him, surprised. “Wh—“

“Just do it.”

He dropped back into the crowd, and found himself standing next to Malcolm Baddock, who gave him a curious look. Draco ignored him. Somewhere in the crowd behind them were Harry, Hermione and Ron. He was aware that they were watching him without having to turn around and look. *God, I hate teamwork*, he thought, as he emerged into the L.N. Malfoy Permanent Exhibit.

The room that housed the Cursed Artifacts collection was different than the other museum rooms they had been in. This, Draco thought, was probably to be expected. The center of the room was empty: all the artifacts were displayed along the walls, and every one was inside a glassed-in case. He recognized quite a few of them. There was the usual cursed jewelry and household items: mirrors that twisted the face of anyone who looked in them, jewelry that carried blood curses. One could curse anything, if one had a mind to. Most of the class were chattering and humming near a display of medieval cursed items: goblets that turned anything poured into them to acid, jewelry that slowly poisoned the wearer. The voices of the students were hushed, echoing faintly off the high marble ceilings and stone walls.

Draco, having seen all these things before, hung back, watching. Ginny and Seamus were standing by the far side of the exhibit, hand in hand, and as he watched, Seamus bent and said something to her and she laughed. Then, to Draco's relief, she released Seamus' hand, and as instructed, went over to examine the books in the glass-fronted case that lined the eastern wall of the room.

Draco knew what was on those bookshelves as well. A collection of Dark Magic books that even the Restricted Section at Howgwarts wouldn't carry: the *Necronomicon*, fragments of *The Book of Eibon*, the *Unaussprechlichen Kulten* by von Junzt, the *Pnakotician Manuscripts*, the *Sussex Fragments*, and the *Cultes de Goule* by the Count of Erlette – all books his father had owned. The titles came into clearer focus for him as he walked up to stand beside Ginny and look through the glass, but he didn't read them. He was very conscious of her standing next to him, of the group of students behind them, of the hushed and reverent atmosphere of the museum.

“Ginny?” he said, and she turned around, and looked at him.

It was now or never. Draco took a deep breath, reached out, and took hold of Ginny's wrist. She widened her eyes, surprised, opening her mouth to speak, and he pulled her hard against him and kissed her.

For a moment, she went absolutely rigid in his arms. Her lips parted under his with a sort of stunned acquiescence, and for a single split

second it was *almost* a real kiss. But it was only a second. Any illusions he might have had that she would melt into his arms evaporated as she wrenched her mouth away from his with a gasping sound. A moment later her hands were flat on his shoulders, shoving him away. “Let me go – let me *go* –”

He let her go. It wasn't part of his plan, but he couldn't bear to hold her there while she tried to struggle away from him. Her dark eyes met his for a split second, full of pained shock, and then hands clamped around Draco's arms, dragging him backwards. “Get *off* of her!” yelled Seamus' voice in his ear. With a feeling of dark glee Draco wrenched himself free of the other boy's grip and spun around to see Seamus staring at him, absolutely livid with rage. “Malfoy, you – what do you think you're *doing*?” Seamus shouted, so incoherent with anger he sounded almost tearful. Draco nearly felt sorry for him for a moment. “You -- you filthy *Slytherin!*”

“Jealous, Finnigan?” Draco said in a low voice, so soft only Seamus could hear him. “She doesn't let *you* kiss her like that?” -- and he might have gone on in that vein, but was prevented from doing so by the fact that Seamus chose that moment to punch him hard in the mouth.

The force of the blow snapped Draco's head back for a moment. His vision blurred and then cleared, and he saw Seamus staring at him, looking shocked. He smiled, and Seamus' look of shock intensified. Then he flung himself at the other boy, knocking him down onto the ground. The breath went out of Seamus in a startled gasp, and he twisted to get away from Draco, elbowing him hard in the ribs. Draco slammed a hard punch into Seamus' face, and then another; Seamus clawed at Draco's shirt, shoving him backward, and drove his fist up into Draco's stomach. He was swearing under his breath, very colorfully, his Irish accent blurring the words almost beyond recognition. Draco was visited by a sudden memory of knocking Seamus down when they had been six years old, and pummeling him with the blunt end of a broken broomstick. Some things didn't change, did they, Draco thought as he threw himself to the side to avoid another punch and Seamus went with him; they rolled across the floor together in a tangle of punching arms and kicking legs. Draco was faintly aware that everyone around them was screaming. Excellent.

A voice spoke to him then, inside his head: Harry, sounding anxious. *Have*

you caused a distraction, Malfoy?

Oh, yes, Draco replied with some satisfaction, and ducked another punch from Seamus. *Oh, yes, I have.*

The alarm, said Harry. *I need you to trigger the alarm.*

Not a problem, Draco replied, grabbed hold of the front of Seamus' shirt, and flung him backward hard. against the side of the glass case holding the Dark Arts books. The breath went out of Seamus and he gasped, and Draco took that opportunity to draw his left hand back just far enough, and point it at Seamus. The other boy's eyes widened in fear, and then Draco whispered *Stupefy!* A white jet of light shot from his fingers; Seamus ducked, and the bolt went over his head and directly struck the glass case behind him, which shattered into a thousand pieces, sending glass flying everywhere. And over the sound of the shattering glass, and Seamus' yell of startlement, and the screaming of their classmates, Draco heard the sound of the museum's alarm. It was, probably appropriately, the scream of a banshee – unbearably loud and horrible. Everyone cowered and clapped their hands to their ears. Draco was about to follow suit when he felt strong a grip clamp itself on the back of his shirt, and he was hauled into a standing position. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Seamus receiving similar treatment at the hands of a burly museum security troll. He shut his eyes as he was dragged to his feet, and in his head he heard Harry say, “Thanks, Malfoy.”

Sure, Draco thought back. *Any time.*

“Harry, you give Ron a hand up,” said Hermione, looking around the deserted Cantwell J. Muckenfuss Exhibition of Implements of Indeterminate Purpose anxiously. All three of them had shrugged out from under the cloak; not that it mattered, as the room was entirely deserted. The sounds of screaming could be heard coming faintly in the distance, and all the security trolls had fled; whatever Draco had done to cause a distraction it had certainly worked.

“Well, at least you can count on Malfoy to start a problem at the appropriate time,” said Ron, stepping into Harry's cupped hands and

allowing him to give him a leg up. A second later, Ron's hands were pressed against the glass which shielded the precious cup. He drew his hand back.

“Wait,” Harry said urgently. “Wait for the alarm.” He paused, a look of intense concentration on his face. “Draco says he can do it,” he added, and a moment later an ear-piercing shriek reverberated through the room: a howling, terrible, mournful sound. *A banshee wail*, Hermione thought. She almost screamed herself as Ron nearly tumbled sideways, catching at the side of the glass to steady himself. Only Harry seemed unperturbed. “Now!” he called up to Ron. “*Now!*” – And Ron drew his hand back, wrapped tightly in a fold of his cloak, then slammed it forward into the front of the display case.

The sound of the glass shattering was completely buried beneath the howling wails echoing through the room. Ron reached into the case, pushing aside the other objects – the glass bottle, the bone knife, which flashed briefly blue when he touched it – that shared a shelf with the cup. “No, don't touch *anything!*” Hermione shouted loudly, but Ron couldn't hear her, her voice was muffled by the sounding alarm. He pushed the knife aside and took hold of the cup, tossing it back to Hermione, who caught it one-handed, and shoved it in her bookbag. She drew out the transfigured Cup, and tossed it to Harry, who handed it up to Ron. Ron placed it carefully on the shelf, then leaped down to the floor. Harry raised his right hand, and pointed at the case. Hermione saw his lips shape the word, *Reparo*, and the glass flew up and reorganized itself just as the sound of the alarm was mercifully cut off.

The three of them looked at each other, all out of breath, with identical looks of amazement. “It worked,” said Ron, and whooped out loud. “We did it!”

“*I know*,” whispered Hermione in disbelief, staring down at the cup in her hand. It was very beautiful up close, and strangely light, even the row of emeralds lining the handle didn't seem to weight it down. Very, very carefully, she placed it inside her bookbag, and snapped the bookbag shut.

“We'd better get out of here,” said Harry, practically, and beckoned Ron and Hermione to his side. “Let's get back,” he added, tossing the

Invisibility Cloak over all three of them. They hurried from the room, holding each other's arms under the cloak, moving on tiptoes. Almost at a run, they re-entered the Cursed Artifacts exhibition, huddled under the cloak...

And came to an astounded stop. Ron dropped the edge of his cloak, and Harry made a grab for it, but fortunately no one in the room noticed the brief reappearance of Ron's head – they were too busy staring at the scene taking place in the center of the room. Two huge, gray-skinned burly security trolls, the like of which Hermione had only seen stomping around in book illustrations, stood facing each other across the heads of startled and milling students. Each was tightly gripping the arms of a struggling figure in its huge hamfisted hands: the one of the left gripped Draco, and the one on the right seemed to be having difficulty controlling a kicking and squirming Seamus Finnigan.

“I didn't know Seamus knew about the Plan,” said Ron.

“He doesn't,” said Harry grimly. “Oh, hell.”

“I don't think we need this cloak,” said Hermione, not even bothering to whisper, “nobody's looking at us, anyway.”

She pulled the cloak off of them, and stepped forward, the Cup in her book bag banging against her leg like a guilty reminder. She was right, nobody noticed them. There was far too much excitement going on already: Professor Flitwick was running and fro like a garden gnome that had been subjected to the *Tarantallegra* curse, the museum staff was urging the students to stand away from the broken glass that covered the floor so that the *Reparo* charms could be performed, the Canadian tourists were screaming, and the students were gawking in awed wonder at all the chaos. Meanwhile, Seamus appeared to be trying to claw his way out of the troll's grasp in order to get at Draco, who was making no such effort, and was staring back at Seamus in bored amusement. He might have been in the middle of buffing his nails for all the expression he showed, except that he was covered in blood and scratches – and so, for that matter, was Seamus.

Harry shot Hermione a look. “Did you know he was going to do this?”

Hermione shook her head. "I don't even know what happened..."

"He kissed me," said Ginny's voice in her ear.

Hermione spun around and saw Ginny standing behind her, looking very pale and startled. She paused for a moment to wonder how Ginny had managed to get behind them without her noticing, then dismissed it. "Who kissed you?" Hermione asked in surprise.

"Draco," said Ginny dolefully. She did not look pleased.

"Oh," said Ron, twiggling. "I get it. So Seamus clocked him one, then?"

"Actually, I think he hit Seamus first...possibly not. It was a bit hard to tell," said Ginny glumly. "I feel terrible about the whole thing."

Hermione was about to tell her not to be ridiculous when she was interrupted by Professor Flitwick's high twittering voice ordering all the students to get in an orderly line and file out of the room after the security trolls, heading towards the Portkeying platform at the museum's center. Hermione almost felt herself collapse in relief; the sooner they were back at school, the less the likelihood that anyone would notice their jiggery-pokery with the Cup.

She caught at Harry's sleeve and pulled him forward; all four of them fell into step with the other students. Ron and Ginny were conversing quietly behind her and Harry seemed distracted. "Harry...are they all right?"

A small line of concentration had appeared between Harry's eyebrows. "Draco says he's fine," he reported after a pause, "and he says Seamus is fine as well, they both look worse than they are."

"I'd no idea when we asked him to cause a distraction that'd he'd go quite that far."

Harry laughed low under his breath. "That's Draco. Never does anything by halves."

They were passing through the Enchanted Objects room now. Hermione tightened her hold on Harry's sleeve. It looked perfect, untouched, as if

they'd never been in there at all. She resisted looking towards the transfigured cup behind its sheet of glass. "When we get back to school," she whispered softly, "I've got to go hide the cup, right away."

Harry nodded. "You can borrow the Cloak, then," he said. "Draco says he's meant to go straight to Dumbledore's office; after that, I was supposed to meet him in the armory for fencing practice anyway. I mean, it is Monday. I guess I'll just go wait for him there."

Hermione nodded. "Make sure he's okay." They were in the center of the museum now, in the small garden. In groups of five the students were being herded onto the platform, handed their wands back by museum staff, and hurriedly Portkeyed back to school. Draco and Seamus must have gone first; they were nowhere to be seen. "I feel like we ought to..."

"Celebrate?" said Ron, from behind her. "Massive post-caper booze-up?"

"Ron, *shh*," she said, but she smiled. "Yes, exactly. Celebrate." She paused. "Before we figure out what on earth to do next..."

"I'll meet you guys in the common room before supper," Harry said. "We can celebrate then." They were up on the raised dais now, about to step onto the platform that was the Portkey out of the museum. Harry looked towards Hermione, and checked at her hesitant expression. "Hermione...?"

"Harry," she said, very quietly, and glanced back towards the museum. "You don't think that maybe..."

"Maybe what?"

"Maybe it was a bit too easy?"

"You must have a different definition of 'easy' than I do," said Harry, stepping forward, and took her hand as the Portkey whirled them away.

That much wounded pride ought to put a slump in anyone's upright posture, Draco thought, but it didn't seem to in this case: Seamus glared at him from the other side of Dumbledore's office, standing rigid and

upright against the far wall. His face was a colorful relief map of bruises: blackened eye, bloody nose, bruised chin, swelling lower lip.

Draco smiled at him pleasantly. They had been herded in here by Professors McGonagall and Snape and told to wait for Dumbledore to arrive. As soon as they had left, Seamus had commenced glaring at him and hadn't stopped yet. Smiling at Seamus hurt Draco's split lip, but it was worth it anyway just to see his hands clench against his sides in impotent fury. He supposed it was interesting to note that he hadn't lost his joy in malice via his association with Harry. He wasn't sure if it was a good thing, but at least it was interesting.

Surprisingly, it was Seamus who broke the silence first. "She would never kiss you back," he said. "Never. Never. *Never.*"

Draco picked up a crystal paperweight from the desk and held it up to the light that poured through the window. "Never never never?" he echoed. "That's right, Finnigan. Because if you say it three times, *that'll* make it true."

"What do you *want*, Malfoy?" Seamus demanded, his voice thick with dislike.

"What do I *want*?" Draco echoed with a laugh. "Let's see...I've always wanted to own a Quidditch team. Maybe the Appleby Archers. And I want to be old enough to get a tattoo. And I'd like a really nice suede jacket that won't get ruined in the rain -"

"No," Seamus interrupted. "What do you want with *Ginny*? Why her?" His eyes slid away from Draco, and fixed on the floor. "You've got everything already. Haven't you? Why do you want her too? Just to show...that you could have her if you wanted?"

The crystal paperweight felt heavy in Draco's hand. It was shaped like something, he couldn't quite tell what, it seemed to move fluidly under the touch of his fingers. "You're in love with her," he said, feeling some surprise, although he thought he might already have known it. "Aren't you?"

Seamus raised his eyes from the floor. They were intently blue, the one

beauty of an otherwise ordinary face. "If you take her away from me just to show that you can," he said, "and then you hurt her again, I swear I'll kill you, I don't know how yet, but I'll find a way and I'll kill you. You can die, you know – even if you are a Malfoy."

Draco just stared at him. Behind them, the door to the office opened with a click, and Dumbledore came into the room. He regarded both boys silently for a moment before he spoke. His voice was grave and quiet. "Sit down," he said. "Both of you. Please."

Draco looked down at the paperweight in his hand. It was a rose, he saw, with a heart carved out of a chip of emerald. He wondered why he hadn't seen it before. Setting the crystal flower on the desk, he sat down, and Seamus sat down beside him, leaning as far away from Draco as he could get.

Dumbledore looked from one of them to the other. His expression was one of tired resignation. "So," he said. "I have heard what transpired in the museum. I suppose it would be a truism to state that I am surprised at you both. Neither of you seems the type to employ physical violence."

"They took our wands away," Draco said. He heard his own voice with surprise. That wasn't what he had meant to say at all. "Sir," he added, weakly.

Seamus shot him a look of grave disgust. "It was just a scuffle, Professor," he said. "It got a bit out of hand."

"I started it," said Draco, and batted his eyelashes at Seamus.

"That's true, sir," Seamus said, steadfastly ignoring Draco. "He did start it."

"Yes," Dumbledore said. "Yes, I'm sure he did." He looked at Draco, and Draco's heart dropped into his shoes. "You have disgraced the school," he said, "and more importantly, you have disgraced yourself. Both of you." He looked down at his folded hands, and then back at the hangdog boys slumped in their chairs. "Twenty points from Gryffindor," he said, "and thirty points from Slytherin. You will both serve detention. A month of it for you, Mr. Finnigan. And for you, Mr. Malfoy – a month." He saw their

horrified expressions, and for a moment it looked as if he might smile. “You will serve your detentions together,” he added. “By the end of it, I expect you to be able to write each others' life histories.”

“I could already write Finnigan's life history,” drawled Draco irritably. “Was born, ate a potato, sucked at Quidditch, almost got shagged but not quite, ate a potato, died.”

“Thank you, Mister Malfoy,” said Dumbledore coolly. “Let me make that *two* months of detention for you.”

“Good,” interjected Seamus, and shot a glance at Draco. “And I think you should have to pay the bill for the damage to the museum, you smug git, Malfoy.”

Draco looked at Seamus. Then he smiled politely. “That was the Malfoy wing of the museum,” he said. “I'm hardly going to have to pay off my own Foundation, am I?”

Seamus turned an unbecoming shade of scarlet, and was silent. Dumbledore cleared his throat. “Thank you, Mister Finnigan,” he said. “I believe that will be all I need from you.”

Seamus got to his feet, still puce, and stalked out of the office. Draco could *feel* Seamus resisting the urge to slam the door as he went out, and smiled to himself. When he turned back to Dumbledore, however, his smile melted like snow in April. The Headmaster was looking at him with a gaze so piercing Draco felt as if Dumbledore were drilling into his head.

“Mister Malfoy,” he said. “I am quite sure you had your reasons for doing what you did. And Merlin knows they are opaque to everyone but yourself. However, there is no excuse for ruthless use of other people's sincere emotions. No matter what your intended ends might be.”

Draco swallowed hard and looked down at the ground. In his place, Harry would likely have felt terrible. Draco merely felt terribly confused. Surely, if Dumbledore knew what they had been trying to accomplish... “I understand, sir,” he said. “I'm sorry--”

“Don't apologize to me,” said Dumbledore in a clipped voice. “You will

apologize to Mister Finnigan. In public. And furthermore..." The Headmaster's voice trailed off then. Draco chanced a look up and was startled at what he saw: Dumbledore was looking at him with an expression of unutterable weariness. He seemed old in that moment, almost frail, his face very lined. "Draco," he said at last. "I understand that I have put you and Harry in a terrible position. I know that. And I am sorry for it. I wish that there were more that I could do, but I am afraid that I cannot."

"Headmaster..." Draco said in a sudden burst. "What you told me last week – about my father and Harry's parents – do you think I should tell him?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "I am afraid that is your decision to make," he said. "But I would say that yes, you should. It is never wise to hide things." He sighed, and shook his head again. "That is all, I suppose," he said. "And you will not go to Madam Pomfrey to have her attend to your wounds – I wish you to bear your bruises. And, when you have a moment, give a thought to what they mean."

Draco nodded silently, not exactly sure what Dumbledore might mean, and the Headmaster smiled at him. It looked like a real smile, if a tired one.

"Very well," Dumbledore said. "It is Monday afternoon, and I know you have an appointment in the armory. Go along, and give Harry my regards."

Outside the door to Dumbledore's office, the only sound was the ticking of the brass grandfather clock in the corner of the hallway. Ginny tried to ignore the insistent noise as she waited, nervously, for the office door to open. The moment they'd all returned to school everyone had scattered -- back to their respective common rooms to gossip, she didn't doubt. Hermione had fled somewhere, Cloak in hand, Harry had gone off to wait for Draco, and Ron – well, she didn't know where Ron had gone, but he'd scarpered pretty quickly as soon as they'd arrived back at Hogwarts. Not that she minded; she'd heard Harry tell Hermione that Draco and Seamus had been taken to Dumbledore's office, and she'd headed there without a

moment's thought.

A quarter hour later and she was still waiting. A vague and displaced sense of guilt assailed her. She felt as if somehow the fight were her fault. Probably because she had been its catalyst, however unwilling. The worst part, she thought wretchedly, was that some part of her, some small part, had *liked* the fight...she'd never thought Seamus had it in him to get quite so passionately angry, and as for Draco --

She broke off and looked up as the door to Dumbledore's office opened, wondering which of them it would be, or if it would be both of them. It was Seamus. She felt her mouth sag open a little bit – she hadn't realized quite how *bad* he would look. She hadn't seen most of the fight, and had somehow assumed that it was, had been, mostly staged and not sincere. But Seamus' injuries looked quite sincerely inflicted. The skin around his left eye was bright purple, and his bottom lip was swelled up to twice its normal size. “Oh,” she gasped, involuntarily. “*Seamus...*”

He glanced down at himself. His white shirt and gray sweater were spattered with blood. “Yeah,” he said. “Not so pretty, huh. I should get to the infirmary.”

“You look great,” she said firmly.

Seamus snorted, then winced as if this had been painful. “I do not,” he said. “I look like I've been playing tonsil hockey with a paper shredder.”

Ginny laughed. “Well, you're still making jokes,” she said. “So I'm not so worried about you any more.”

Now he did look at her. “You were worried about me?”

“Well, yes,” she said. “I mean – *look* at you.”

“I thought you said I looked great.”

“I lied,” she said. “You look horrible.”

He looked as if he would have smiled, if he'd been able to. Something tugged at her. He looked so different like this. Bruised up of course, and

bloody, and it gave him a slightly dangerous air that he'd certainly never had before. Even his voice sounded different...“Remind me why I hang around you again,” he said.

“Because,” Ginny said, and went up to him, and put her hands on his shoulders. “Of this,” and she kissed his chin, “and this,” and she kissed his cheekbone where the bruising wasn't too bad, “and this,” and she very gingerly kissed his mouth.

He looked at her wide-eyed, and touched her face lightly with the tips of his fingers. “I thought –” he said. “I figured you'd be angry.”

“I'm not. It was Draco's fault.”

“Yeah, but everything you said before –”

“Look, Seamus—“

“About not wanting me to protect you –”

“I know, but –”

“And I don't want you to think I don't respect that, because –”

“SEAMUS!” she yelled, and he broke off, startled, and stared at her.

She took a deep breath before she spoke, but when she did, her voice was firm.

“I want to go to Ireland with you,” she said.

Harry looked up as the door to the fencing room opened, and Draco came in. Harry hopped down off the table and came towards the other boy, smiling. “I wasn't sure you'd make it,” he said. “You're pretty late.”

“Sorry,” said Draco, shutting the door behind himself. He was still standing in the shadow and Harry could see only the outline of him, and the faint glint of silvery hair in the darkness. “I got detention. And I had

to do some quick talking...and a little bit of kissing."

"Dumbledore made you kiss him?" Harry snorted. "Malfoy, what kind of detention did you *get*?"

"Not Dumbledore," Draco clarified. "He was actually pretty understanding. Blaise, however...she wasn't."

"Blaise?" Harry bit his lip. "You know, I forgot all about her."

"Yeah," Draco said. "Apparently so did I." He sighed. "She was waiting for me when I got back to the dungeon. So was everyone else as a matter of fact. I had to do some quick talking."

"She forgive you?"

"Not exactly," Draco hedged. "I promised to talk to her about it as soon as I got back from detention."

"I'm detention now?" Harry suggested, a laugh building under his voice. "You know, you didn't tell me you were going to punch Seamus in the face."

"You wouldn't have let me," said Draco, finally coming forward into the light. As he did, Harry saw that he had the beginnings of an impressive black eye, as well as a cut across one cheek. Oddly, it suited him. Only Draco, Harry thought wryly, could manage to give the impression that he had gotten up in the morning, decided a black eye might add to his ensemble, and punched *himself* in the face. His shirt was also ripped where he had skidded across the floor on broken glass, and even that looked intentional. "Anyway, it wasn't like I planned it," Draco added. "It came to me in a flash of inspiration, you might say."

Harry raised an eyebrow.

Draco grinned. "You told me to create a distraction."

"You," said Harry, "have been wanting to belt Seamus in the face for weeks. You think I can't tell?"

“Oh, come on,” said Draco. “Don't you ever want to belt Seamus in the face? He's so damn smarmy.”

“No,” said Harry. “I happen to like Seamus.”

“No accounting for tastes,” said Draco. “Did you want to practice, or not?”

Harry nodded. “Sure I do. It's been a while.” He went back to the table and retrieved his sword, and when he turned back to Draco, Draco already had Terminus Est in his hand and was looking down at it almost quizzically. His face was oddly blank, expressionless, his eyes shining with a strange light. “Malfoy...?” Harry said.

Draco looked up quickly, his gray eyes lighting. “Yeah. Sorry,” he said, came forward, and met Harry in the center of the room. They saluted each other and moved apart, and then back together, Draco advancing, Harry backing away and parrying as he did so. He wondered if there would ever be a time he wouldn't hear Draco's voice in the back of his head as long as he had a sword in his hand. He had been quite patient in the beginning, explaining attack and recovery, parries and lunges. But Harry knew perfectly well he'd never have become as good as he had, as quickly as he had, if some measure of Draco's own knowledge and skill hadn't bled over to him through the Polyjuice Potion.

He slitted his eyes now as Draco came forward quickly with a beat-feint-feint-thrust. Harry riposted swiftly, then began retreating, drawing Draco out. Draco knew what he was doing; Harry could tell by his smile, but they were just practicing so it hardly mattered. Often they simply went on and on and on, until both or one of them tired, with nobody winning. Now Draco ducked and tried to get through Harry's guard, low-line, and Harry smiled at the anticipated move and replied with a stop-thrust which the other boy should have been expecting – but Draco did not move at all to block the thrust and Harry, realizing this almost a split second too late, wrenched his arm to the side. The blade made a sound like a whisper as it opened a slash along the side of Draco's sleeve. Harry, nearly overbalancing, crashed into Draco, who caught him and pushed him away, steadying him.

Harry jumped back as if Draco's touch burned him. He realized he was shaking and the hand that gripped the hilt of his sword was slick with

sweat. "Draco," he said. "What - why did you - I could have *killed* you, why didn't you block me?"

Draco's expression was almost completely blank. He looked down at his shoulder, where the rip in his shirt was already reddening with blood. Then he looked back at Harry, and Harry realized with a slight start that he was very pale, and that his white-blond hair, his shirt, his clothes, were drenched in sweat, as if he'd been running a marathon. "I don't know," Draco said in an unusually quiet voice. He walked across the room, and laid Terminus Est down on the long wooden table there. Then he put his hands flat on the table, and made a sort of gasping, hitching noise, as if he were having trouble breathing and only leaning on the table was holding him up. "I don't know," he said again, his voice almost too faint to be audible.

Seriously alarmed now, Harry went over and dropped his own sword on the table. "Draco," he said, "are you all right?"

Draco didn't say anything. Harry stood where he was, and waited, and finally Draco lifted his head and looked at Harry. His eyes were gray tunnels, going on and on without ending, and Harry could see into and through them - could see Draco's bewilderment and rising panic. And his pain, not emotional pain, but physical pain. As if a light had been switched on he realized what was happening, the knowledge passing from Draco to himself like light passing through a crystal. "You're ill," Harry said. "Aren't you?"

Draco took another breath. His shaking seemed to have eased a bit. "There's something wrong with me," he said. "My reflexes - they're off. I'm slower than I was. And I've been feeling dizzy a lot."

"Well, you got shot in the shoulder two weeks ago. You lost a lot of blood. Could it be - I mean, it would make sense if -"

Draco looked unconvinced. "Maybe," he said. "I've been waiting for it to get better. But it's been getting worse."

"For how long?" Harry said. "How long have you been ill?"

Draco shrugged. "Two weeks. Since the accident."

“Then it must be the injury – they must not have fixed it right – or maybe you were supposed to rest, and you haven't been resting properly –” Harry realized he was beginning to sound hysterical, and stopped with an effort. “This is why you lost the game Saturday,” he said. “Isn't it?”

Draco nodded. “Uh-huh.”

“You have to go to the infirmary,” said Harry. “Right now.”

Draco shook his head. “No.”

“Then I'll bang you over the head and drag you,” said Harry, in a decided manner. “I wasn't asking you. I was telling you.”

A slight flicker of amusement lit Draco's eyes. “That's touching,” he said. “But I'm not going. I'm not so slow I can't duck a punch from you, Potter.” He held up a hand at Harry's furious expression. “Look,” he said. “I already told Hermione and she's looking into it, in case there was some sort of – well, something on the shaft of the arrow that hit me.”

Harry felt as if someone had walked up and kicked him in the back of the knees. “Like *poison*?”

Draco hesitated for a split second, then shook his head. “That's impossible. I'd be dead already. There's no poison that takes this long to work. It could be a Slowing Potion or an Enervation Spell – annoying, but fixable. And look – we're going home in four days anyway. If it doesn't get better, I can get the best mediwizards in the country to come to the Manor and have a look at me. I'll owl Simon Branford himself if I have to. So don't get your knickers in a twist about it.”

“Why didn't you tell me?” Harry said, crossing his arms over his chest.

Draco looked him up and down, then, rather grudgingly, smiled. “I figured you'd freak out,” he said.

“I'm not freaked out,” said Harry.

“Right,” said Draco. “And I'm the Balinese Goddess of Plenty.”

“I think there was a statue of her in the museum,” said Harry thoughtfully. “Doesn't she have six breasts?”

Draco choked on a noise that was unmistakably a laugh. “Sod off, Potter.”

Harry ducked his head, and when he looked up again, he was relieved to see that Draco looked almost back to normal, no longer pale and strained. “I'm assuming if there was cause for concern, Hermione would have told me,” he said. “So I am not, actually, going to freak out.” This was something of a lie. “But I am going to expect you to see the mediwizards when we get home.”

He saw Draco blink, and felt the slight jolt of gratified surprise that came from him – it was still more than slightly odd to realize that *home* was now, for both of them, the same place. “All right,” Draco said, and straightened up. “I said I will. So I will.”

And Harry realized he would have to be satisfied with that.

She was waiting in his room when he got back from the armory. Sitting on the foot of the bed, in an emerald blazer and short black skirt, one long leg crossed carefully over the other. As usual, from the top of her perfectly groomed red-gold head to the tip of her Jimmy Floo stiletto heels, she was perfect.

“Blaise,” Draco said, feeling the exhaustion that had been haunting him seep like a cold pain into his bones. He felt dirty, in need of a shower, and the blood that had dried on his shoulder itched. “Now really isn't the...”

She launched herself off the bed, and stalked towards him, her green eyes blazing. Before he could move or react, her open palm cracked across his face in a stinging slap. “Bastard,” she hissed.

Draco fought not to wince. It had not been a good day so far – punched in the face by Seamus, stabbed in the shoulder by Harry, now smacked across the cheek by Blaise. He wondered what else the gods had stuffed up their sleeves as far as harm to his person was concerned. “Do that again,”

he said, "and I'll hit you back."

She glared at him. "Draco Malfoy," she snapped. "I will not let you make me look stupid."

"You look stupid?" he said. "Impossible."

She gave him a hard look. "Why?" she said. "Why did you do it?"

"Why did I kiss Ginny Weasley? Is that what you mean?"

She nodded tightly. "Have you got..." She looked sick to her stomach. "Feelings for her?"

Draco considered. "Define 'feelings'."

"Are you in love with her?"

"No," he said.

"Then why the —"

"I wanted to hack off Seamus Finnigan," he said. "It seemed the simplest way."

"And why would you want to hack off Seamus Finnigan?"

Because he's a smarmy little bastard," Draco said. "Because he grabbed your broom last Quidditch game, and I —"

She looked disgusted. "You expect me to believe that? Nice try."

"He annoys me," Draco said with a shrug. "Make of that what you will."

Blaise bit her lip. Her internal struggle was visible on her face. She wanted to believe him, and yet her inner cynic would not let her. When she finally spoke, her voice was carefully slow. "You're using me," she said. "I just don't know what for, or why."

Draco was jolted. "No—"

She cut him off. "Give me one good reason to stay with you, Draco Malfoy," she said. "One."

He glanced down, and was greeted by the sight of her feet in their silver strapped shoes, her toenails painted silver to match. Her toes were curling under, which always happened when she was nervous – everyone, he thought seemed to have one mannerism that always betrayed them – Hermione's biting her lip, Harry's twisting his hands together. "I'll buy you something pretty," he said.

She laughed. It wasn't a happy laugh. "Like what?"

"Whatever you want." He looked up from her feet, and saw her staring at him, her cheeks flushed. He took a step forward and put his hands on her waist; when they'd been children, he'd almost been able to span her small waist with his hands. "There was that bracelet you liked in Diagon Alley..."

"I don't want any jewelry, Draco," she said, cutting him off.

"Then what do you want, darling?" he said, chancing an endearment.

It worked; she almost smiled. "When I was a little girl," she said, "I always wanted a pony to ride."

He laid his hand against her cheek. Her skin was soft under his touch, her eyes enormous and lambently green. She was gorgeous – probably the prettiest girl he'd ever seen – and he felt nothing for her beyond a distant unfocused desire. "I bet I could help you make do without one," Draco said softly into her ear.

Her eyelids fluttered down, her long lashes shading her gaze, and for a moment she rested her cheek against his hand. Then her eyes flicked back up to his face, and she stepped back and away from him, pushing his hands away. "I don't think so," she said. "You don't get to touch me yet."

Draco wasn't sure whether he felt snubbed or relieved. "Blaise..."

"Make me look like a fool again and I'll rip out your kidneys and wear them as earrings," she said. "And that's a promise."

“I thought you said Slytherins don't keep their promises,” Draco said.

“I'll keep that one,” she replied, and turned on her heel. “You can count on it,” and she stalked out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

Night had already fallen when Harry left the armory and trudged upstairs to Gryffindor Tower. He was late to supper, and was sweaty, tired and in need of a shower. He spoke the password (“Ashwinder!”) and stepped into the common room, which was filled with flickering firelight. His eyes lit up when he saw that the room was empty save for Ron, who was sprawled in one of the fat armchairs pulled close to the fire.

Ron looked up as Harry came into the room, and waved him over. Harry came and dropped into the armchair next to Ron's, and for a moment they sat and stared into the leaping orange flames in a companionable silence. It was Harry who spoke first. “Sorry I'm late,” he said. “I was –”

“With Malfoy,” said Ron. “I know. You had fencing practice.” He was looking into the firelight; the vivid flames painted a dark gold shadow over his already bright hair. “Hedwig brought something for you while you were gone,” he said, as if remembering something, and began rummaging beside the armchair. “I put it back here...”

“Thanks...where's Hermione?”

“She went off to stash that cup thing. Said she had a perfectly brilliant hiding place for it.” Ron sat back up, a small package in his hand, addressed to Harry. “Here you go.”

Harry sat up straight and took the package. “I'd almost forgotten I bought this,” he said, tearing it open.

Ron looked curious. “What is it, then?”

Harry smiled. “You want to see?” He had succeeded in getting the package open now, and tipped something out of it into his hand. He held the hand out to Ron, opening his fingers to reveal something that glimmered blue

in the center of his palm.

Ron stared at it. "A ring?" he said. "I didn't know you cared."

"It's not for you, pillock," said Harry easily. "It's for Hermione, of course."

Ron sat where he was, staring down at Harry's hand. He made no move to touch the ring. "Is that a sapphire?"

Harry glanced down at the delicately worked blue circlet in his hand. "No, it's Venetian gl—"

"Is it a Christmas present?" Ron interrupted.

Harry blinked, looking slightly flummoxed by this hard line of questioning. "Well, it is but it's also..." he hesitated. "I suppose it's an I'm-sorry present. Sorry for being distant, for being difficult - you know. What we talked about before." He bit his lip. "I just want her to understand that my recent behavior doesn't have anything to do with whether I love her." He looked down at the clear blue jewel. "I guess I couldn't think of the right way to say it, so..."

"No." Ron was shaking his head. "No. Harry. That's stupid."

"Stupid?" Harry blinked at his friend, then very slowly closed his fingers over the small box, and retracted his hand. "Why is it stupid?"

"Because," Ron said roughly. "Because you're supposed to give a girl an engagement ring when things are going *well* in the relationship, Harry, not when they're going badly."

"It's not an -"

"It's manipulative," said Ron, and then flushed to the roots of his red hair.

"Manipulative?" Harry echoed in disbelief. "Because I want to give Hermione something that I think she'd like, that's manipulative?"

"Tell me you're not trying to tie her to you," said Ron. "Go on, say it. But I won't believe it."

“She's my girlfriend,” said Harry. “We're already tied together. And frankly, I think you're being kind of an ass about this.”

“Am I?” Ron had begun tapping the point of his quill against his knee. As he spoke, he tapped it more quickly and with greater force. “When are you going to do it, Harry?” he asked.

Harry shook his head. “I was thinking Christmas Day,” he said. “You know. When people usually give Christmas presents.”

“It's not just an ordinary Christmas present,” said Ron. “I think you should wait.”

“Oh, really.” Harry's voice was irritable. “Why's that?”

“Look, Harry – it's a ring. And no matter what, you give a girl a ring, she's going to think you want to marry her –”

“Well, maybe I do want to marry her,” said Harry, then checked at the astonished expression on Ron's face. “Well, not bloody now, I'm seventeen, it would be ridiculous. But that doesn't mean that I –”

“Marry her?” Ron echoed, and there was a strange tense note in his voice. “You can't.”

“What do you mean I can't?”

“Hasn't she talked to you lately? Don't you listen to her? Your relationship is falling apart!”

Harry stared at Ron. His jaw was set, his shoulders rigid. “And I suppose you think you know more about my relationship with Hermione than I do?”

“Bloody anybody would,” said Ron angrily, “the amount you pay attention!”

“You know what I think?” Harry burst out furiously. “I think you're jealous.”

Ron went white. "What?"

"Jealous. And you're hacked off because I haven't been around much lately. And yeah, I'm sorry. But this isn't exactly the way to show me the error of my ways, you know. Because all this is making me realize is why I don't want to spend time with you in the first place," Harry added furiously. "So maybe you might want to take a second and be a bit more understanding instead of acting like you know what Hermione wants better than I do!"

"You think you know everything?" Ron threw back at him, and there was an odd hitch in his voice. "How much time have you spent with her these past months? I bet you couldn't tell me what classes she's taking. You've been so wrapped up in your little world, and you don't let anyone in except that fucker Malfoy, and if you don't see the way *he* looks at her you're stupider than you look."

Harry shook his head. His eyes were brilliant with anger. "Nice try. I know you hate Draco and quite frankly, I couldn't care less. I don't know what the hell has gotten into you, Ron. I am going to go upstairs now, and go to sleep, and on Christmas Day I'm going to give this ring to Hermione, and if you want to sit in the corner and glare at me, fine, but –"

"You're so stupid," Ron said, and his voice came out ragged, on a half-tearful gasp. "You're so *stupid* –"

"Just shut up, Ron."

"You think you could just ignore her and she'd sit there and wait for you to wake up and start paying attention again? You think she'd be willing to let you treat her like she didn't matter –"

"You mean Hermione? What are you talking about? *Who* are you talking about?"

Ron sat bolt upright. "*I'm talking about Hermione!*" he yelled, so loudly that Harry flinched back. "*I'm in love with Hermione, and she's in love with me!*"

A dead silence followed this announcement. Harry stared blankly at Ron; Ron stared equally blankly back. The expression on his face was one of stunned incomprehension, as if he could not believe the words that had just issued from his lips. "My God," he whispered. "Did I just..."

"Say that?" Harry's eyes were icy. "Yes, you did. And it's not fucking funny. If you want to make jokes –"

"I'm not joking." Ron's eyes were still dazed, but his voice was firm, and so was his set chin. He raised his face to Harry's. "I wouldn't have chosen this way for you to find out. But it had to be sometime."

Harry shook his head, and his black hair flew around him like a cascade of shadow. "Right. Very amusing. You can really be a jerk sometimes."

"I'm not joking," Ron said again. He raised his eyes to Harry's. For a moment, the two gazes, blue and green, met and tangled. And finally, oddly, Ron smiled, a strangely luminous smile. "I wanted to tell you," he whispered. "I thought about telling you. Every night I thought about it. I must have told you a thousand times, in different ways, in my head. And now...and now you know." He took a deep, shuddering breath, and half-closed his eyes. "And now you know," he repeated again.

There was something in the simplicity of the words he spoke, in the expression of mingled relief and terror on his face, that was inarguable. Another silence followed, broken by the sound of an object striking the stone floor. It was the package that Harry had been holding; it had fallen out of his hand.

"That's insane," Harry said. His voice was also firm, but blank and colorless, lacking any music at all. A robot's voice. "It doesn't make any sense."

Ron's lips parted; he looked as if he were about to speak. Then the portrait hole swung open, and they both froze, and turned to stare. It was, as if inevitably, Hermione. She was smiling, flushed from the cold outside, her arms full of books and the fur collar of her blue cloak pulled up around her neck. "Hey, you two," she said cheerfully. "What's all the yelling?"

“Hermione,” interrupted Ron, his voice fierce and wretched, “*he knows.*”

Hermione paused and blinked at him. “What?”

Ron got to his feet. He was standing next to Harry now. Harry had remained very still, not moving. His eyes went from Hermione to Ron, and back again. “Harry knows,” Ron said. “I’m sorry. I know we were going to wait until New Year’s.”

The smile had begun very slowly to fade from Hermione’s face. She looked from Harry’s white face to Ron’s set one. “Is this some kind of joke?” she said uncertainly. “I don’t understand.”

“Welcome to the club,” said Harry, speaking for the first time since she had come into the room. “I don’t understand either.”

“Hermione!” Ron said fiercely. “Don’t you get it – there’s no point pretending! Harry knows! I told him!”

Hermione looked at him wonderingly. “Told him what, Ron?”

“I told him,” said Ron, speaking very slowly, “about *us.*”

Hermione’s mouth opened slightly, and she stared at Ron. Then she stared at Harry. Her gaze went back and forth between them and she resembled nothing so much as a small creature trapped between two much larger predators. “I don’t...” she said softly, and then her voice trailed off. “Are you two...” Her gaze finally came to rest on Harry. “Harry...” she began.

“Ron says he’s in love with you,” said Harry in a flat voice, and Ron flinched. “And he says you’re in love with him.”

Hermione looked stunned. “He said what?” she whispered, still staring at Harry. “No, he wouldn’t say that – it isn’t true. That can’t be what he meant.” Her eyes, enormous in her pale face, went to Ron. “That’s not what you meant, is it? Harry just misunderstood.”

Ron looked as if Hermione had hit him in the face. The blood seemed to drain out of his skin. He made a strange sound, low in his throat, and stood up, staring at Hermione. “You can’t do this,” he said. “I know you’re

afraid but you can't do this.”

“Afraid?” Hermione echoed. “Afraid of what?”

Ron spun around, and stared at Harry. His eyes were huge, almost black with intensity. “I love her,” he said. His voice was thin, but defiant. “I love her, and she loves me. We love each other. And we haven't held back, either. We're together almost every night. Together in *every way*.”

“*Ron!*” said Hermione, her voice exploding out on a half-shriek. “What are you *doing?*”

Harry looked as if he were going to throw up. “This has gone beyond a joke,” he said. “Beyond any kind of game – one of you better tell the truth, and pretty fucking quickly.”

Ron turned his head, and looked at Hermione. “For God's sake, it's time, Hermione,” he said. “Tell him you love me.”

Hermione's hands slowly clenched at her sides. Her voice when she spoke was as fierce and cold as an ice storm. “*I do not love you,*” she said, and her voice rose and rose, brushing the edge of hysteria. “I do not love you and moreover I have no idea what you are talking about. I have never *been* with you. I have never –”

“You're *lying,*” Ron said, his voice as astonished as it was angry. “How can you –”

“How can *you?*” Hermione shouted back. “How can you stand there and tell such terrible lies?”

“It's the truth!”

“I would never do that! Never!”

Ron spoke again, his eyes never leaving Hermione's, although his words were for Harry. “Where do you think she goes, Harry, when you can't find her? What do you think she's been hiding? Why does she always look so tired? You've had that feeling she doesn't love you any more? *Now you know why.*”

“Why are you doing this?” Hermione's voice sounded shattered, a fragile glass bell buckling under strain. “Why? Why are you doing this, Ron?”

“Because I'm tired of *lying*,” he shot back.

“You're lying right now!”

“I'm telling the truth!” Ron's voice was thunderous. He turned back to Harry, who was standing very still, unmoving, his face entirely blank. “You believe me, don't you?” he said in a harsh half-whisper. “You know it's true.”

Harry said nothing. He glanced down and then back up at Ron, expressionless, as if he were gazing at a stranger.

Then he looked at Hermione, who started towards him involuntarily. He held out a hand, arresting her progress. “No,” he said.

She stopped where she was. “Harry—“ There was a pleading note in her voice. “You know I would never – you know I love you.” She turned and looked at Ron. “Tell him you're lying,” she whispered. “It's not too late – tell him –”

Ron didn't look at her. His eyes were on Harry, the lines of strain around them very dark. “It's the truth,” he said. “I know what you want to do. Do it.”

Harry raised his right hand and pointed it at Ron. “*Veritas*,” he said.

Hermione shrieked out loud as the jet of black light shot from Harry's hand and hit Ron in the chest. Ron doubled over, gasping, then slid slowly down the wall, holding his arms tightly across his body, his legs splayed out in front of him.

Harry looked at him, still with that odd distance on his face, as if he was regarding something that was happening very far away.

“Ron,” he said, and Ron raised his head. His face was creased with pain. “What you just told me – is it true?”

Ron took a deep and shuddering breath. The pain had its claws in him, and when he spoke his voice cracked. But it was strong, and there was resolution in it, and surety.

“Yes,” he said.

Hermione went white, and swayed on her feet. She put out a hand and steadied herself against the wall; she seemed to be beyond speaking.

Harry, however, was not. “You're in love with Hermione? You've...been together?” he demanded, his voice hard and sharp.

Ron nodded. “Yes, like I told you.”

The skin of Harry's face seemed to have tightened, pressing back against the bones. But his voice was steady. “How many times?”

Ron flushed. “I don't know. A lot...I can't count...almost every night.”

“*Where?*”

Ron ducked his head, struggled, and said, “The prefect's meeting room.”

Harry's breath was coming quickly now, but his voice was still expressionless. “And does she love you?”

Hermione found her voice. “Harry –”

“Shut up,” said Harry, his tone cold and flat. He was still looking at Ron. “*Does she love you?*”

“She said she did,” said Ron. He was looking down at his hands now. “She said she did.”

“She said she loved me too,” said Harry and there was nothing in his voice: no anger, no pain, no love and no hate. Just a terrifying emptiness. He raised his hand and pointed it again at Ron, “*Finite incantatum.*”

Ron jumped. The pain faded out of his eyes, although the tension

remained apparent in every line of his body. Very slowly he began to rise to his feet, his hands behind him, flat against the wall. "I'm sorry," he said, and looked at his feet. "I'm sorry."

Harry raised his head, and looked at Ron. Somewhere inside his eyes was the eleven-year old boy he had been, begging his best friend to say that he lied. Behind that child, the man that Harry had become knew that he did not.

"How could you," he said, his voice flat and utterly toneless. "How could you do that to me?"

Ron said nothing. He couldn't seem to meet Harry's eyes with his own. All the color in his face had gone, and he stood stock-still, his back pressed against the wall. At the base of his throat his pulse beat, fast and hard and visible beneath the skin.

"Harry." It was Hermione, her voice a thin shell of itself. "Please. It isn't true."

Harry turned on her. "Don't talk to me." His voice was fierce, his eyes like chips of green ice. "Don't talk to me, don't look at me. Don't ever come near me again."

Hermione's face crumpled. "*Please* listen—"

"*I said don't talk to me!*" Harry yelled, his composure cracking at last. "He's telling the truth, how can he lie under the Veritas curse? Tell me that, since you're so goddamn clever! *How is it possible that he's lying?*"

"*Harry!*" Hermione said, her voice a half-scream, and then Harry's hand went to his wrist and ripped away the watch she had given him, and he flung it at her, so hard that she cried out when it struck the arm she had raised to protect her face.

"Get away from me," he said, and his voice cracked, through and through like glass shattering. "Get away from me before I hurt you, because I will if you come near me, I swear to God I will."

Very slowly, Hermione bent down and picked up the watch. When she

straightened up, there were tears on her face, although she did not move to blot them or wipe them away. She looked not at Harry, but at Ron, and her face was very white. "I hate you," she said, "I will always hate you for this," and then her voice broke and she turned and ran to the portrait hole, and it swung open and let her through.

It was a cold walk from the prefects' bathroom back to his bedroom in the dungeon, but Draco was not in a mood to hurry. He'd washed off the sweat of fencing practice, and had been soaking meditatively in the bath when he'd noticed that the blood that seeped from his injured arm, as it washed away down the drain, was slightly phosphorescent – it was glowing.

This had killed his enjoyment of his bath. He'd gotten out and toweled off, and left the bathroom without bothering to dry his hair. He shivered in the cold air of the unheated dungeon, and turned the last corner on the way to his room with a feeling of relief – relief which faded quickly as he saw that the hallway in front of his room was not deserted. A cloaked figure stood there, hood pulled up, almost but not quite melting into the shadows. The figure was slender, and obviously female. She straightened up as he approached.

Draco paused, and sighed. "Blaise?" he said. "Look, it's been a long day –"

He broke off as the figure raised two slender hands and pushed the hood back: a cascade of brown curls tumbled out, framing a white face.

Hermione.

Draco gaped at her, all clever commentary flying out the window. "What are you *doing* here? Someone might see you."

She looked at him blankly, as if he were speaking another language. "Malcolm Baddock already saw me," she said. Her voice was distant, and very calm. "He let me in. I told him you'd kill him if he said anything." She paused. "I think you should let me into the room now."

He looked at her more closely. "Does Harry know you're here?"

Her reaction to this question was unprecedented: she flinched violently, and her eyes filled with tears. Shocked, he reached out for her, then thought better of it, and unlocked the door instead. He pushed the door open, and ushered her into the room; with a last look up and down the corridor, he followed her in and shut the door behind them.

He threw his towel over the back of a chair, and studied her. She had taken a few steps forward and now stood very still in the center of the room, between the bed and the fireplace, her hands at her sides. He felt vaguely relieved that he was generally a neat person – the room was extremely tidy: his fencing clothes, tossed across the back of an armchair, the only sign of mess. Then again, she didn't seem as if she would have noticed if he'd been collecting garbage on his floor since the start of term. She stared around her like someone in a distracted dream.

Draco shifted his feet, wondering what to say, which rarely happened. He was also increasingly aware that he was wearing damp pajamas which were sticking to him. “Hermione,” he said slowly. “Would you mind telling me what this is about?”

She turned slowly and looked at him. Her face, above the white-lined collar of her blue cloak, was very pale, her eyes like huge black coins. “Your room is very nice,” she said. “You never said you had such a nice room...”

“Hermione,” he said, more sharply.

“You have a fireplace... I wouldn't have thought you'd have a window... oh, the rooms are built into the cliff, aren't they? That's so –”

“*Hermione.*” Without thinking about it, Draco crossed the room to her, and caught at her wrist. She looked away from him, her eyes wide and blank. A sudden horrible thought assailed him, and he tightened his grip on her wrist involuntarily. “Did something happen to Harry? Is he all right?”

“I don't know,” she said, meeting his eyes finally. “Draco, do I seem...mad to you?”

“Do you seem what?”

“Do I seem like I've gone mad?” Her breath was coming quickly now, in ragged gasps. His hand where it held her wrist was slippery, and he was suddenly even more conscious of his damp, half-dressed state. “Lost my mind?”

he opened his mouth to say her name again, then realized it was becoming repetitive. Instead, he took her by the shoulders and propelled her towards the bed. She sat down obediently on the edge of the bed and folded her hands in her lap. He stared at her, and she stared back.

“I need to change my clothes,” he said. “Sit right here and don't, uh, don't turn around.”

She nodded dully. Any fears he might have had that she would be tempted to swing around and sneak a peek were relieved by her expression. She looked about as interested as if he'd just told her he was about to go work a very dull Arithmancy problem backwards in Japanese.

Feeling as if he had wandered into a very strange dream, Draco went to his clothes chest, pulled out a pair of black trousers and a Knarl Lagerfeld dark green shirt, crossed to the other side of the room, and changed hurriedly, watching Hermione as he did so. She did not move from her place on the bed, only sat where she was, staring down at her hands. He pulled his shirt on, buttoned it, went back to the bed, and sat down next to her. “Okay,” he said quietly. “Why don't you tell me what happened?”

She didn't reply, only stared past him, at a point beyond his left shoulder. He reached out, and took hold of her shoulders, gripping them tightly. “*Hermione*,” he said firmly. “I assume you came here because you wanted my help. But if you don't tell me anything, I *cannot* help you.”

“I know,” she said, very softly, not raising her eyes to his. “I know, but how can I tell you what happened when I don't understand it myself?” His grip on her shoulders tightened, and she winced. “I've gone mad,” she said. “It's the only explanation.”

He was silent for a moment. When he spoke, it was very steadily. “You,” he said, “have always been the sanest person I know. If you're mad, then

we all are. I am. Harry is. Weasley is –” Her shoulders jerked violently under his hands, and he ducked his head to try to see her face. “Ron? This has something to do with Ron?”

She nodded, a tiny nod. “Yes.”

“Tell me,” he said. “Not what you think happened, or what you think might be wrong with you. Tell me the facts.”

She took a deep and ragged breath, and raised her eyes slowly. They were so dark the pupil seemed to have disappeared into the iris; they looked like black tunnels, going on and on forever. “You won't believe me,” she said, and her voice cracked with pain. “Harry didn't believe me, and you won't either, and Ginny will believe Ron because he's her brother, and what will I do, I won't be able to stand it if you don't believe me, I won't be able to *stand* it –”

“I'll believe you,” he said sharply, cutting her off. “I believe you already. Just tell me what happened.”

“All right.” She nodded, and looked down again at her hands, balled into fists on top of her knees. “All right,” she said again, and then she began to speak, haltingly at first, then in a rush of words like a river undammed, telling him what had happened in the Gryffindor common room, what Harry had said, what Ron had said, what they both had done. And as she spoke, her small steady voice going on and on, Draco found himself at first unable to believe what he was hearing – and then, strangely able to. *I knew there was something wrong. I knew there was something.*

“And then,” she finished, her voice unsteady, “a-and then, Harry said he never wanted to see me or speak to me again, and I should never go near him. I ran out – I saw McGonagall and Lupin rushing up, but I ran past them. I guess they ran into the common room – the Veritas curse must have set off the wards, they have those wards up, you know, the Dark magic ones, and –”

“I know about the wards,” Draco interrupted her gently. “Sod the wards.”

She nodded. “Of course. I'm sorry.” Her voice was empty and flat, and when she glanced down at her hands again he saw that she had something

balled up tightly in her right fist. He dropped his hands from her shoulders, and slowly reached for her hand. She let him, offering no resistance as he pried her fingers open, and he blinked at the familiar glimmer of gold that was revealed. It was the gold watch that Harry always wore on his right wrist, his gold watch with the dark leather band. “He threw it at me,” she said, by way of explanation, and closed her fingers again. “He said I should never come near him again.”

“I know,” Draco said. “You told me.”

“He's right,” she said. “There's something wrong with me. I don't remember – I don't remember having done anything with Ron, but I must have done, mustn't I?”

Draco took a deep breath. He knew his next words must be chosen with great care. “Hermione,” he said. “There is nothing wrong with you. I knew Weasley was developing some sort of –feelings for you. I just didn't realize he was quite this delusional about it.”

Her head snapped up and she looked at him almost accusingly. “How do you know he's delusional? How do you know it isn't me that's delusional?”

“Because he's the one telling the bizarre story, Hermione, not you.”

“You didn't see him,” she said, her voice rising, “he was so sure, Draco, he was so sure, and the way he looked at me – and he was under the Veritas curse, *how could he be lying?*”

“Because,” Draco said firmly. “The Veritas curse makes you tell the truth, but it doesn't gift you with knowledge you don't possess. In other words, just because he believes it's true doesn't make it true. He could be under a Confundus curse – or have been Memory charmed –or just be a complete nutter, for all I know, although I doubt it. What I don't doubt is that the Veritas curse, in this case, doesn't prove anything. *Anything.*”

He broke off, because Hermione was staring at him. Her eyes were enormous. “You believe me,” she said. “You really believe me, don't you?”

“Yes,” he replied, because he did. “I absolutely believe you.”

“Oh, thank God,” she said and burst into tears. He stared at her in alarm, but before he could do anything, she had thrown her arms around his neck and buried her face in his shoulder. She was sobbing in a way he would not have thought possible, every bit of the controlled reserve that had kept her so calm throughout this past half hour swept away as if by a flood. Very gingerly he put his own arms around her, and held her as she wept. He felt sure that there were Things One Did in these situations, soothing noises to be made, heads to be patted, but he had no experience with comforting people, much less comforting anyone he cared about. He could do nothing other than sit and hold her as the tumult of her grief spent itself.

“I feel like I can't breathe,” he heard her whisper finally, her voice muffled against his shoulder. “I don't understand what's happening to me.” She still had her arms around him, her hands fisted in the back of his shirt. All of her softness was pressed against him, and he could almost taste the salt of her tears in his mouth. Against his will, he felt his body react to her proximity; after all, he was seventeen, and some things were beyond his immediate control. Quickly, he reached up and firmly detached her arms from around his neck.

“You should lie down,” he said, pulling away from her. “You're exhausted.”

She shook her head swiftly, her hand still gripping his shirt. “No. No. I can't. I couldn't possibly sleep.”

He sighed, his mind darting back and forth between various options. Holding her on his lap again was not a workable one. Neither, apparently, was she willing to lie down on her own. He slid off the bed and knelt down in front of his small bedside table; he slid the bottom drawer open, and drew out a bottle. The label on the bottle proclaimed it to be wine from the Archenland Vineyards, bottled in 1867. He looked at it for a moment – it was meant to be a gift for Sirius and Narcissa, and was worth more than he cared to remember. But, it couldn't be helped. “*Aperto*,” he muttered, and the cork popped out of the bottle with a faint sound.

He handed the open bottle open to Hermione, and she took it and looked at blankly for a moment. Then, without hesitation, she raised the bottle to her lips.

“Whoa,” said Draco, jumping to his feet. “You're supposed to...oh, hell, whatever,” he finished in a resigned manner as Hermione knocked back a healthy swig – then gasped and choked.

She looked at him with watering eyes. “Draco, what *is* this stuff?”

Gently he reached forward and took the bottle away from her, placing it atop the bedside table. “Archenland wine,” he said. “You're supposed to mix it with water, technically...it's very strong.”

She made a face. “Tastes like oven cleaner,” she said, her words very slightly slurred. Draco was not surprised. Generally Archenland wine was consumed by the teaspoon. A whole glass could knock out a mountain troll. Already her eyelids were beginning to flutter down. “Draco,” she said softly, and reached out her hand. “Could you please...”

Very carefully he took the proffered hand. It was soft and warm in his grasp, a small alive thing which he held as loosely as he could; in the back of his mind, as always, was the careful thought that he must not be disloyal to Harry, and yet at the same time her pain hurt him in a way he couldn't explain. As always, the narrow space between the two people he loved most in the world was a precarious place to stand.

“Could you please,” she said again, and now she was definitely slurring her words, “find him for me?”

He knew she meant Harry. “You want me to try to find him?” he echoed. “Make sure he's okay?”

“Yes–” Her mouth trembled. “I just want to know that he's all right.”

“I know,” Draco said. “So do I,” and he shut his eyes, and willed himself to concentrate. It was very difficult for a moment, as his mind was whirling. He forced himself to think of Harry, and his mind groped through the black space that separated them, searching for the familiar shape of Harry's thoughts, the known contours of his mind. He found him, finally, a vague shimmer of light in the darkness. *Harry*, he said. *Harry, can you hear me?*

There was a long silence. Then a very faint, almost undetectable reply. *I can hear you.*

Are you all right?

Another pause. *No. I'm a long shot from all right, Draco. I may never be all right again.*

Do you want me to come and get you? Draco asked, knowing that he would have to leave Hermione to do so; knowing that he would, if Harry wanted him.

This time the response was immediate. *No. I'm in Lupin's office. They brought me here. I'm in trouble, I think. I don't care, though.*

Harry –

They're coming. It's all right, Malfoy. There's nothing you can do for me. Nothing anyone can do.

And Harry's mind shut down like a door being slammed shut. The force of it seemed to knock Draco back into his body; his eyes flew open. For a moment, he blinked at the light, his eyes adjusting – he had been in such a profound darkness. He hurt, but it was not a corporeal pain – he was not even sure it was *his* pain. It was Harry's, but then Harry was almost his own self. It was the first time in his life that he had ever thought that if he could take someone else's pain and bear it himself, he would.

“Hermione...” he began, in a half-whisper – and paused.

She was asleep, her cheek on her hand, her body curled among the pillows. Her long dark lashes looked like ink strokes against her pale cheeks, and her chest rose and fell steadily with her breathing. He began to stand up, but realized that he could not – her outflung hand was tightly bunched in the material of his sleeve, and he could not pull away without waking her.

With a sigh, he moved closer to her, and pulled the corner of the blanket up so that it covered her shoulders. Then he lay down beside her on the bed, and stared up into the darkness.



The prefects' meeting room was freezing cold. *He* was freezing cold. Ron felt sure his fingers were turning blue, but when he looked down at them, they were the same color they had always been. It was hard to believe. Had he been able to take himself to a doctor or mediwizard, they could have told him that shock drops body temperature, but he couldn't, and wouldn't if he had been able to. He didn't want to see anyone. He wanted to sit in this room forever. He wanted to die.

Over and over in his mind he kept replaying the scene in the common room. What he had said. What Harry had said. The look on Harry's face. He'd known it would be bad, but not that bad. Hermione had told him so many times, here in this very room, that she was quite sure that Harry didn't love her any more; that she suspected he knew that she no longer loved him either. And he'd believed her. Why shouldn't he believe her? Hermione had never lied to him.

Only, apparently, she had.

A spasm of nausea twisted his stomach as he recollected her words in the common room. *I do not love you*, she had said. *I do not love you and moreover I have no idea what you are talking about*. So she had lied. Apparently she never had had any intention of telling Harry: not at New Year's, not ever. Looking back now, he could see how she had put him off and put him off. He'd been too blinded to see it at the time.

The sickness came back in a wave. This time, he was able to breathe through it. It was difficult, but he managed it by concentrating. In fact, he was concentrating so hard that he did not hear the door of the meeting room open quietly. It was only when he looked up again that he saw that she had come into the room, and was looking at him with an expression of alarm.

“Ron?” she said gently. “What's wrong? You look ill.”

He got to his feet and stared at her, and Hermione stared back. She looked the same – the same – the faint scarlet light from the glass window teased the gold-red glints in her tumbled hair. She wore it down because he liked it down. He'd told her that. And she was wearing her black school robes, and under them her blue pajamas that he had given her two years ago. “What,” he said, and his voice came out creaky and unfamiliar, “are you

doing here?"

Her lips parted and she looked at him in surprise. "I know I haven't come lately," she said. "But please don't be angry – you know it isn't easy for me to get away." She took a step towards him, and when he did not move away, she took another. She put her arms around him, and he let her, unresisting. "I have to leave soon," she said. "Don't let's waste our time being angry."

He looked down into her face. Her familiar, beautiful face. He remembered the first time she had asked him to meet her there. And she'd cried on his shoulder. Harry didn't talk to her any more. He didn't love her. She wasn't sure she loved him either. She wasn't sure she ever had. She'd made mistakes, terrible mistakes. Would he ever forgive her. Could he still care about her. And she'd kissed him. He'd about fallen off the table in shock. It had been weeks before she'd tried that again. And he had marveled. How she'd been so able to behave in public as if nothing were wrong, or strange, or different. She'd told him she was terrified of hurting Harry. Harry had so many troubles these days, they'd driven him half mad. He wasn't the same Harry. He might even be dangerous. Help me, she'd said. You're the only one who can. His thoughts, his memories, broke up into whirling fragments and spun around his head like startled birds. He clutched at her. He heard his own voice as if it came from a distance. "Why did you," he said. "Why did you lie to him?"

Her voice sounded suddenly sharp, startled. "Lie to who?"

"To Harry," he said. "Why did you lie to Harry?"

When she replied, her voice sounded defensive. "We both lie to Harry," she said. "All the time. We have to. But, I told you. New Year's –"

"*New Year's?*" Without any conscious recognition that he was doing so, he seized her shoulders and shook her, hard. He heard her gasp. "*What's the point of bloody New Year's when Harry knows already?*"

She froze in his grasp. "Harry knows?" she echoed, her voice utterly shocked. "He knows?"

He stared at her. All the whirling thoughts in his head came together like

glass fragments under the *Reparo* spell. Everything seemed suddenly very obvious and very clear. He tightened his grip on her shoulders, and she gasped in pain, but he hardly noticed it. When he spoke, he marveled at the evenness of his own voice: its firmness and deliberation. "Tell me," he said. "Who are you?"

She tried to pull away. "Ron, let me *go*."

"Who are you?" he said again. "Who are you, and why have you been pretending to be Hermione?"

References: The fountain in the museum with its poem is from The Weirdstone of Brisingamen; Archenland wine that's incredibly strong is from The Narnia Chronicles; all the Dark books in the Museum are from HP Lovecraft's Miskatonic University. The idea that the Slytherin dungeon is built into a cliff is from Stacey. The Stonehenge Museum historical pamphlet is adapted from the British Museum's historical pamphlet.

"and trust me, Weasley, eternity with Satan and all his hellish minions will be nothing compared to five minutes with me and the pointy end of my wand." - Blackadder

"crazy whirligig of fun" - Buffy

"This must be some newfangled usage of the word 'safe' that I hadn't previously been aware of." - Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

"Was born, ate a potato, sucked at Quidditch, almost got shagged but not quite, ate a potato, died." - Buffy

"the Balinese Goddess of Plenty" - Blackadder

Draco Veritas Chapter Seven: Burning the Boats

It is a curious sensation: the sort of pain that goes mercifully beyond our powers of feeling. When your heart is broken, your boats are burned: nothing matters any more. It is the end of happiness and the beginning of peace.

--GBS

"Will he die of it?" the Dark Lord asked.

He stood beside a polished rosewood table on which sat a chess set carved from fluted glass. The chess set was familiar to Draco. He had seen it somewhere before. It nagged at him, but like all things seen in dreams, he could not pinpoint its place in his life. The room the Dark Lord stood in was full of shadows: Draco knew this room, and the gilded cage that stood at one end of it. At the moment, the cage was empty.

Lucius, who stood a little ways away, seemed to hesitate. "That is one possible outcome, my Lord."

Voldemort nodded. In his long-fingered hand he was holding a chess piece: a green knight. "And this risk is acceptable to you?"

Lucius nodded. "Strategy entails risk."

Voldemort began to turn the chess piece over and over. "Perhaps he will die of a broken heart first."

Lucius blinked. "I have never known you to concern yourself overmuch with hearts, my Lord."

"To everything there is a season, my dear Lucius," said the Dark Lord, and set the knight down on the polished surface of a rosewood table.

"Yes, my Lord. A time to be born, and a time to die."

"No need to quote Scripture at me, Lucius," said the Dark Lord, sounding amused. "We have the Cup now, or at least it is no longer where we cannot reach it. When the Ritual is performed, I shall ascend, and the old order will pass away, as shall the old gods. I shall be the only ruler of not just the wizarding world, but all worlds. My name will be legion. I will show to them the true nature of gods."

"Which is?" Lucius asked. Draco could hear a note in his voice that surprised him: he sounded strained, perhaps angry. Voldemort did not seem to notice.

"Indifferent and cruel. And loving not mankind."

Lucius looked as if he were about to speak, when the door opened. Wormtail entered, carrying a tray. He crossed the room, and put the tray down on the table beside the chess set. Draco saw that the tray held a decanter of brandy: he suspected it was Re'em Martin, his father's favorite.

"Thank you, Peter," said Lucius, without looking towards him. To Draco's surprise, Wormtail then seated himself at the table, and poured a glass of brandy. He raised it to his lips, and the Dark Lord frowned at him.

"Is she returning tonight?" Wormtail asked, jerking his chin towards the empty cage along the far wall.

The Dark Lord's frown deepened. Without another word, he gathered his robes around him and stalked from the room. As the door shut behind him, Lucius whirled on his unfortunate companion.

"I thought I told you not to address him directly, you idiotic -"

"I was just asking a question," Wormtail said belligerently, and drained the glass in his hand. When he set the glass down on the table, his hand was trembling. "An innocent question."

"Nothing about you is innocent," Lucius snapped.

Wormtail poured himself another glass of brandy. "Does he know where the Cup is?"

Lucius' eyes narrowed. "Yes, Peter."

"Does he really?"

"He knows who has it - why do you question? Have you information which you have been withholding?"

"I thought my opinion was of no interest to you," said Wormtail, with an odd flash of his eyes.

"It is not of any interest to me."

Wormtail bared his little rat teeth over the rim of the glass. "He is mad. Mad, and you know it."

"Silence!" Lucius bellowed, so loud that the fabric of the dream began to rend and split, and Draco felt his eyes fluttering open. "He can hear you..."

The dream was gone. Draco opened his eyes and the room swam into focus around him. He tried to sit up, but something was gripping his upper arm like a vise. He turned, and saw her lying beside him, drowned in deep sleep, her face pillowed on her tumbled hair - *Hermione? What's she doing here, in bed with me? Good God, what've I done?* - and then he remembered, and sat up so quickly he almost knocked his skull on the headboard.

"Hermione, wake up." He shook her shoulder. "Come on."

She came back to consciousness if she were swimming up through deep water, her eyelids fluttering open slowly. Her dark eyes focused on him, and he saw the confusion in them for a moment. Then she seemed to remember, and half-sat up, rubbing at her eyes. "I was dreaming," she said. "You were in it."

"Was I?" He sat back against the pillows, and tried not to think about how much he wanted to stay there and rest. "What was I doing?"

"You were in it, and so was Harry. You were... different. We were all in London. I think you were...I don't know, gangsters or something. You had guns. It was very peculiar."

Draco blinked at her. "What's a gangster?"

"Never you mind." A smile ghosted across Hermione's face. "You were older. You were..."

"I was what?"

"Nothing." The smile widened, then vanished. She sat up straighter, her shoulders tensing. "What time is it?"

"Just past midnight," he said.

She bit her lip, looking tense and unhappy. Her hair tumbled around her head in unruly curls which had begun to frizz up at the ends. "I have to get back to Gryffindor Tower," she said.

He leaned forward, ignoring the exhaustion which dragged him down like a lead weight. "Are you sure that's a good -"

"I have to see Harry." Her voice was tense and desperate.

"Okay." He hesitated. "And again, I have to ask you. Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"I want to ask him to put the Veritas curse on me." Her hands balled into tight fists at her side. "Then he'll have to believe me."

"What if he won't do it?"

"Then I want you to do it."

Draco stared. "What?"

"Then I want you to do it. In front of him."

"Hermione -"

"There's no other way!"

He reached out for her, but she jumped off the bed and began pacing up and down the room. The fire behind her had burned down to orange-red embers, and the smoky light outlined her body through her clothes, tinting her hair a dark scarlet. She spun and faced him, looking determined.

"He trusts you," she said. "Come with me to talk to him. If you put the Veritas curse on me without telling him you're going to -"

"I don't want to put the Veritas curse on you without telling him I'm going to."

"But you have to -"

"I don't," he said coldly, "have to do anything." He swung his legs over the side of the bed, and looked sharply at her. "I'd do a lot for you," he said. "I'd go so far as to say I'd do almost anything for you. But I won't blindside Harry. Maybe he trusts me now, but would he then?"

She looked shocked for a moment. Then her shoulders drooped. "You're right," she said. "I'm sorry." She looked back at the fire. "Come with me," she said again. "Just to talk to him, then."

Draco fought down his misgivings. "All right." He slid off the bed, landed lightly on his feet - and almost passed out. The blood roared in his ears as loudly as thunder, and black diamonds of darkness danced in front of his eyes. He grabbed at the bedpost to steady himself.

"Draco?" Hermione was at his side in an instant, her hand on his arm. "Are you all right?"

He nodded as his vision slowly cleared. "I'm fine."

"I'm sorry," she said softly. Her dark eyes were fixed on his face, full of concern. "I haven't forgotten about what you asked me the other day - about your shoulder. I've been looking in the library..."

"I said I was all right." He shook off her hand, not looking at her. He bent down again, this time carefully, and grabbed for his boots, which were under the bed. She watched him while he laced them up, biting her lip and looking anxious. It was exactly the way she usually looked at Harry, he thought - concerned and ... protective. He didn't like it - didn't want to feel worried about. He stood up and grabbed for his cloak, which had been flung across a chair back. "Let's go."

The corridor was deserted, thankfully, as was the common room. The torchlight in the outside hallways was dimmed almost to nonexistence. Draco murmured *lumos* at his wand, and grimly smiled to himself at how they must look - the Slytherin prefect and the Head Girl, sneaking along the corridors like a guilty couple on their way back from the Astronomy Tower. Although in that case, he imagined, Hermione probably would have been clinging to his arm. Instead, she walked a little apart, lost in thought.

As they turned a corner, she paused. "Draco, wait."

He stopped and turned. "What it is?"

Hermione was biting her lip. "The prefects' meeting room..." She turned and pointed. "We just passed it."

Draco was taken aback. "You don't think...?"

"I thought I heard a noise," she said, still staring off down the corridor.

Draco lowered his wand. "All right. Let's check it out." As he passed Hermione, she caught at his sleeve, and they walked the rest of the way to the meeting room door like that. *Now we look like a guilty couple*, Draco thought, and shoved the thought back.

The meeting room door was closed, but a faint bar of light lay across the bottom. That in itself meant nothing, but it was enough to make Draco turn back to Hermione. She was staring at him with huge eyes. She jerked her chin towards the door.

He sighed, and put a hand on the knob. "*Eirenaeus Philaethes*," he said, and the doorknob turned under his fingers. He pushed, and the door swung open.

The light inside was dim, and it took a moment for Draco to focus his eyes on the scene before him. When he did, he stared.

He saw Ron standing by the table. He had shrugged off his school robes, and was in a shirt and jeans. His red hair was wildly ruffled around his head, and he was leaning forward, his hands on the shoulders of a girl seated in a chair in front of him. It took a moment for Draco, noting Ron's posture, to realize that he was not touching her affectionately, but instead, holding her tightly in place. She was wearing white pajamas, sprigged with flowers, and her dark hair was pulled back. Even without seeing her face, Draco knew immediately who she was. He was not at all surprised when she whipped her head around at the sound of the opening door, and he saw her wide dark eyes, the familiar line of her nose, the curved-bow mouth.

It was Hermione.

"You're really not going to do anything?"

"And what," Dumbledore asked, "would you suggest that I do?"

"I don't know," said Charlie, and walked restless over to the small table by the bay window in the office. Outside, the moon hung round and white above the snowy grounds. "Something's obviously going on."

"Things are often going on, as you put it," said Dumbledore, gazing calmly at him. "It does not necessarily mean I should intervene."

Charlie pushed his hands into his pockets; he was very cold, although a fire was roaring in the grate behind Fawkes' perch. It seemed a year since he had run up the stairs of Gryffindor Tower, responding to the alarm wards which had been set off by the Veritas curse Harry had performed, although he knew it had been only a matter of hours. "The last time I saw my little brother cry was when he was six," he said. "And then again tonight."

"I understand, and I am sorry."

"What's to be sorry about? Ron wouldn't do something like this -" Charlie broke off, and turned away from his old Headmaster. "He loves Harry, they were like brothers."

Dumbledore was silent for a moment. In the silence, Charlie could hear Fawkes rustling on his perch. It seemed to him the phoenix was making a low humming noise, almost music. "I know," Dumbledore said finally, his eyes troubled. "But perhaps you are too close to this situation, Charles, to be objective. I can only reiterate that at the moment, it is not my business to intrude."

"Objective about what?" Charlie demanded. "This puzzle doesn't add up, sir. If Ron's telling the truth, then both he and Hermione were acting bizarrely out of character. And apparently Hermione denied the whole thing. So either she's lying, or my brother is, or one of them has gone completely mad - which, I should think, would be a matter of concern for the school."

"I talked to your brother at length," Dumbledore said. "He is not mad. He is quite lucid."

"What does Remus say?" asked Charlie abruptly. "Has he contacted Sirius? Perhaps Harry could go home early. Classes are all but over, after all."

Dumbledore shook his head. "Harry specifically requested that we not contact Sirius. He was anxious that the wedding not be spoiled."

Charlie felt a frustrated anger tug at him - at himself for not seeing something was wrong earlier, at Harry for stubbornly refusing any kind of comforting, at his brother for being so willfully blind. His sympathies were torn - he could only imagine what it would be like for Ginny when she discovered what had happened. Ron was their brother and they loved him unconditionally, but Harry had always been an honorary member of the family as well, and he was so very obviously shattered by what had happened. Charlie's heart broke for him, not just for the teenager who had lost his two best friends in one night, but the fragile little boy who had never had a family. For years Ron and Hermione had been all the family Harry had ever known.

When he spoke, his voice was rougher than he intended. "I should think you could see there was something else going on here. I would think you'd want to protect Harry."

"That has always been," said Dumbledore gravely, "my primary concern. I have always sought to protect Harry from any harm that might come to him, physically or magically. But I cannot protect him from the ordinary disappointments of life, nor would I if I could."

"But that's what I'm saying," said Charlie in a low voice. "There's nothing ordinary about this. This behavior isn't like my brother, it certainly isn't like Hermione either. Obviously there's some outside manipulation going on. It might look like some irrelevant adolescent romantic tangle, but..."

"Outside manipulation? Outside manipulation by whom?"

Charlie opened his mouth, then shut it again. He knew perfectly well that there was no reason not to say the name, but was reluctant all the same. "Well," he said, "the obvious."

"Voldemort?" snapped Dumbledore, and Charlie flinched. "Unlikely."

"Unlikely why?" Charlie demanded. "Ron and Hermione have always been among Harry's greatest protections. If they were taken away -"

"If Voldemort wanted them taken away, he would kill them," said Dumbledore flatly, and Charlie shivered. "Such a ruse as this would never occur to him. He is not like a human man. There are no thoughts like our thoughts in his head, no feelings like our feelings in his heart."

"But he must have felt once," said Charlie. "He was born a human man, like the rest of us."

Dumbledore reached out a hand and gently stroked Fawkes' head, and the phoenix hummed again. "You mean when he was Tom Riddle," he said. "Yes, perhaps then, he knew human feeling. If not love, then he knew jealousy and yearning and rage. Not just this blind grasping after power. Not this passionless killing."

Charlie felt a faint surprise stir in his heart. "Are you afraid of him?"

"I would be a fool not to be wary," said Dumbledore. "And yet I do not think he was behind this current...situation."

"Then who?" Charlie asked.

Dumbledore shook his head. "I do not know, Charles...I do not know."

Everything after that happened very fast.

The girl-who-looked-like-Hermione-but-wasn't gasped once, and Ron spun around. His eyes widened hugely in his white face, and he stared at the real Hermione, who gaped back at him. The moment hung suspended between them, like an airplane with its engines cut, waiting to plummet.

Released from the grip of Ron's hands, the girl bolted to her feet. Ron spun back around and reached for her, but she was too quick for him - she tore her sleeve out of his reaching grasp and raced for the door. She avoided Draco but slammed straight into Hermione, knocking her down. This barely slowed the girl's hurtling forward progress - she stumbled, righted herself, and flew down the corridor, vanishing around the corner so quickly she almost skidded and fell.

Ron immediately flung himself after her, but Draco was too quick for him. He grabbed Ron by the arm, and barked at Hermione, "Go! Go!" She didn't need to be told twice; she sprang to her feet and bolted after the girl, dragging her wand out of her sleeve as she ran. Ron tried to pull away, but Draco spun him against the wall so hard that the breath was knocked out of him. He gasped and his knees buckled; Draco caught him with an iron grip on his upper arms, and held him fast. "Who is she?" he hissed, and shook Ron, hard. "Who is she really?"

Ron stared at Draco defiantly. "I have no idea."

"Bollocks," said Draco, and slammed him back against the wall again. Ron regarded him blindly, as if he wasn't there, as if the grip on his arms didn't hurt. "Who *is* she?"

"I don't know," Ron said, woodenly. "That's what I was trying to find out."

"You're lying, Weasley."

"Think whatever you want," said Ron, looking away from Draco, "I'm telling the truth."

Draco stared at him, taking in the blank, stunned expression on Ron's face. "So you don't even know who you've been shagging, do you? That must be nice for you. She could have been anyone. *Anything.*"

"Don't," Ron said, but his tone was hopeless, as if he didn't expect mercy, and wouldn't have thought he deserved it if it were offered.

Draco leaned his face in close to Ron's, and spoke in his ear. His tone was conversational. "You know, there are two simple rules of friendship, Weasley, and you've broken both of them. The first one is: you don't screw your best friend's girlfriend. Two: you don't screw your best friend's girlfriend." Draco grinned without amusement. "I recognize that's only one rule, but since you apparently failed to catch it on the first go-round, I thought it was worth restating."

Ron dragged his eyes back to Draco's face, and looked at him with dull loathing. "I don't see what it's got to do with you, Malfoy."

"It has everything to do with me."

"Why? You hated me before. Now you get to hate me with Harry for company. What's the difference? Aren't you glad I turned out to be just what you always thought I was?"

"If you're waiting for me to thank you for living down to my expectations of you, you'll be waiting a long time," said Draco shortly. "Even I expected better of you than that."

"You would have done it," said Ron, his voice flat.

Draco's muscles stiffened. "I would have done what?"

"The same thing," Ron said. "If she'd wanted *you.*"

It was a moment before Draco could speak. When he did, his tone was sharp and cold as an icicle. "Might I point out," he said, "that she didn't

want *you* either. Snap out of the dream state, Weasley. She never wanted you."

Ron laughed. It sounded less like a laugh than a gasp of pain. "But you're not denying it," he said. "Are you?"

Draco slammed Ron back against the wall, hard. "One more smart word out of you," he snarled, "and trust me, Weasley, eternity with Satan and all his hellish minions will be nothing compared to five minutes with me and the pointy end of my wand."

"Let him go." It was Hermione's voice. Draco turned and saw her standing in the doorway. She was very pale but seemed composed. She was clutching her robes tightly around her, as if she were cold. Draco immediately wondered just how long she had been standing there. "He doesn't know anything."

"How do you know that?" Draco asked, and gave her a hard look - but it seemed to be the real Hermione, not the pajamad imposter. She had the same tear tracks under her eyes, the same tangled hair, the same clothes.

"Because I do," she said tiredly. Her eyes glanced over Ron, who looked quickly away. "We need to go talk to Harry now - that's what's important."

"And the girl...?"

Hermione shook her head. "She got away. She ran too fast for me to catch her, and then she turned a corner and she just...disappeared. If I didn't know better, I'd think she had an invisibility cloak."

"So she's gone. Wonderful," said Draco, and added, in a low voice, "assuming of course, that it even was a *she*." Ron flinched but didn't look at him. With a shrug of disgust, Draco released his grip on Ron and stepped back. He looked the other boy up and down once, as if taking his measure. Then he smiled. "You saved my life," he said. "And because of that, I won't hurt you. Not now. But if you come near me again...if you come near Harry again..."

"That's for Harry to say!" Ron burst out suddenly, and just as quickly subsided, as if he were sorry he'd spoken.

"I can't speak for Harry," Draco said. "Actually, sod that. I can speak for Harry. One of those fun side effects of lying to someone and stabbing them in the back, is that usually, afterwards, they're not too eager for your company. But if you want to give it a try, by all means --"

"*Draco*," Hermione said from the doorway. "Please don't." She held her cloak even more tightly around herself. "We need to go."

Out of the corner of his eye Draco saw Ron wince. As if he had finally truly felt the way she was looking at him, or not looking at him - but then perhaps it had just been her use of that one word, *we*. A *we* that obviously didn't include him. Draco felt a savage satisfaction. Good, he thought. "Later, Weasley," he said, and gave him his most arrogant smile, the charm of which, he felt fairly certain, would be wasted on such stony soil. Ron, drooping against the wall, kept his eyes on his shoes as Hermione and Draco walked out of the room.

Once in the corridor, Draco fell into step beside Hermione, who was walking quickly and purposefully, her arms crossed. He gave her another hard look. "It really is you, isn't it?"

She looked at him with somber eyes. "Of course it's me."

"Prove it."

"I could tell you more about my dream," she said. "You were wearing vinyl in it."

"Vinyl?" Draco echoed, slightly appalled.

She nodded. "Vinyl trousers."

"This sounds like a nightmare."

They were at the stairs that curved up to the Gryffindor Tower now. Hermione led the way. "Not exactly," she said over her shoulder as they ascended.

"Well, you weren't the one who had to suffer the slimy touch of vinyl against your skin, now were you?"

"I think you might have been wearing glitter makeup as well," she added thoughtfully.

"Tell me any more about this dream, Granger, I'll leave you here to fend for yourself."

Hermione made a face at him. They were at the portrait of the Fat Lady now. Draco scooted behind Hermione in hopes of going unspotted, but the Fat Lady seemed to be asleep anyway. Hermione took a deep breath. "*Mundungus*," she said, and the portrait swung wide. Draco looked at her, but she gestured that she should go first; with a deep breath, he stepped through the portrait hole.

"How dare you?" Rhiannon gasped, staggering back against the wall, clutching the tattered remnants of her garments about her with trembling hands. The ragged strips of damp cloth did nothing to obscure the heaving, womanly curves of her bosom. Tristan feasted his eyes on the moist orbs as he advanced, his wand outstretched stiffly before him. It was, he thought grimly, not the only stiff thing in the room. He dragged his mind back to the matter at hand. "How dare you approach me thus?" she cried.

"You scorned to speak with me otherwise," he growled. "But I will force you to listen!"

"You abandoned me years ago," she snarled, her eyes flashing like furious emeralds. "I never thought you would return."

"But now I have!" he cried.

"And now I am married to Montague!" she replied, with a heave of her honey-colored breasts. "And he is a good man, a fine man."

"But you do not love him," Tristan snarled, advancing upon her, and pressing her back against the stone wall with his firmly muscled arms. She writhed within his grip, but could not escape. "Not as you loved me!"

"I love you no longer," she spat. "I hate you, I despise you, nay - I loathe you!"

"And yet you cannot keep yourself from wanting me," he breathed, and plunged his lips against hers. She struggled, but it only brought her lush, ripe feminine frame into more insistent erotic contact with his rock-hard masculinity. His wand clattered to the ground between them, unheeded, but he no longer needed it to keep her at bay. She had begun to return his insistent kisses, panting desperately against his rather thick neck, "Oh, Tristan! Oh, Tristan! Oh! Oh! Oh!"

"My flower," he whispered into her hair. "My angel, my flame-haired vixen...!"

Ginny looked up from *Passionate Trousers* and frowned. The fire in the grate had died down again, and there was no longer enough light to continue reading. She was reluctant to light the candles in the wall sconces, not wanting to attract anyone else downstairs. She preferred the common room empty at this late hour of the night; she had only come down because she had been unable to sleep, and was afraid that reading in the dormitory would have woken Elizabeth or Ashley.

With a sigh, she got up, took her wand from the small table next to the couch, and poked the end of it at the grate. "*Incendio*," she whispered, and the fire roared up in the grate with a loud crackle that almost obscured the sound of the portrait door swinging open. Almost, but not quite.

Ginny looked up in surprise. Who could be coming into the tower at this late hour of the night? She did not get up from where she was sitting, knowing that the couch in front of her hid her from view - not even when she saw who it was stepping through the portrait hole, and had to cover her mouth with a hand to choke off a cry of surprise.

It was Draco Malfoy. He ducked into the common room, straightened up, and looked around. Through the high bright glow of the fire he seemed outlined in gold, his pale hair turned the color of candlelight. He looked tired, and less immaculate than usual - his hair was too fine to tangle, but it was rumpled around his head, and his clothes looked as if he had slept in them. He hesitated for a moment, glancing around- even now he appeared to be looking down his elegant nose, as if mentally ticking off all the ways the Gryffindor common room was inferior to its Slytherin counterpart. Then he turned, and held out his hand, and Hermione stepped into the room beside him.

Ginny blinked in astonishment. Hermione? And Draco? What were they doing? The obvious answer presented itself, but she rejected it, a little too firmly. Hermione wouldn't do that to Harry, and furthermore, neither would Draco. Of that, Ginny was positive beyond all other doubts. He would slice off his own left hand, quite cheerfully, before he would let anyone touch a finger of Harry's; he would hardly hurt Harry himself and he would know he was doing just that. She remembered Draco in the rose garden, the night of the Pub Crawl, telling her, "Everyone has one weakness. He's protected elsewhere. Not where she's concerned."

Hermione had straightened up beside Draco, and was looking not around the room but at him, as if for guidance. Ginny had never seen Hermione look like that - as if she were quite lost. She was always so confident. She, too, looked ruffled, and her face was marked with the traces of recent tears. "Draco," she said very softly, and he turned to look at her. "Are you sure I should go up with you?"

Draco's expression, already serious, did not change. "Yes."

"But he said he didn't want me coming near him."

Who? Ginny thought. *Who said that?*

Draco glanced up towards the ceiling in exasperation. He seemed to be counting to ten in his head. "Hermione," he said. "You need to tell him what we just saw."

"You could do it," said Hermione in a small voice.

"I suppose I could," Draco acknowledged. "But I won't."

"Draco..."

"Either you come willingly, or I knock you down and drag you."

Hermione almost looked as if she might smile. Ginny didn't blame her. There was something amusing about Draco's look of total determination. "You'd hit a girl?"

"Chivalry is dead," Draco said shortly. "I'm the proof."

Now Hermione did smile. It wasn't much of a smile - wobbly and tearful both. But it was a smile. "All right," she said. She held out her hand, and Draco took it, almost absently. She began to walk towards the stairs that led to the boys' dormitory, and Draco followed her. As they started up the steps, he turned, and glanced back at the common room. For a moment, Ginny thought he saw her - a look almost of recognition flitted across his face. Then his expression darkened, as if a shadow had come between him and the firelight. He turned back to the stairs, and followed Hermione up into the darkness.

Harry lay flat on his back, staring up into the shadows. He wasn't exactly sure how he had gotten back to his bed, put his pajamas on, and lain down, but here he was. The events of the evening were fuzzy in his mind after the point where Hermione had rushed out of the common room, holding the watch he had thrown at her. He remembered turning back to Ron, who'd looked white and sick and on the verge of throwing up. Neither of them had said anything, and a moment later, the professors had begun pouring in through the portrait hole. Charlie had been there, Lupin, McGonagall....Harry remembered being taken down to Lupin's office, and Charlie walking Ron off the other way, an arm over his shoulder, casting worried glances back at Harry as he did so.

There hadn't been much discussion of punishment, not that Harry remembered. He was fairly sure he'd told Lupin what happened, and that there had been a lot of shocked silence, and some discussion of calling on Sirius, which Harry had nixed. He didn't want to talk to anyone right now, and that included Sirius. He wondered if Lupin had walked him back to the Tower. He really didn't remember. Much of the evening was like a long howl of static, punctuated by short lucid bursts of sound. Are you all right, Harry? Do you need anything? I'm fine, I just want to go to sleep.

And here he was. In bed, in his pajamas. Curtains drawn, staring up into the flat darkness overhead. Sleep was a faraway country he could not touch. He heard his own breathing, felt the beat of his own heart, and wondered that his body kept on going although all feeling seemed to have stopped. Inside him was a lion on a chain, and if he let it free it would bring the castle down around his ears. Some fierce inner part of him took pleasure in the image - his Magid powers gone wild, the window glass

shattering in, the walls shaking apart. But most of him was grateful for the icy control that seemed to have settled over him like the jaws of a trap slamming shut. He did not know where it had come from. Draco, he suspected. But he was grateful for it.

A soft whispering noise made him jump. He rolled onto his side, and saw with astonishment that the curtains on his bed were being drawn back. He blinked as faint light flooded the darkness, and he saw the blurred shape of an arm, pulling the curtains back, a shoulder, the glint of light on fair hair.

Draco.

"Malfoy?" Harry whispered, shielding his eyes against the sudden light. "What the --?"

"I need to talk to you," said Draco, sounding grimly determined.

Harry felt for the glasses on his nightstand, and slipped them on. Instantly, the world sprang into focus, and he saw Draco standing above him, holding back the bed curtains with one hand, his expression set and grim. And behind him - behind him was Hermione. She had her arms wrapped around herself as if she was cold, and her hair had tumbled forward, almost hiding her expression.

Harry heard his own voice as if it came from a distance. "I won't talk to you with *her* here," he said, and jerked his chin towards Hermione.

Draco looked exasperated. "Potter..."

But Hermione merely looked stricken. She looked at Harry as if he had slapped her, then looked quickly away. Harry felt a bitter sense of horrible triumph; it went away as quickly as it had come, leaving him feeling sick and ill. Something nudged at the back of his mind then, and he knew it was Draco, trying to think to him as he had been trying to do all night. Harry ignored it. He did not want anyone in his head right now.

"You heard what I said," he muttered.

Draco opened his mouth to reply, but before he could say anything, Hermione interrupted. "Fine," she said, and her voice was slightly shrill

with tension. "If that's the way it has to be to get you to listen, Harry - I'll go."

"Hermione -" Draco began, but she was gone, having turned away quickly, and Harry heard the soft sound of her footsteps as she walked quietly away. The dormitory door opened and closed, and as it closed Harry winced, feeling as if something sharp had been driven into his heart.

"Idiot," said Draco in exasperation. "What did you have to do that for?"

"You wouldn't understand," said Harry in a fierce whisper. He glanced around at the lumped shapes in the other beds - it seemed that Neville, Dean and Seamus were managing to sleep through all of this. "Nobody's ever betrayed you."

"Oh, bollocks," said Draco succinctly. "My father tried to kill me - remember? If you really want to play at Whinging Sweepstakes, that is."

"It's not the same," Harry said in a bitter voice, knowing full well he was being a complete git about this. "Anyway, I don't want to talk about it."

"Too bad." Draco's voice was flat. "Because there's something you need to hear."

"Just leave me alone."

"No. I won't do that." Draco reached out a hand and took hold of Harry's arm. "Would you come with me -"

"I said leave me alone!" Harry jerked his arm out of Draco's grasp, and as he did, the water glass on the nightstand next to the bed trembled, shook, and flew off the table, slamming into the stone wall. It shattered, spraying glass and water in all directions. Harry glared at Draco. "Now look what you made me do," he added, with illogical fury.

"Harry?" It was Seamus' soft Irish voice, speaking from the other bed. Harry turned his head and saw that all three of the other boys in the room were now awake, struggling into sitting positions and staring. "Is everything all right?"

"Fine," Harry said sourly.

"Is that -" Seamus broke off, sounding stunned. "Is that Malfoy over there?"

"No, Finnigan," said Draco, in a voice dropping with sarcasm. "It's Santa and his twelve tiny reindeer. You've all been such good little boys, I decided to bring you your presents early."

"I don't believe this," said Dean Thomas, his voice fuzzy from sleep. "How the hell did he get into our dormitory?"

"Apparently he came down the chimney," said Seamus darkly. "What do you say we stuff him back up it?"

"Try it and I'll break every bone in your body," said Draco in a soft and deadly voice. He still hadn't turned around to look at Seamus, but Harry could tell from the sudden change in his posture that he was very aware of the movements of the three boys behind him. "Potter...come with me. We need to talk."

Harry looked at Draco's outstretched hand, and crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm not going anywhere."

Draco looked utterly exasperated. "Okay, fine." He took a deep breath. "You asked for it...Ron," he said, his voice very firm, "is not now, and never has been, sleeping with Hermione."

A stunned silence. Dean, Neville and Seamus stared with open mouths, frozen in a tableaux that would under other circumstances have been very funny. Harry stayed where he was, sitting up in bed, frozen. Bizarrely, Neville, speaking from the depths of his bed, was the first to break the silence.

"I'm not sleeping with Hermione either. Is that newsworthy?"

"Oh, fuck the hell off, Longbottom," said Draco, but the side of his mouth twitched. He pitched his voice low, and spoke again: "Potter...?"

Harry flinched once, violently, at the sound of his name, without being able to prevent it. The next words he spoke tumbled out of his mouth without him even thinking about them, "I don't believe you," he said.

"*What?*" Draco looked stunned - Harry had a feeling he'd been prepared for a number of reactions, but not this one. "How can you -"

"You said what you came to say," Harry said. "And I don't believe you. Now go away."

Draco went white, then two red spots appeared on his cheekbones. His eyes flashed. "Not until you listen."

"I'm not interested."

Draco moved so quickly that Harry had no time at all to pull away : his hand shot out and closed around Harry's upper arm, jerking him unceremoniously off the bed, swinging him around, and flinging him to the floor. Harry hit the ground sprawling, the breath knocked out of him. "You," said Draco, breathing hard and staring at Harry as if he had never seen him before, "are a total - a total - I don't think a word has even been invented yet to describe what you are, but you are one. And a total, total one at that. Aren't you *listening* to me? Did you not hear what I said? Do you not care what you're doing - to her, to everyone?"

Harry didn't get a chance to reply. Suddenly, Seamus was standing between them, having moved as quickly as if he had Apparated there. He faced down Draco, looking furious. "How dare you burst in here like this, Malfoy," he said. "Are you trying to be funny?"

Draco's eyes trawled slowly over to Seamus, raking up and down him with a look of amused disbelief. "At least I *can* be funny when I try, you tedious little worm," he said. "Now, if you don't mind, this doesn't concern you."

"It bloody does concern me," Seamus said. "This is *our* dormitory, our house, and Harry is my friend. And I do believe he told you to go away. Translated into Slytherin, that means: 'fuck off, you stupid bastard'." He took a menacing step forward. "Got that?"

"Finnigan, you'd lose a battle of wits with a dead monkey," said Draco, sounding weary. "If you want to hit me, hit me. But quit with the attempts at repartee. It's painful."

Seamus' mouth twitched. Then he rolled up his sleeves - an almost quaint gesture - and began to walk toward Draco. Draco kept his arms at his

sides, his eyes still on Harry. He wore an expression of amused detachment. He wasn't going to hit Seamus back; that much was obvious. Even without being able to read Draco's mind, Harry could tell what Draco was thinking - this was Harry's dormitory, his place, his responsibility to do something. Draco didn't plan on doing a thing.

Harry sighed. He felt suddenly exhausted, tiredness welling up within him like blood welling from an open cut. "Let him alone, Seamus," he said quietly, and sat up.

Seamus, looking astonished, half-turned to look at him. "What?"

"I said let him alone," said Harry in a dead-tired tone. He looked at Seamus, and Seamus did a double-take, as if what he saw in Harry's expression had shocked him. "He has a right to be here."

"So you want to talk to him?" Seamus asked, very quietly.

Harry nodded. "Yeah. I guess I do."

Draco smiled: a cocky, sideways smile. "In that case..."

Harry started to get to his feet. "We can go down to the common room -"

"No." It was Neville. "There'll be people there." He looked at Dean, and then at Seamus. "We'll go."

Dean looked miffed. "We will?"

"Yes," Neville said, and cast a pointed, sideways look at Harry. "I admit I don't know what this is about, but it's obviously important. So we'll go, and we'll come back later."

"We will?" said Dean again, now sounding gloomy.

"Yes, we will," said Neville firmly, took hold of Dean by the back of his pajama top, and marched him towards the door. After a moment Seamus, having cast a considering look at Draco and Harry, followed them. They all three went out, and the door shut behind them.

"Typical," said Draco, turning back to Harry. "No Slytherin would give up a night's sleep just so his dorm mate could work out his interpersonal problems."

"It doesn't matter," said Harry, still feeling bone-weary, "just tell me whatever the hell you came here to tell me, and go away."

"I already told you," said Draco, crossing his arms across his chest, "and *you* didn't believe me."

"Because I -"

"Which," Draco went on as if Harry hadn't spoken, "considering I'm the one person in the world who cannot lie to you, is pretty damn ironic."

Harry paused. There was a note of sharp bitterness in Draco's voice that Harry had rarely heard there. "How," he began, and paused again - something seemed to have caught in his throat - "how do you *know* they aren't - that it's not true?"

Draco sighed, and looked down at Harry. Had Harry been in another mood, he would have noticed how tired and drawn the other boy looked: his eyes swam in blue hollows, and there were dark lines of strain by his mouth. "I can tell you so you'll have to believe me -"

"No. *No*. I don't want anyone else in my head."

"Fine, then." Draco sat down on the trunk at the foot of Harry's bed. "I know because I saw it for myself, all right? I *saw* Ron with the girl he thought was Hermione. Of course, it wasn't Hermione. You know how I know that? Because the actual Hermione was standing next to me at the time." Draco gave a short bark of laughter and looked up at the ceiling. "You honestly think she'd ever do that to you?" he demanded. "You honestly think she'd even want to?"

Harry looked at him, but he was hearing Ron's voice in his head. *I'm in love with Hermione, and she's in love with me.* "And you're so sure..."

"Of course I'm sure. I told you why I'm sure. I'm absolutely, utterly sure. Ron's been shagging someone, but it isn't and never was Hermione."

Someone's playing bloody tricks on all of you, I promise you that. Now do you believe me?"

Harry looked down at his hands, and said nothing. He wondered when he had started biting his nails again. Bitten they certainly were, down to the bloody cuticles. He curled his fingers in protectively against his palms.

Draco's voice tightened. "Potter? Why would I lie?"

"You might," Harry said. "If she asked you to."

The whiplash crack of the other boy's anger struck Harry like a blow, even though he had closed his mind off as best he could. He flinched back as Draco's inner voice cut into his thoughts, *And would I lie if you asked me to? Is that what I do - lie at the behest of others? Have I so little will of my own?*

"Don't." Harry scrambled to his feet, his hands fisted at his sides.

I'm telling you what I saw! The girl he thought was Hermione, wasn't Hermione. I don't know who she was --

"Stop it!"

Draco nearly tipped off the trunk in exasperation. "I'm telling you! I saw it for myself! Why can't you listen? Isn't this what you want to hear?"

"It's exactly what I want to hear!" Harry shouted back. "That's why I can't listen!" He spun away from Draco, and faced the wall. There was a tightness in his chest, as if something was constricting his breathing. A yell of anger was pressing against the inside of his ribcage, choking him, struggling to get out. "I don't trust this," he said. "I can't trust this. I don't trust anything any more."

"She never lied to you -"

"He did, then." Harry stayed where he was, staring at the wall. "What about Ron?"

There was a long silence. When Draco spoke, finally, it was in a low voice. "I'm sorry about that, Harry."

Harry noted, vaguely, the use of his given name. He supposed it ought to make him feel more kindly towards Draco. It didn't. Rage was beginning to crash against the inside of his head, in rhythmic waves like the ocean crashing against the shore. "You didn't really think about that, did you," Harry said in a hissing half-whisper. "You never even tried to like him, or treat him kindly, not even for my sake. I bet all this makes you *glad*." He spun around then, and glared at Draco, who had gone a chalky sort of color and looked appalled. "How am I supposed to believe what you say, when you'd never let yourself believe she'd do that - not for a second. Because you could stand to see her with me, but you could never stand to see her with Ron. Maybe you even like her being with me, because it's the closest you'll ever get to being with her yourself. But Ron, you've always hated him, you think he's beneath you -- you always have - she'd be dirty if she let Ron touch her - admit it! Admit you felt that way! -- and maybe if you didn't, maybe if I hadn't let you treat him like that, he wouldn't have felt like I wasn't his friend any more! Like I picked you over him! And I never picked you, Malfoy -- I never picked you! Whatever there is between us, it was forced on me -- I never wanted it!"

His voice broke on a half-shout, and cracked, although he was not crying. He felt a bleak triumph. He had been hurt, and terribly. He wanted to hurt *someone* back. And judging from the way Draco had flinched away from him, he was succeeding in doing just that. "I never got a choice," he said again, harshly - and then broke off, staring at the other boy. Draco's eyes were huge in his white face, huge and startled. He looked very like a child who has reached for a parent's hand, only to be slapped away with no explanation. And Harry fell silent, realizing suddenly that he had hurt Draco nearly as much as he had been hurt himself. More, perhaps. The feeling of satisfaction vanished instantly. "Malfoy, I -"

But Draco was on his feet, backing away from Harry's outstretched hand. "Fuck you, then, Potter," he said, his voice a serrated dagger of ice. "You want me to leave you alone? Consider yourself left. Stay here and rot, for all I care. Ruin everyone's life. Ruin your own --" He broke off, as if he couldn't stand to look at Harry any more - spun around on his heel, and stalked to the door and out of it, slamming it hard behind him.

"Ginny, I have to talk to you."

She looked up from *Passionate Trousers*, and to her surprise saw Seamus, coming down the boys' staircase. He was wearing a dark cloak, thrown over a pair of red and white striped pajamas. His feet were bare.

She set her book down on the table beside her. "Seamus...what are you doing awake?"

"Hey." He sat down next to her, and in a very uncharacteristic gesture, put a hand on her wrist. She looked at him in surprise. His dark blue eyes held a troubled, anxious look. The firelight behind him turned the edges of his light hair to a fringe of pale gold: a faint halo. "I went to your room, you know...woke up Elizabeth and Ashley. They said you were here, reading."

"And here I am," she said. "What's going on, Seamus? You're scaring me."

He told her.

Somewhere in the middle of the explanation, *Passionate Trousers* fell off her lap and hit the floor with a bang. Ginny stayed where she was, rooted to the spot, staring at Seamus with awful amazement. "How..." she whispered finally. "How do you *know*?"

"I bumped into Hermione in the hallway when I left," he said. "She explained...she asked me to explain it to you." He bit his lip. "Ginny...."

She wrenched her wrist out of his grasp. "I can't believe this! I can't *believe* it! It's - it's - it's so *unfair*!"

Seamus looked at her in surprise. "Unfair?"

"Everyone falls in love with Hermione! Everyone!" Ginny leapt up out of her chair, picked up the poker she'd been using to stir the fire, and flung it at the grate. It hit the metal with a clang, and bounced off. Seamus winced. "First Harry, then Draco, now my own brother..." She whirled on Seamus, who was slumped down in the armchair, staring at her. "Who's next? You?"

Seamus looked justifiably startled. "I'm not in love with Hermione."

Ginny put her hands on her hips. She realized she was being ridiculous, but didn't seem able to stop. "Why *not*?"

"Why not?" Seamus looked even more startled. "Because I'm not!"

"That's not an answer!" she snapped, and crossed her arms over her chest.

Seamus looked exasperated. "I don't know, Ginny...she's Harry's girlfriend, isn't she?"

"Well, isn't she pretty?" Ginny demanded.

"Of course she's pretty."

"Isn't she nice?"

"She is, at that," Seamus replied, with a brief flash of a smile.

"And isn't she clever?"

"Of course she's clever...it's a bit intimidating, really."

"Oh, so is that why you like me? Because I'm not that clever?" Ginny raged. "Because I don't intimidate you?"

Seamus looked terrified. "No, not at all -"

"Well, then what? Is there something *wrong* with her?"

Seamus cast a hunted look towards the stairs. "I think I'll go back to the dorm," he said. "There may be glass flying around, but it's a bit more peaceful up there."

Ginny stamped her foot. "So what's the problem with her then? Not good enough for you?"

"What? Nothing's wrong with her, Ginny --"

"Why aren't you in love with her, then?"

Seamus, finally, lost his temper. "Because!" he shouted. "I'm in love with you!"

Ginny stared at him. He stared back, looking astonished, as if he couldn't believe what he'd just said. Neither could Ginny quite believe it. She'd dreamed of having a boy tell her that. What girl her age had not? But it had never been like this in her mind - the words had never been *shouted* - the eyes gazing into hers had never been blue. Blue was the color of her brothers' eyes: the color of steadiness and dependability and kindness, not of passion or romantic love. She thought suddenly and irrelevantly of Tom. She could no longer remember the color of his eyes, although she knew they had not been blue. They had been green...or was it that they had been gray, was that why she loved gray eyes, that bitter-cold color that said so little and hid so much?

"Oh," she said into the silence. "Seamus, I..."

Her voice trailed off. He was sitting, looking at her very steadily, his hands in his lap. The firelight played shadows over his just-mended, bruiseless pale skin, the strong straight nose, the lightly freckled arc of his cheekbones. He was handsome the way picture-book heroes were handsome - he looked like he ought to be slaying a dragon with one hand, and carting off a fainting maiden with the other. And yet his handsomeness didn't *touch* her - not the way Harry's melancholy-prince looks had touched her once, or Draco's fallen-angel beauty, or Tom's....

She shook off thoughts of Tom. "Oh," she said again, softly, and then, to her own great surprise, she added, "I have to go find him."

Seamus' eyes widened. "Find who? Harry?"

"No - my brother."

"Ginny -"

"I can't now, Seamus," she interrupted. "I need to find Ron."

Seamus nodded without looking at her. "I saw him come up the back stairs and go into his room."

"How did he seem? Was he all right?"

"All right? - no," he said, and then at her expression, amended himself. "He looked pretty devastated. But physically, yes, he looked fine."

She sighed - in relief, in fear, in despair, she didn't know. She went to Seamus then, and kissed his cheek, and he let her. But he did not look at her. "Thank you," she said.

He didn't reply, and Ginny did not stay to ask him why. She made a beeline for the boys' staircase, all her thoughts now focused on her brother.

Draco ran down the front steps of the castle and out onto the snowy path without looking where he was going. He shivered, but did not stop walking - it was an icy night, and he had not brought his cloak. Throwing his head back, he stared up at the sky - it arced above in black and silver, the moonlight a steel-colored shriek raining shards of light down onto the snow. For the first time in days, there were clouds: heavy as blocks, they seemed about to collide with each other. He wondered if that meant it was going to snow again soon.

He had reached the bottom of the path, where the Quidditch pitch was, and veered off sharply towards the right, alongside the Forbidden Forest. Some part of him knew he was following a route that Rhysenn had set for him, that he had often followed to meet her. He did not think about why he was going this way: he wanted to be alone, he wanted to be far from the castle, and he wanted...what *did* he want?

He was at the low wall now, that ran perpendicular to the forest's border. He leaped over it and landed on the other side, silent as a cat in the deep snow. This was where he had met her all those weeks ago, that night he had bumped into Harry and they'd gone to get drunk in Hogsmeade. His boots sank up to the ankles in the snow as he took a few steps forward into the clearing, and paused. He stood there for a moment, gasping in lungfuls of icy air, trying to still the pounding of his heart. There was no way for him to know it, but the same thoughts that had run through Harry's mind earlier, in the dark, ran through Draco's now. Inside him, too, was the same lion on a chain, and its roaring was loud in his ears. Iron control had been drilled into him since he was a child - hours spent locked in dark places, waiting for his father, hours spent in enforced silence without speaking. Over his emotions he had laid his own will, like heavy bars of steel, keeping everything contained. And yet...he visualized for a moment the steel bars snapping, the rage and grief inside him

breaking free, how he could tear down the trees with the force of his anger, crack the world in half.

But of course he could do none of those things, not in reality. Instead, like a petulant child, he flung himself face-down in the snow, and buried his head in his arms.

The cold bit into him instantly; the snow freezing under his body, his bare hands. He ignored it, hearing his own voice in his ears. *Stay here and rot, for all I care. Ruin everyone's life. Ruin your own!*

It was better, still, than hearing the things Harry had said to him. Horrible things. Not that no one had ever flung insults at him before, but it was worse, coming from Harry. Especially since he suspected that Harry had been right about most of what he'd said.

"Draco?" said a voice in his ear. "What are you doing? Did you fall out of a tree?"

He knew that voice. He supposed he should not be surprised that she was here, but he burrowed his head further into his arms anyway, willing her to go away.

She didn't. "Poor baby boy," she said, her voice lilting with amusement. Her breath tickled the back of his neck, and when she spoke again it was in a theatrical tone. "How art thou fallen from heaven, oh Lucifer son of the morning?"

Draco sighed, and rolled over on his back. Rhysenn was kneeling above him, her hair tumbling down, a tent of black silk around them both. She was cloakless, her shoulders bare and white under the moonlight. Draco spat snow out of his mouth, and sat up. "I'm hardly an angel," he said.

"Maybe a fallen one," she said, and smiled. "Now get up."

She stood, in a rustle of silk, and he got to his feet as well, mostly because he didn't want her standing over him. He had been right, she wore no coat, or any covering against the cold. She was dressed in black with her black hair loose down her back. Her feet, where the black dress ended, were bare on the snow, and where she walked, they left no marks behind

them. The bodice of her dress was tightly corseted and above it her breasts and shoulders were very white.



"It is going to snow," she said. "Why did you summon me here, when it is going to snow?"

He looked at her, breathing hard, as if he had been running - he was exhausted. "I did not summon you here," he said.

"I heard you crying out for me." She made a little pirouette, her skirt flying out, and suddenly her clothes had changed - now she was wearing a French maid's outfit, complete with fishnet stockings, a feather duster, and a peaked cap. "I came as soon as I could."

Draco blinked at her, and took a step back. "So you came here to help me?"

She lowered her eyes. "Of course I did."

"Good. I know exactly what you can do to help me, then." She looked up inquiringly. "You take messages from my father, to me," he said. "I know you do. Now I want you to take a message back."

"Back?" she laughed. "I do not take messages *back*."

"You'll take this one," he said, and there was something in his voice that made her look at him sharply. "Tell him," Draco said, "tell the Dark Lord, and my father too, that I know that they had something to do with what happened tonight. They did this. And I will find out why, and how, and they will regret what they have done. They will regret what they did to my friends." He paused. "I will make them pay for it."

Rhysenn smiled her cool little smile. "Is there any more to that speech?" she asked. "You could add a bit about drowning them in their own blood, or some stuff about cold vengeance - up to you of course."

Draco's voice was clipped. "No, I think it's fine as is, thanks."

"It's just a long list of unspecific threats," said Rhysenn, sounding disappointed. "Honestly, if you could add something about ripping out their spinal columns, or roasting them over an ever-burning fire of pitch and molten lava..."

"No," said Draco, coldly.

"Oh all right." Rhysenn looked vexed. "But it's a very boring message, if you want my opinion."

"The only thing I want less than I want your opinion, is syphilis," said Draco pleasantly.

"Well, your father won't like it."

"Fine. I don't like him."

"But he's your father."

"So he is."

Rhysenn pouted. "You're very disagreeable tonight," she said.

"What, you didn't think that was funny? I thought it was rather funny. All right, the delivery was a little off, but chalk that up to the freezing temperatures."

"It was childish," she snapped. "Why are you in such a difficult mood?"

"I've had a hard day," Draco said tightly. "And you, with your ridiculous -" he made a vague, irritated gesture in her general direction - "*outfits*, I mean what the hell do you need a feather duster for, it's ten degrees below zero out and there's *nothing to dust!*"

She looked annoyed. "I suppose you'd like it better if I wore a potato sack?"

"Knowing you, it'd be a see-through potato sack."

She rolled her eyes. "Well, then. There's always the outfit I wore to charm your little Gryffindor friend. Would you prefer pigtails and knee high stockings?"

Draco gave a short bark of laughter. "How do you know that's what Harry prefers?"

Her lip curled. "Just look at his girlfriend," she said silkily. "Saddle shoes, cardigan sweaters, short wool skirts. A little girl. So I expect, that's what he wants."

Draco's heart thumped hard and sickeningly against the cage of his ribs. It had never occurred to him that she would have seen Hermione, or

noticed her. But of course, she would have. "And what about me?" he asked, trying to change the topic. "What do I want?"

She smiled. "Only what you cannot have."

"That explains why I don't want you, then."

"Oh, very funny." She laughed, and shook her hair back. "You suffer," she said, "I feel it. Perhaps you are foolish to spurn what comfort I might offer you."

He looked at her then, as calculatingly as he could, and she looked back at him out of her oddly shaped gray eyes that were like his own. It was strange how she could look quite ordinary from some angles, even ugly, and from others so beautiful that despite his dislike of her he felt his own awareness of her beauty strike through him like a note of music sounded through the depths of sleep. "You offer me nothing," he said. "You never try with me, not like you try with Harry. Why not?"

She stepped away from him. "Are you insulted?"

"No." It was true. "Just curious."

She shrugged. "Why do you think?"

"I think my father told you to stay away from me," he said. "Apparently Harry's another matter."

"What I choose to do with Harry, or he with me, is hardly your concern," she said lightly.

"I don't think he's choosing anything," Draco said bluntly. "If he was, he wouldn't go near you. And what do you want from him?"

"Maybe I just like him," she said with another smile.

"A seventeen-year old virgin with skinny chicken legs? I somehow doubt that."

Rhysenn burst out laughing, and sat down, still gracefully, in the snow. As she sat, her short skirt fell away from her thighs, allowing Draco to see that, distractingly, she was wearing hot pink knickers. On the other hand,

he supposed it could have been worse; she could have been wearing no knickers at all. "Harry's a virgin?" she said. "Oh, that's priceless."

Draco suddenly wondered if this had been supposed to be some sort of secret. Then he wondered if it was even true. He'd always assumed, but... "I don't really know," he said, a bit stiffly, feeling somehow that he had lost ground here. "I was just guessing."

"That little girlfriend of his must not be much use," said Rhysenn, and there was a cool contempt in her voice that shot a bolt of ice up his spine.

"Leave her out of this," he said, his tone clipped. "As a matter of fact, leave them both out of this. Stay away from Harry from now on."

"But I like him."

"No, you don't. You just want something from him. Well, too bad. He's been through enough."

"Oh, I don't know," she said, tilting her head back as if she were bathing in the light of the moon. "I think you underestimate him. All that untapped power, it's attractive. And empirically of course - those eyes, that hair. He's very appealing on his own merits."

"That's great," Draco said. "I meant what I said. Stay away from him."

"Don't tell me you can't see it," Rhysenn said, tracing lines in the snow with a bare toe. "I so enjoyed watching you two fight just now... all that delicious tension. Tell me you didn't enjoy manhandling him about just a little bit."

Draco looked at her as if she had sprouted an eleventh toe. "You're a very strange woman."

She shrugged voluptuously. "You're fond of him," she said, "so why not?"

"I-" Draco spluttered, then paused. "You just really don't understand people, do you?" he said, sounding weary. "Have you never had a human emotion, or was it just so long ago that you forgot?"

An odd flicker came and went behind her eyes, and for a moment she looked almost angry. Then her expression smoothed itself out into a mocking half-smile. "I would have thought Lucius would have told you that it's hardly good manners to mention a lady's age like that," she said.

"He said I shouldn't mention a lady's age, sure," said Draco, finally fed up. "I don't remembering him saying anything about demon bitches from hell."

She leapt to her feet, her eyes flashing. "How dare you," she said, and he shrank back - she seemed suddenly to tower above him, her eyes flashing, her hair whipped by an invisible wind. She came towards him and it took all his self-control not to step away. "Stupid child," she said, and her face had taken on the narrow, predatory look of a veela's. "Stupid, impatient little boy."

"I am not a child," he said hotly.

"Oh, you are," she said. "So painfully young, and that is why it is so sad," and she took his face between her long and narrow hands, not sounding sad at all. He did not move away - could not move away. "Are you cold?" she whispered, and her breath stirred the hair at his temples. "Not now, but always? Do you wake up freezing from nightmares you cannot remember? Does your breath come short, does your heart pain you when you breathe? Does your vision begin to blur?" Her hand slid to cup his chin, and she drew his face up, until he met her gray gaze with his own. "My sick and beautiful angel-boy," she said, and her voice was like liquid silver. "Too pretty to go mad or blind, and die of it...but it is long past stopping, now."

"Die of what?" Draco said, and he heard the note of blind panic in his own voice. "What's long past stopping?"

She took her hands from his face and stepped back from him. "If you cannot guess, you will know soon enough," she said, and smiled like a devilish angel.

What is wrong with me? he wanted to ask her, *Am I ill, and how ill am I?* -- but he knew that if he did, she would respond teasingly, with more questions; so instead he turned, and took a few steps away from her. It seemed to him that the horizon had lightened, a paler pewter blue ribbon

between the black earth and the blacker clouds overhead. "Please leave him alone," he said, finally, without looking back at her. "Leave *us* alone."

He waited, but she did not reply. When he finally turned, she was, as he had known she would be, gone; the snow underfoot showed no marks at all where she had walked.

"*Mundungus*," he said, and the portrait door opened. Draco paused a moment to admire the irony of the fact that he now knew the Gryffindor password. Years ago, he would have paid good Galleons to know it. Now, it seemed trivial.

He stepped into the Common Room and the portrait swung shut behind him. The room was not empty: someone was standing over by one of the overstuffed armchairs, apparently putting something into a pocket. He knew immediately it was Ginny, even before she turned around, knew from the flaming-red hair that was currently screwed into a topknot at the back of her head. Curling tendrils escaped and wound around her face like licks of fire. She looked harried. "Draco, what are you doing here?"

"Delighted to see you too," he replied. "Nice pajamas."

She glanced down at her kitten-printed flannel pajamas, and pulled her robe closed around her. "Where's Harry?" she said.

"Not the faintest idea," said Draco. "Don't care either."

"What are you doing here, then?"

"Came to see Hermione," Draco said, rather shortly. "Unless you have a problem with that."

Ginny gave him an extremely superior look, as if he were a troublesome toddler. "I don't," she said. "But Hermione might."

Draco looked at her narrowly. "Meaning...?"

"Meaning Harry went to talk to her about a half hour ago, and she slammed the door in his face," Ginny said. "Then he took his cloak and left, and I haven't seen him since."

"Good for her," said Draco shortly. "Best thing for him."

Ginny looked very taken aback. "What on earth do you mean?"

Draco frowned at her and stalked over to the fireplace. There was a poker lying beside the grate; he bent and picked it up, and prodded moodily at the glowing coals with the pointed end. "Harry needs to grow up," he said. "He's acted like a complete arse, and he might as well know it. The only thing that might do him the blindest bit of good at this point would be if she kicked him down the front staircase and he bounced down every single step."

"That sounds possibly fatal," said Ginny.

"Ah, well," said Draco, and prodded savagely at a coal. "You win some, you lose some."

There was a short silence. Draco raised his eyes to Ginny, expecting her to look angry, or appalled, or disgusted with him. Instead she looked merely sad. "I take it he got angry at you," she said.

"You could say that," Draco said, hearing the acid in his own voice. "He accused me of lying to him, and despising his best friend, and basically causing all this, which I apparently did by being a selfish, overbearing, snobbish and despicable bastard with no redeeming qualities whatsoever. I asked him if there was anything I could do to help, and he indicated that he might perhaps feel a bit better if I were to swallow six pounds of lead and throw myself into the lake. So I left."

"Ah," said Ginny thoughtfully. "The lake's frozen over, you know."

"Thank you, I can always trust you to cut to the heart of the matter."

Ginny pushed a lock of red hair back from her eyes, and sighed. "I thought you couldn't lie to him," she said. "Not...mentally."

"Yeah, well," said Draco, in a flat voice, "He blocked me. I couldn't reach him at all."

"Nobody could have," she said gently, and put a hand on his shoulder. The contact was strangely comforting, perhaps because he was so cold and her hand was warm. "You have to go find him."

"I don't have to do anything," Draco said. "Except, possibly, go back to my room, get unbelievably pissed on Archenland wine, and sleep until the middle of next week. Maybe when I wake up, the Boy Who Lived will have sorted out his hellishly complex love life without my assistance."

"Without your assistance," Ginny said in a quiet voice, "he'd be dead."

Something half-remembered from a dream chimed inside Draco's head, and he laughed, not happily. "He won't die of this. It's just a broken heart."

"I don't mean this. I mean all the other times you saved his life."

"Well, I'm glad you remember them," said Draco, and his voice was colder than the ice forming on the windowpanes. "Because I don't think he does."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"What would you know about it?" Draco said, and instantly regretted having said it. She looked startled, then hurt, and then annoyed. He didn't blame her.

"So what are you going to do, then?" she demanded sharply. "Go back to bed and see if you can sleep? I'm betting you can't. Not knowing that he's somewhere, needing you, and you didn't go and help him."

"He doesn't need me," Draco said. "I think he made that pretty clear."

Ginny sniffed. "You're scared," she said in a superior tone.

"What do you mean, scared?"

"As in 'frightened.'"

"Thank you. That clears it up nicely. Frightened of what?"

"Of feeling anything," she snapped back. "Caring about people makes you vulnerable, and you hate that. You *need* Harry, and whatever you might think, he needs you. And he's all alone right now, and he's more miserable than he's ever been in his whole life, and so what if he yelled at you? So damn what? Like he hasn't forgiven you for worse. When you were injured, when that arrow hit you, I've never seen anyone as upset as he was. And then he slept on the floor of the infirmary all night, remember? Or don't you? So whatever this massive poncy diva sulk of yours was inspired by, let it go. It doesn't matter. Spank your inner child, stiff upper lip, shut your eyes and think about your country - I don't care what you have to do. Just *do* it, and go out there, and find Harry, because I'm worried sick about him and you should be too."

Draco looked at her narrowly. She was slightly out of breath now, and flushed, her cheeks bright pink. "You done?" he asked.

She set her chin. "Don't I seem done?"

"Hard to tell with you. Sometimes you get a second wind."

"Not this time," she said severely. "So are you going to go?"

Draco leaned the poker against the mantel, and paused for a moment. "Let me ask you something."

"What?"

"Why don't you go, if you're so worried about him being alone?"

Ginny sighed. "Because I have to stay here," she said. "I actually just came down here to get my book, and then I was going to go back and sit with Ron. I have to take care of my brother," she added, looking down at the book in her hands, and then back up at him. "And you should go take care of yours."

Draco looked at her - she was still pink-cheeked and bright-eyed, and in her kitten-print pajamas looked like a little girl, although she most manifestly wasn't. "I don't even know where to look," he said in a low voice. "I can't....find him."

Ginny shook her head, without looking at him - she seemed to be glancing around the room to see if she had forgotten anything. "Of course you can find him," she said. "Not everyone has telepathy to rely on, you know. Sometimes all you have is how well you know the other person, and you know him better than anyone. Where would he go?"

He felt something loosen in his chest at her words - she was right. As a matter of fact, he had a fairly good idea exactly where Harry would have gone. "I wouldn't know what to say to him."

"You'll think of something," Ginny said, extinguishing the last lit candle with a pinch of her fingers. Now there was only the fire for illumination. It turned the edges of her hair to candleflame. "I have faith in you."

He almost laughed. "Well, that sets you apart from the masses, doesn't it," he said.

"Maybe," she said. "Don't tell anyone."

"Any other dark secrets I should know about?"

She looked thoughtful. "Well, I can eat an entire ice cream sundae without using my hands."

"Really?" Draco asked.

The side of her mouth curled up. "Really. Now, go on - I have to get back upstairs."

He nodded. "Okay. And ... thanks."

"What are friends for," she said lightly.

"I wouldn't know," Draco said. "I think that's maybe why I..." He trailed off, unable to formulate the statement properly.

Ginny smiled at him, a little sadly. "You want to know what *I* think? I think you don't know a good thing when you have it," she said, "that's what I think," and she disappeared back up the stairs.

By the time Draco found the room again, through some amount of trial and error, it was full morning. Night had passed like a wheel turning, and in his exhaustion, the corridor walls and even the floor beneath his feet seemed to shimmer in the pale gray light.

He knew where he was going. A dark room, not that far from the main staircase, a room filled with old furniture and dusty unused books. And on the wall, a mirror framed in tarnished gold, a mirror he had never looked in. *I show you not your face, but your heart's desire.*

He had been there once, and walked out - it was not a place that figured happily in his memories. But for Harry, it would be different. That he knew. Standing by the lake, drenched in rain, that afternoon, he had felt what Harry was feeling as if it were water pouring through a sluice gate that could not be closed. Harry's happiness had layered itself over his own pain until he was no longer sure exactly what he was feeling, his emotions wavering light and dark like a Flickering Charm: happy/sad happy/sad happy/sad. He had put his hands over his ears and slid down the trunk of the tree, waiting for it to be over. He was not used to feeling with such intensity: not such happiness, nor such misery. It was like bleeding to death.

And I'm here.

He remembered the door now, the corridor outside. It had been wide open that day, now it was open only a crack. He put a hand on it, pushed it wide, and stepped into the room.

The pale dawn light drowned the walls of the room in silver. The furniture, shrouded in white sheeted coverings, looked like icebergs looming up out of the grayish darkness as Draco navigated his way across the room. Through the bay window in the east wall, he could see the world outside: white sky, white snow, the slender penciled shapes of winter trees. And on the window ledge sat Harry.

He had his legs drawn up, his hands clasped loosely across his knees. He was looking out the window, and the faint light chased the planes of his face with silver. As Draco approached, Harry turned and looked at him. He seemed unsurprised to see him there, or if he was, Draco couldn't tell. Harry's face was a mask.

The two boys looked at each other across the dark space that separated them, as if they faced each other across a Quidditch pitch. Had the mirror on the wall been a true mirror, it would have cast back a curious reflection: the two boys both the same height, the same slenderness, one so fair and one so dark, one in black and one in white. Some odd tableau of perfect opposites seemed to be being enacted. No living soul could have failed to notice it, but there were no other souls in the room, and Harry and Draco could not see themselves.

"I thought you'd come," Harry said.

Draco hesitated. A bitter voice spoke in the back of his head, wanting to snap back at Harry, Why did you think I would come? Because I have nothing better to do, because I follow you, pathetically, believing in our friendship, while you call me a liar to my face?

But another voice shouted that voice down. Oddly, it was Sirius' words, words he had spoken months ago... *I would forgive you if my forgiveness were required... The things we do for love, those things endure.*

"Well," Draco said. "I'm here."

"I see that," Harry said. "How did you find me?"

Draco glanced around the shadowed room, and back at Harry. "I thought you'd come here."

"Because?"

"It's what I would do."

Harry looked down at his hands. When he spoke, his voice was rapid. "I'm sorry."

Feeling suddenly exhausted, Draco leaned against one of the sheeted white pieces of furniture. He suspected from its shape that it was an ottoman. "Sorry for what?"

"For what I said." Harry's voice was deadly quiet. "All of it."

"Even the part where you said, 'Hey, Malfoy, what're you doing here?'" Draco asked, but Harry didn't crack even a slight smile. The faintness of the light smoothed the lines of strain from his face, made him look younger, a solemn-faced child.

"I hate everyone right now," Harry said. His voice was still even. "I looked at you, up there in the dorm room, and I hated you too."

"I know," Draco said. "It's okay."

"It's not okay." Harry took a ragged breath. "I've got no reason to hate you. You were just trying to help."

"Don't," Draco said, and straightened up. He began to cross the room towards Harry, who was still looking down at his hands with that same look he had worn in the graveyard: that look like blindness, as if were seeing through this world to another and terrible place beyond.

"I wanted to hurt you," Harry said. "I had to keep my mind locked down so I wouldn't hurt you."

It occurred to Draco to remark that Harry had managed to hurt him just fine anyway, but that seemed a childish and petty thing to say. Most of his anger was gone, now that he had seen Harry; he felt only terribly exhausted and horribly sad. "You apologized," he said, "does that mean that you believe me now?"

Harry nodded, ever so slightly. *I believe you now*, he said, and Draco almost jumped at the unexpected contact. *Some part of me believed you then, but I didn't want to admit it.*

Why not? Doesn't it make things easier? She still...loves you.

Except that she hates me. Harry unclasped his hands from around his knees and swung to face Draco, dangling his legs over the side of the window sill. And not without good reason. I was horrible to her. I wouldn't forgive me, either.

She'll forgive you, Draco replied. *She'll understand.*

How can she understand when I don't understand? I don't understand what happened, and I don't understand why I never noticed anything, and I don't understand why Ron would... Harry raised his eyes to Draco's; in the half-light, they were black. *Do you?*

Understand what happened? No, although I have my guesses, Draco replied. Do I understand why Weasley did what he did? Yeah. I think I do. I also think I'm not the best person to explain it to you.

Harry's mouth tensed. Why not?

Because I hate him for what he did, Draco said flatly. And a big part of me wants you to hate him too, but my reasons for that are selfish reasons, and I know that.

There was a short silence and then Harry, apparently having decided that pressing Draco on this point would be a bad idea, nodded again, and scooted sideways on the window sill. Draco accepted the unspoken invitation and went to sit beside Harry. They sat for a while without speaking, in neither a companionable nor an awkward silence - Draco felt it was somehow a watchful silence, as if he were waiting for Harry to reach some sort of conclusion. He sat where he was as the sky outside the window lightened and lightened, the clouds parting to reveal strips of silvery gray sky.

The light began to spill into the room, turning the mirror on the far wall into a gleaming sequin, starring Harry's pitch-black hair with jewelry light. The light showed, as well, the lines by the side of his mouth, the mother-of-pearl half circles under his eyes. He held out his hand, and for a moment Draco just looked at it, unsure what Harry wanted. It was his right hand, and along the flat palm the thin zigzag scar shone like silver wire. He turned his own hand over to see the counterpart scar there, and flinched in shock when Harry took the hand he had extended, and held it tightly.

Draco looked at Harry in surprise. He had always watched Harry and Ron with wonder and some envy of their easy physical camaraderie - the pats on the back, the hugs when they won a Quidditch match, how Ron would hold Harry up if he was laughing too hard to stand, or casually shove him while they were walking, and catch him when he fell. He and Harry had none of that: they touched each other only in extreme circumstances, and

then it was a light brush on the shoulder, a tap on the wrist. Even when he'd thought Harry was dying, he had not touched him.

The pressure on his hand increased, and he flinched, because now it hurt. Harry was less holding his hand than crushing it, his grip so tight that Draco could feel the bones of his fingers grind together. He winced but didn't move. Harry's grip grew tighter and tighter until Draco thought he could no longer keep from exclaiming at the pain, and then Harry let go.

Draco took his hand back, and looked at it with trepidation. He half expected to encounter a shapeless blob of crushed flesh, but his hand looked the same. He wiggled his fingers. They worked. "Ouch," he remarked conversationally. "So you've decided to blame my hand, then?"

Harry blinked for a moment, as if waking up out of some kind of dream. "Sorry. Did that hurt?"

"Does Professor Sinistra want into Charlie's pants?"

Harry blinked again. "I don't know, does she?"

"You don't pay attention to anything at this school, do you, Potter?"

"I don't follow every tedious bit of gossip, if that's what you mean."

"There's nothing tedious about gossip."

"Oh blah blah, Dean's dating Eloise, Parvati's marrying a Death Eater's son, Blaise is fooling around with Malcolm behind your back..."

Draco almost fell off the windowsill. "Blaise is fooling around with Malcolm behind my back?"

Harry looked worried. "I figured you knew. Everyone knows."

Draco was speechless.

"Oh, dear," said Harry, looking, if possible, even more wretched.

Draco recovered himself, and snorted. "Don't worry about it. I don't care."

"I know you don't," Harry said. "I wish..."

"You wish what?"

"That I could be a bit more like you," Harry said. "I mean, not in most respects of course. But it'd be nice not to care."

"Not caring's overrated," Draco said. The idea of a Harry who didn't care was foreign and somewhat bothersome to him. "Anyway, on that topic, have you decided what to do about Hermione?"

"I guess I'd better talk to her," Harry said. "Only I don't know what to say."

"Far be it from me to tell anyone to apologize," Draco said. "because, myself, I'd rather be chewed apart by rabid weasels. Then again, I've never been a git like you were last night."

"That is such a lie," Harry began indignantly, then paused. "Right, you're just winding me up. Okay, so I was a git."

"Yes, you were. You were a git of epic proportions. You were such a git, they should name a town after you. Dorksville springs instantly to mind. Or, perhaps, Little Wankerton. I suspect that one's not taken."

"Argh," said Harry. "Let me alone. Crushed, fragile ego, remember?"

"I decided a tough love approach might work wonders here," Draco replied. "Because frankly all the intensive moping and 'death, death, oh welcome death' stuff is starting to get on my nerves."

"Then what's your advice?"

"Well," Draco said thoughtfully. "If I were you, which thankfully, I'm not, I would recommend that you recognize the fact that Hermione's about six times smarter than you, or me either for that matter, and therefore you should be honest with her. Because if you aren't, she'll see right through you anyway."

"Be honest? That's your advice?"

"Well, take a whack at it. If that doesn't work, groveling makes a solid backup plan. Then again, why are you asking me? I'm not the one with the girlfriend."

"You have a girlfriend," Harry said.

"Not any more," said Draco, and hopped down off the window sill. "Look, try again with Hermione today, and if she still slams the door on you, I'll talk to her."

"Thanks," Harry said, a little stiffly. Draco could tell that he loathed the thought that Draco could talk to Hermione and he couldn't. On the other hand, he was biting it back, which Draco appreciated.

"I have to get some sleep," Draco said. It was true. Exhaustion seemed to be drizzling through his bone marrow like cold water. Harry was starting to look very blurry indeed and he could hear his own pulse beating in his ears. "Will you be all right?"

"I'll be all right," Harry said. He caught Draco's expression, and almost smiled. "I'll be fine. You look knackered, Malfoy. Go to bed."

Draco was halfway to the door when Harry spoke again, and Draco turned around instantly, wondering if Harry was calling him back. He wasn't: he was standing now, obviously getting ready to leave as well, but he had paused, one hand on the window sill. "Malfoy?"

"Yes?"

"Who do you think she is?"

Draco knew immediately what he meant. "I don't know," he said honestly. "She looked like Hermione. It was a good disguise."

"But you have guesses? I know you do."

Draco nodded, slightly. The sun had risen outside the window, but there was still no color in Harry's face. He looked wan and ghostly, and Draco was suddenly reminded of the way he had looked second year, when he'd toppled off his broom during a match, and the bone in his arm had broken with a sickening crack. Draco hadn't been at all sorry, but a

certain primal empathy of feeling had made him wince all the same. He remembered Harry's sick, pained, white-faced look then - he looked the same now. "Who hates me that much?" Harry said, and his voice was a little wistful. "To plan something like that?"

"If it's any consolation, Potter," said Draco, as gently as he could, "by my calculations, it didn't have anything to do with hating you."

The sky outside Dumbledore's office window was pale gray, streaked with darker gray clouds. Hermione kept her eyes apathetically fixed on it while she waited for the headmaster to arrive. She was exhausted, having not slept all night, and she felt slightly dizzy. She had been absolutely dreading breakfast, but to her relief, McGonagall had been the first person to knock on her door in the morning, and had requested that she come straight to Dumbledore's office. Well, that wasn't exactly true. Harry had knocked on her door late in the night, and she'd opened the door, taken one look at him, and shut the door in his face.

I know he came to apologize, she thought. She'd seen it in his face. But she hadn't wanted to hear it then. She didn't want to hear it now. She wondered if she ever would.

The door opened behind her, and she heard someone come into the room. A throat was cleared, and a voice spoke: it was Dumbledore, as she'd known it would be. "I'm afraid I need to speak with you, Miss Granger."

Hermione turned and looked listlessly at the headmaster. "I know, sir."

He moved to stand behind his desk, looking very grave indeed. "Please come and sit down, Miss Granger."

Hermione nodded. She had no idea how much the professors knew about the events of the night before. A great deal, she imagined - she'd seen it in McGonagall's face, and saw it now in Dumbledore's. At another time this would have withered her with humiliation, but now she was beyond the point of caring. She went towards the seat that Dumbledore had indicated, in front of his desk, and sat down, clasping her hands in her lap. "What did you want to talk to me about, Professor?" she asked.

Dumbledore took the seat behind his desk, and regarded her gravely over the top of his gold-rimmed spectacles. "A rather serious matter, I'm afraid," he said gently. "Normally I would not call you in to discuss the private business of another student, even a close personal friend of yours..."

"I know," she interrupted, her own voice sounding a little desperate in her ears. She kept her eyes fixed on his desk : "You want to talk to me about Harry."

There was a short silence. Hermione kept her eyes fixed on Dumbledore's desk: Finally, he spoke, still gently, "No, Miss Granger. I wanted to talk to you about Mr. Weasley."

She raised her eyes slowly, and the compassionate kindness she saw in his expression almost undid her. "About Ron?" she whispered.

He nodded. "Mr. Weasley has left us," he said.

For a brief and bizarre moment, Hermione thought that he meant that Ron was dead. The room seemed to tilt crazily around her, and she grabbed tightly at the arms of her chair. "He's what?"

"He has resigned as Head Boy," said Dumbledore. He glanced down, and she followed his gaze. Only then did she realize that the shiny square she had noted earlier was a badge...Ron's Head Boy badge, to be precise. It was upside-down, and she could see the inscribed lettering where his name was printed, backwards. "He has left Hogwarts."

"Left school? But how could he..."

"Classes are over for this term," Dumbledore said. "I could compel him to stay, if I wished. But I saw no point in it. I hope he will want to return, once the holidays are over..."

"No," Hermione whispered, staring at the silver badge on the desk. "He can't have left, he can't -"

"Miss Granger, I had hoped that we could discuss the fact that, since there is no longer an acting Head Boy at Hogwarts -"

"No," Hermione said again, and stood up so fast that her chair crashed to the ground. "Headmaster, I - is there any chance he's still here, do you know, has he left yet?"

Dumbledore regarded her with cautious alarm, rising from his seat. "He went to clean out his room and to collect his belongings," he began, and might have added something else, but Hermione did not wait to hear it. She turned on her heel, and ran out of the room, leaving Dumbledore staring after her.

The door to Ron's room was closed, but not locked. Hermione flung it open, and stepped inside. Her heart sank.

The room was bare. The Chudley Cannons posters had been stripped down from the walls, the trunk was gone from the foot of the bed, and the school books from the shelf by the door. The patchwork duvet cover Mrs. Weasley had made for Ron fifth year was also gone, and the bed looked as bare and impersonal as a hospital cot. The only sign that Ron Weasley had once lived here was a small object tucked into the frame of the mirror that hung on the wall by the window. Moving slowly, Hermione crossed the room and gently pried the object out of the frame.

It was a photograph. Not a wizarding one, but one that had been taken with her own very ordinary Muggle camera, on a delayed timer. It showed herself, in her school robes, standing between Ron and Harry, a hand on each of their shoulders. They all looked well and happy and smiling. Staring at the photo, she felt a fist clench at her heart. Slowly, she set the photograph down on the window sill, and turned away.

The door behind her opened. She spun around. She saw a slender white hand on the doorknob, then a bright red head. It was Ginny, and she was talking to someone behind her. "If you want to look one more time to make sure you haven't forgotten anything," she was saying, "then we could..."

Ron, Hermione thought numbly. She stood frozen in place, the rest of Ginny's words lost on her, as Ron came into the room after his sister. Unlike Ginny, he saw her instantly - his eyes went straight to hers across the room, and for a long moment they stared at each other in silence.

"...or you could wait downstairs with the coach driver, and I could look -"

"Ginny," said Ron, very quietly.

Ginny broke off, and turned to follow his gaze. When she saw Hermione, she paled, but held her ground. "Hi," she whispered.

Hermione nodded. She felt unable to force a sound past her tight throat.

"I was....Ron and I were just going downstairs," Ginny said. She glanced around quickly, and then back at her brother. "It doesn't look like you left anything behind, we should probably just -"

The hitch in Hermione's throat loosened. "You left this," she said, and plucked the photograph from the windowsill. She held it out to Ron, who looked at it, and whitened. "Don't you want it any more?"

It was Ginny who moved to take the photo, but Hermione retracted her hand. Ginny looked at her brother, her eyes alight with concern. "Let's - it's better if we just go."

Hermione bit her lip. "Please," she said imploringly to Ron. "Just talk to me for six minutes, and you can go, I won't ask you again. I promise." Her voice shook. "You owe me six minutes, at least."

Ginny looked faintly bewildered. "Six minutes?"

But Ron understood, as Hermione had expected he would. "Six years," he said in a remote voice. "One minute for each year we've been friends."

Ginny looked even more miserable. "Ron..."

But Ron was looking past his sister. "Fine," he said. "Fine. I'll talk to you."

Ginny's face fell, and she glanced at her brother, but his mouth was set in a stubborn line. With a resigned shrug, she went to the door. "I'll meet you on the steps," she said to Ron, and went out.

The door shut behind her, and Ron and Hermione were alone together in the empty, silent room. Ron crossed his arms over his chest, hugging his elbows as if he were cold. He was staring at a point just past Hermione's left ear, as if he couldn't quite bring himself to look directly at her.

"You can't leave," she said to him. It wasn't what she'd meant to say at all, but there it was. "You can't."

He still wouldn't look at her. "I'm leaving," he said. "It's done. And don't tell me I didn't have to resign -"

"I'm glad you resigned," she interrupted coldly. "That's not what I mean. You can't leave without talking to Harry."

Now he looked at her, his blue eyes gone wide with amazement. "Talk to Harry?"

"You owe him an apology at least -"

"An *apology*?" Ron's voice was a slap. "You think this is like that little disagreement we had back in fourth year; you think this is something that can be solved with an apology? Hermione, he hates me now, after what I did."

"But you didn't really do it -"

"Yes, I did." He was hugging himself again, his knuckles white. "In every way that matters, I did."

"Why?" The question she had promised herself she would not ask, burst out of her. "*Why* did you do it?"

He was silent. After a minutes had gone by, he dropped his hands from his elbows, and straightened up. And his eyes met hers. "I thought you loved me," he said. "I thought..."

His voice trailed off into silence. She looked at him, seeing as if for the first time how white and drawn he was. His red hair fell in dank tangles over his forehead, his eyes were shadowed with a violet as dark as any of Pansy's horrible eyeshadows. His clothes were crumpled, as if he had slept in them. He looked like someone who had been ill for days. She wanted to hate him and reached for the anger she knew was there, the rage that ticked away just below the numbness that had claimed her thoughts. Instead, she saw a series of images cast like shadows against the walls of her mind.

Ron, on the train to school, eleven years old in threadbare robes. Sitting in class, chewing a quill, a look of intense concentration on his face. Denying the Burrow garden with determined glee. Facing down Snape, facing down Sirius Black, teetering on his broken leg, wincing in pain. Soaking wet when Harry dragged him out of the lake. The first time he had kissed her. The way he had looked when he had brought Harry up out of the Bottomless Pit, and Ron had pushed Harry towards her, and then turned away while they embraced. His face in that prison cell under Slytherin's castle, and she wondered again what he had been about to tell her. Her eyes went to his left hand where the hilt of the sword had burned its cross-shaped mark. *I want to hate him, she thought, but I can't, any more than Ginny can. He's part of me, my own blood and bone. My childhood.*

"Of course I love you," she said. "And you love me. And you love Harry, and he...he loves you."

Ron winced. "Don't," he said.

Hermione ignored him. "And you threw all that away. And for what?"

"I don't know." His voice was fierce. "I told you I don't know. I can't explain it. It's like I went mad for a while. It's like I was looking down from some high place, seeing myself do these things, and it seemed right and justified. And I loved you..." He looked away again. "I never have loved anyone else."

"You didn't love me. Whoever she was...that's who you loved."

"She never existed," Ron said. His voice was bitter. "That's what I think. There never was a girl I loved...just something evil that took the shape of what I wanted."

"Like a demon?" Hermione asked, her mind suddenly flipping the pages of her DADA textbook. "Like a succubus?"

Ron looked faintly exasperated. "I told you I have no idea."

"You spent all that time with her and you never -"

"I thought she was you!" he burst out. "Maybe I'm a fool, and I just saw what I wanted to see, but she did a damn good impression of you, Hermione. She had your mannerisms down - the way you curl your hair around your finger when you're thinking. The way you bite your nails. She had your clothes -"

"I know. I saw. My pajamas." Hermione shook her head. "Six years of friendship," she said in an icy voice, "and all it took to convince you was a little bit of nail-biting and a pair of stolen pajamas."

Ron made a little gasping sound, as if she'd walloped him in the chest. "Maybe I believed it because I wanted to believe it."

"You *wanted* to believe I'd do that to Harry?"

"Not everything," he said in a deadly cold voice, "is about *Harry*."

"Bollocks," she shot back. "This is all about Harry."

Ron put a hand up, as if to ward off her rage. "This -- *this* is why I have to leave."

"Why? Because I want you to face what you did? Because I want to know *why*?"

"Yes, because you want to know why. And there is no why." His voice was flat with exhaustion. "I don't have any answers."

"You must know why you did it..."

"I don't. It seems like a fever dream." His shoulders hunched, and he shoved his hands in his pockets, shivering. "I close my eyes, I see her face. Your face. I was sick all night, thinking about what I did. I've been sick all morning. I've been throwing up till there's nothing left to throw up, and then I throw up again." His eyes were bleak. "I touched her, I spent nights with her, hours and hours talking. It wasn't just *sex*, you know. We talked, we ate together, we did our Potions homework. And I don't even know who she was. She could have been anyone - *anything*." He shook his head, and leaned back against the wall. "So don't ask me why I did it - because it's what I've been asking myself, and I still don't know."

"Don't try to tell me how much you're suffering." She heard her own voice in her ears, and was shocked at its cruel tone. "I doubt it could be enough."

His mouth hardened. "Let me ask you something, Hermione. If I'm so horrible, if I'm so awful ... then why do you want me to stay?"

"Because -- because I can't do this alone." There, she had said it. "I can't."

"You can't do what alone?"

"Put Harry back together. I..." Ron looked at her blankly, and she bit her lip. "I saw him tonight...just now, and he..."

A muscle spasmed next to Ron's mouth. "How did... how did he seem?"

Hermione looked away. "Broken," she said.

Ron's blue eyes darkened, but when he spoke his voice was steady. "He's been broken for a while now, Hermione," he said. "You never saw it because you didn't want to. That other Hermione...whoever was pretending to be you...*she* saw it." He looked, then, at the photograph in his hand. Abruptly, he shoved it into his breast pocket. "She saw it better than we did."

She looked at him, then turned away quickly and went to the window. She put the palm of her hand against the cold glass, and looked out. The sky was heavy, leadenly gray, the clouds weighted with their freight of incipient snow. The only color in the white expanse of ground before the Forest was a cluster of moving black dots where some students were having a snowball fight. Hermione closed her eyes, remembering Ron's cold hand in hers, her other hand gripping Harry's. Promise me...that we'll always be friends.

"He can't be broken," she said, not opening her eyes. "I won't let him be."

"And what'll you do if he won't let you fix him?"

"That doesn't matter," she said, in the same remote voice. "I'd do anything for Harry. Anything. Even if it made him hate me."

"Would you leave him?"

That made her eyes fly open. She stared at Ron, who stared grimly back, his blue eyes steady. "You mean if he wanted me to? If he - despises me now?"

"No," said Ron. "Not exactly." He took a few steps towards her, and then, seemingly assured that she was not going to lunge at him and slap him, came to stand beside her. The gray light from the window cast a sickly pallor over his already pale skin. Hermione wished she had a Pepper-up Potion to give him. Then she tried not to wish it. She was, after all, still angry. "Hermione..." He took a deep breath. "I know you won't believe this, because you're too angry, and you - you have every right to be angry. But when I say I don't know why I did it, I mean it. It was like I went mad for those few hours every night. Pieces of my memories come back to me now and they seem like hallucinations - not like dreams, too real and vivid for that, but like waking nightmares. And yet they're memories of happy times. At least, I thought I was happy."

"Ron...what are you trying to say?"

"That maybe I don't know why I did it because...because I wasn't in control of what I was doing. I know it sounds like an excuse, but I'm not making excuses. I blame myself, I do, but at the same time - at the same time, maybe you're right, and all this really is about Harry. After all, what better way to get at him than through you and me?"

"No." Her nails dug into her hands. "Don't say that."

"It's true. You know it's true. They used *us* to get at him."

"Who are 'they'?"

Ron spun away from her and stared at the wall. "I don't know. But I know I'm right."

"Is that why you're leaving?" she asked, in a small thread of a voice. "To keep him safe?"

"Maybe. A little bit." He covered his face with his hands. "I don't know. I'd like to think so. But ... I've spent all these months missing him, wondering

where he'd gone, where we went. Us, our friendship. I blamed Malfoy for all of that being lost. But now I wonder." He took his hands away from his face. The redness of his eyelids (so he *had* been crying) made his eyes look bluer, his face consequently even younger. "I don't think it is Malfoy. I think it's something inside Harry. There's something he's dreading, but he's obsessed with it, too. I just don't know what it is." He looked at her, hard. "Do you?"

After a long moment, she shook her head. "No. And I still don't see how you can justify leaving him."

"Leaving him?" Ron gave a short bark of almost-laughter. It was the most unhappy sound she had ever heard. "How can I leave him? He's already gone."

"You think...you really think...that I'm putting him in danger?" Hermione asked. "I try...I try to protect him, however I can."

Ron said, flatly, "You can't do him any good if he won't let you."

Hermione looked at him. "Why," she whispered, "do things have to get this bad before we can talk like this? You never said any of these things.."

"Yes, I did," Ron said. "Just...not, apparently, to you."

She stared at him, a question blossoming in her mind. "How did I never know," she whispered. "How did you never say anything to *me*, anything that would have given you away..."

Ron looked at her out of haunted eyes. "You...there was a spell..." he began, but the door opened then, interrupting him, and Ginny came in. She had her dark brown cloak pulled around her, and her cheeks were red with cold.

"The carriage is here to take you down to the station," she said softly. "We have to go."

"Are you leaving as well, Ginny?" Hermione asked, not taking her eyes off Ron.

"No," Ginny said. "I'm going to stay."

"Okay," said Hermione slowly, "'Okay," and then, looking at Ron, she said, "And you're really going to go?"

"I have to go, he replied, not looking at her. "I have to," and he looked so miserable that she took a step forward towards him - it was her instinct to put her arms around him, but he stepped away from her violently, almost knocking into his sister. "I can't," he said. "I look at you - I see *her*."

"Ron," Hermione said miserably, but Ginny had already taken her brother's arm shaking her head. She cast a desperate look at Hermione, who blanched and stepped back. She kept her eyes fixed on the floor, and waited until she heard the sound of the door clicking shut before she raised her eyes.

They were gone.

He had sworn not to do this unless it was an emergency, but he had begun to think that all this was exactly that. Sitting at his desk, Lupin reached with a sigh for the brass-bound box that sat on the left side of his desk, and drew it towards him. He opened it, and took out a parchment, which he unrolled across the desk blotter.

He remembered Sirius asking him to make a new map, at the beginning of term, handing him the last of the Zonko's Reality Pencils. He'd demurred - it was hardly something a Hogwarts professor wanted to have discovered stashed in his office. But Sirius was very persuasive when he wanted to be. "Just make a rudimentary map," he'd said. "One that shows the boys, at least."

And so it did: as Lupin's eyes scanned the parchment, he saw the two blue dots that were Draco and Harry - Harry seemed to be sitting in Gryffindor Tower, and Draco was making his way up from the Slytherin dungeon. Lupin sat and watched the progress of the second blue dot, his mind awl with confused thoughts, until it drew near enough to the corridor where his office was. Then he got to his feet, and went to the door, slipping the map into his breast pocket.

The hallway was empty, and for a moment Lupin almost rechecked the map. Then Draco came around the corner up ahead. He was walking with

his hands in the pockets of his black trousers, his silver head bent, but he seemed to sense Lupin's presence, and glanced up as he rounded the corner. "Hey," he said, slowing down slightly, "Professor Lupin. Hi."

"Hello, Draco," Lupin said. "Have you got a moment to talk to me?"

Draco glanced down at the silver watch clamped around his slender wrist. Lupin spared a moment towards wishing that the Malfoys weren't biased quite so heavily towards that particular metal. "I'm meant to be meeting Harry and Ginny..."

"This," said Lupin firmly, "is important."

Draco lowered his arm and shrugged. It was an elegant shrug. Everything he did was elegant. Sirius, at his age, had had much the same pantherly grace. "All right."

Lupin ducked back into his office, and Draco followed, shutting the door behind them without being asked. He leaned against the door, and looked at Lupin with wide-eyed, put-on innocence. In the faint winter light, his eyes were bluish, like the shadows under them. "What is it, Professor?"

"The wedding," Lupin said, feeling it wise to start off with something safe. "It's in less than a week, and since everything has been ... chaotic, I wanted to make sure you have everything you need -"

"Harry and I had our clothes tailored months ago," said Draco coolly. "And sent to the Manor. We're fine."

"And Harry, he is -"

"Just say what you want to say, Professor," said Draco, rubbing the back of a hand across his tired eyes. The scar across his palm flashed once: brightly, vividly silver. "I know you know. Harry told me. You're worried about him."

"I'm worried about you."

Draco looked momentarily surprised. "Me? Why be worried about me?"

"Because you're obviously not doing well," Lupin said bluntly. "You lost that Quidditch match, your marks are down in your classes, you seem distracted and upset, you've not written your mother in over a month..."

"I also forgot to send my grandmother a toffee cake for her birthday," Draco supplied helpfully.

"And you look..."

Draco's eyes narrowed. "I look what?"

"Bad," Lupin said, and Draco immediately looked so offended that he was almost amused. "Ill, I should say," he amended himself gently. "You're pale, you've lost weight again..."

"It's winter and I haven't been hungry," Draco said. Lupin just looked at him: at the very thick fair hair that wanted cutting (and it wasn't like Draco to neglect his hair); Draco had always been slender, but now he looked thin. More than that, there was a translucence to him, a faint sort of silvery light that seemed to be shining through his eyes and skin. It was alarming. "How much does Sirius know?" he demanded abruptly.

"I have told him nothing that Harry asked me not to tell him," Lupin said heavily, "although I wish it were otherwise, as I believe he could be a great help to Harry."

"Mmm," said Draco, noncommittally.

"I should also add that I was quite concerned about your altercation with Mister Finnigan at the museum," Lupin added. "It makes me wonder exactly what your motivation could have been. It is not like you to resort to fist fighting. I can only imagine you were trying to create some sort of distraction. But from what?"

Draco looked at his watch. "I ought to go. I..."

"I know. You're meeting Harry."

Draco smiled a sideways smile. "Hermione agreed to talk to him. I'm meant to lend moral support."

"Won't that confuse the other Gryffindors?" Lupin asked, somewhat amused.

Draco lifted one shoulder and let it fall. "Harry doesn't seem to care about that much anymore," he said thoughtfully. "And since I'm persona non grata with the Slytherins..."

"Are you? Why?"

"The façade's pretty cracked at this point," Draco said. "Harry and I are friends. People know it. Word gets around. The Slytherins won't tolerate that. I don't blame them, really. And when I break it off with Blaise, that'll be the nail in the coffin."

"You're breaking it off with Blaise?" Lupin asked in surprise.

Draco nodded. "As soon as I can find her."

"Is this because she was fooling around with Malcolm behind your back?"

Draco looked aggrieved. "Does everyone know about that except me?"

Lupin shrugged regretfully. "Sorry," he said. "And I'm sorry about the Slytherins as well."

"Yeah," Draco said. "Right now, it just doesn't seem all that pressing."

Lupin nodded, and stood up. Draco looked at him apprehensively as he approached, and when he laid a hand on the boy's shoulder, Draco looked every so slightly panicked, as if he wasn't sure what to do. "I know there are things you aren't telling me," he said gently. "And I know it can't be easy...but you can tell me anything, I hope you know that, and it will remain in my strictest confidence."

Draco raised his face; the glare from the window struck through his fair hair, firing it to individual strands of white light. He had his father's coloring, and all his mother's beauty, but somehow, Lupin thought, he looked like neither of them: only wholly somehow his own person. "There is one thing," he said.

"What is it?"

"Something Dumbledore told me," Draco said. "But it's about Harry's parents, so you might not want to hear it."

"About James and Lily?" Lupin asked, drawing his hand back.

"Uh-huh." Draco's face was impassive, but the gray eyes begged for understanding. "How...how well did you know my father, back in the seventies?"

"Not well at all," Lupin said, wondering where this was going. "I knew of him. Everyone knew of Lucius Malfoy."

"You know he sat on the board at the Daily Prophet," Draco said, and Lupin nodded. "He was also wholly responsible for the running of certain of the smaller magazines...the Malfoy Park Banner, of course, and the Hogsmeade Gazette..."

Lupin simply looked at him, curiously. "Yes, and?"

"And very few people knew he ran the Hogsmeade Gazette. After Peter Pettigrew graduated from Hogwarts, it was one of the few places to offer him a job.."

"Right," said Lupin slowly. "Right, he was a reporter..."

"And that put him in my father's pocket, although he didn't know it at the beginning, apparently. I'm fuzzy on the exact details, but at some point early on my father arranged that certain sensitive papers be discovered in Pettigrew's desk," Draco said. "Papers that tied Pettigrew into the illegal exportation of dragon's blood. You know the penalty for that, especially in those times: he would have gone to Azkaban for life without trial, or gotten the Dementor's Kiss immediately."

"Yes," said Lupin. "I know. And I think I see where this is going."

"My father blackmailed Pettigrew into turning informant against his friends. He drew him into the Death Eaters...my father was the one who was responsible for the plot against the Potters...the Secret-Keeper idea...he turned Harry's parents in to the Dark Lord...and he went with him that night in Godric Hollow. He was there when they died," Draco

finished, and slumped back slightly against the wall, as if this recitation had exhausted him.

Lupin held himself silent for a long moment, thinking. None of this, really, was that surprising: certainly it was nothing he would have put past Lucius Malfoy, who, it had always seemed to him, sat at the Dark Lord's right hand. However, in the context of Harry's new relationship with Draco and all things Malfoy, it was disturbing indeed. "And you haven't told Harry?"

Draco shook his head. "No. Dumbledore only told me a few weeks ago, and since then...there hasn't been an opportunity, really," which Lupin knew was only half-true.

"You're afraid that he'll react badly."

"Wouldn't you react badly?"

"Harry knows his parents are dead," Lupin said bluntly. "For a child to grow up knowing his parents are not just dead but were murdered....he's already had the worst of it, don't you think?"

Draco seemed to consider this. "He's very angry," he said. "Especially now...and its sort of an uncontrollable rage. I don't know how to explain it, but I can feel it. When he was younger, Voldemort always came after him, looked for him, but now, if he could, I think he'd go after the Dark Lord on his own...it's that kind of anger."

"And you don't want to make him more angry? Or are you worried he'll focus his anger on you? Because he won't, Draco - Harry knows you aren't responsible for the things your father did."

"Maybe not, but it seems a little stiff to ask him to come and live in a house owned by his parents' murderer," said Draco with a bleak sharpness, and Lupin stared at him.

"But your father's dead," he said. "That house has passed to you; you own it. And when you turn eighteen, if you choose, you can rip it down brick by brick."

A shadow passed across Draco's face. "Right," he said. "Because my father is dead."

Lupin didn't know quite how to respond to this. Draco seemed to have shut himself off, his brief confiding mood having passed. "If there's anything I can do..."

"It's all right," Draco said. "There's nothing you can do."

When Hermione received the owl from Draco asking her if she would see Harry that day, she'd thought about it a long time. She'd just come from talking to Ron, and felt wrung out...but she had to see Harry. She needed to. She agreed to meet him later, in neutral territory - Ron's empty room. She sent the owl back to Draco. Then she looked around her room. Then she began to pack.

She was nearly finished when the clock struck noon, and she straightened up from her packing. She hadn't eaten in almost a day, and felt dizzy when she stood too quickly. She regarded her haggard reflection in the mirror with a sense of distant dismay. An attempt to apply a lip-reddening charm only made her look more washed out, so with a sigh, she straightened her cardigan and headed out the door.

Ginny and Draco were waiting outside Ron's room when she got there. Draco was leaning against the wall, Ginny sitting on the floor at his feet. She had a book on her lap, but she wasn't reading it. They both looked at her and Ginny smiled waveringly; Hermione smiled back as best she could, not wanting Ginny to think that she was in any way angry with her because of the situation with Ron.

Then she opened the door and went in. The door swung shut behind her, and she was alone in the room with Harry.

He was standing next to the bed, with its colorful counterpane, holding on to one of the bedposts. He looked up as she came in, and for a moment his eyes lit up with relief. Then they darkened, and he looked down at the tops of his boots.

Hermione turned and shut the door on Draco and Ginny, who were waiting in the corridor. She turned to face Harry, and took a deep breath. "Hello, Harry," she said.

The sound of her voice seemed to galvanize some electric response inside him. His head went up, and he crossed the room to her. She didn't move. He reached out a hand to touch her shoulder, and she stiffened. Slowly he lowered his arm. "Hermione..."

Her voice was raw with exhaustion. "What?"

"I'm so sorry," he said.

She just looked at him. She could tell he meant it. He looked half-desperate to make her understand: he was very pale, and the eyes behind the glasses were intently green. She noticed, vaguely, what he was wearing: a black sweater that was at least three years old, with frayed, far too short cuffs that showed his thin wrists. It was a sweater Ron had given him; she wondered what that meant.

He seemed unnerved by her silence. "I know now. I know it wasn't you -"

"Draco told me," she interrupted shortly. "I'm glad you listened to him. God knows, you wouldn't listen to me."

"No - it wasn't like that."

"It was exactly like that."

He was silent for a moment. Then he said, "You're right."

The tone of his voice made her look at him again, and she was startled at what she saw. He looked pale, tense, unhappy, but he was *there* - present in a way he hadn't been present in months.

"I'm right?" she echoed.

"You're right," he said again, heavily. "I didn't listen to you. I didn't let myself listen to you. And there's no apology that I could construct that would make it up to you for that. I didn't trust you even though you've never given me a reason not to trust you. And I hurt you, and I--"

"You did hurt me," she interrupted. "If you'd spent years thinking about it, and planning it, I don't think you could have come up with anything that would have hurt me more."

He winced. "I know," he said. "Tell me what to do. There must be something I can do...to fix this."

"I think," she said coldly, "you've done enough."

"Don't -" he reached out for her again, and this time she let him. He put his hands on her shoulders and looked down into her face. She had stood this way with him so many times -- it was familiar, and yet she felt as if she were looking at a stranger. Despite their physical proximity, she had never felt further away from him in her life. "I'll do anything," he said. "Anything you want me to do."

"Make last night never have happened, then," she said.

His hands tightened on her shoulders. "Something I *can* do," he said. "Hermione - help me."

"That's all I ever do," she said. "Help you. But I can't if you don't let me."

"Let you? I'm asking you. Hermione, I'll apologize to you every day for the rest of your life, if that's what you want, because you deserve it. I'll get down on my knees and beg you to forgive me -"

"I do forgive you," she said.

"I'll -" he broke off. "You what?"

"I forgive you," she said.

A look of relief so enormous it almost undid all her plans passed over his face. He ducked his head and kissed her. She had been expecting it, and let him. She tried to lose herself in it, knowing as she did that it might be the last time, but she could not. Those words, *the last time, the last time*, echoed in the back of her head. She closed her eyes, and put her arms around him. Holding him tightly was more satisfying than the kiss itself, which seemed as if it was taking place somewhere far away. But the feel of him under her hands, the slightness of his body, the fragile bones, the

sharp blades of his shoulders, made her want to protect him again. But this was one thing she could not protect him against.

She drew away. "I forgive you," she said again. "But that doesn't mean things are going to be like they were."

"What do you mean?" he asked, the look of relief beginning to fade from his expression.

"You don't really think things can be the same again, do you?" she asked, her voice wistful. "Not after what happened."

"Nothing happened," he said fiercely. "Nothing happened - I was a git, that's all. Nothing happened to *us*."

"That's not true, Harry. You showed me something important last night. You showed me you don't trust me."

"That's not true -"

"It is true," she said inexorably. "You don't trust me. You don't trust anyone. And I know why."

He just stared at her. From the look in his green eyes, she could tell he was dreading her next words, and she wished in some way she could spare him, even as she knew that this was necessary.

"You don't trust me because you know you can't be trusted," she said, her voice very flat. "You lie to me, so you imagine that I could lie to you. You hide things from me, so it makes sense to you that I could hide something so huge, so horrible, from you, and pretend as if everything was all right. It makes me wonder...how bad is it, Harry? What you're not telling me?"

He went very white, and stared at her as if she had turned into something monstrous. "It's not the same," he said.

"How? How is it not the same?"

"Because what I don't tell you - it has nothing to do with *us*. It has nothing to do with you and me, or how I feel about you."

"That's where you're wrong," she said, suddenly furious. "I'm your friend, your best friend, *and* I'm your girlfriend. And I'm sick of asking and getting evasive answers, or no answer at all, or patronizing half-answers. Something's eating at you, something's chewing you up from the inside out. I love you and it kills me to see you suffering, Harry, but it makes it ten thousand times worse when you won't even tell me what it's about. You can't keep some huge secret and expect it to be separate from the rest of your life. It doesn't work that way. We don't work that way. I'm not Draco, I can't read your mind, but I can see what you're feeling. It shows on your face. Except lately...I can't even look at you." Her voice dropped, miserably. "I don't know what to do."

She waited, braced for him to say anything - to say something angry, or bitter, or defensive. He raised his head to look at her finally, and she was shocked at the look in his eyes - the bleakness in it, the despair. "So you're going to leave me?" he said. "Because of this...you'd really leave me?"

"Harry," she whispered. She wanted to go and throw her arms around him, wanted it badly, but she held herself tightly where she was. It was the hardest thing she had ever done. "I'm not leaving you - I could never really leave you."

"Then what are you doing?" he demanded, and some small part of her cursed the Dursleys bitterly and for the thousandth time for all of this. "I don't understand."

"I'll still be with you, Harry, just not the way we were -"

"In other words," Harry interrupted, his voice suddenly sharp, "we should 'still be friends'."

She stared at him. "You say that like it's nothing."

"You love me, and you're still my friend, but things can't be the way that there were. Well, correct me if I'm wrong, but before, we were friends, and we loved each other, so what exactly is different now?"

"I can't be your girlfriend," Hermione said, her voice remote and flat. "That's what's different."

He hardly seemed to hear her. He was very white, and the skin of his face seemed to be pressing back against the bones. She wanted to tell him not to look like that, but she couldn't. "Can't? Can't or won't?"

"I don't know, Harry," she replied despairingly, "when you say you can't tell me what's bothering you, do you mean you can't tell me, or you won't?"

He looked as if she had slapped him. "That's not fair."

"It is fair! It's completely fair!" She hugged herself tightly, willing herself not to cry. "You're lying to me and I hate it. I hate it and pretty soon, I'll hate you too."

"Hate me, then," he flung back at her. He was holding the bedpost again, so tightly his knuckles were white. His face was white, too, his green eyes the only color in it. "If you could hate me over something like that, then maybe you never loved me in the first place."

She had thought she was beyond being hurt again, but apparently not. His remark went into her like an arrow in her heart. For a moment, it was hard to breathe. "I can't do this," she whispered. "I can't."

She turned automatically towards the door, but his voice stopped her like a hand on her shoulder. She had never heard him sound like that. "I love you," he said. "Please don't go."

"Then tell me," she said, without turning to look at him. "Tell me what it is you've been hiding. Tell me, Harry. Please."

His silence was the only answer she needed. She shut her eyes, willing her voice to remain even. When she did speak, she was startled at the calmness of her tone.

"I'm leaving school, Harry," she said. "I'm packed, and I'm taking the train out of Hogsmeade to London tonight. If you want to say goodbye to me, I'll wait for you on the platform. I hope you'll come. I do love you. I always will love you. Believe that, if you don't believe anything else."

He was still silent, although she could hear his uneven breathing, and she wanted very much to turn around. But she didn't. Blindly, she walked

towards the door, and blindly turned the knob, and blindly stepped out into the corridor. Draco and Ginny were still there, staring at her silently, but now her vision was so blurred with tears that they looked like distorted, funhouse versions of themselves. She saw Draco reach a hand out to her, and a voice from a long way away asked her, "What happened?"

She shook her head. "Go in there," she said, "go take care of him," and then she fled down the corridor without looking back.

Ginny looked at Draco. Not surprisingly, he was looking away from her, down the corridor where Hermione had fled. "She shouldn't be by herself," he said.

"I know," Ginny said. "Do you want to go after her?"

He shook his head slowly, and brought his eyes back to hers. "You should. I'm not particularly good at girl talk."

Ginny sighed. "I'm not sure I am either. All those brothers..." she trailed off. "Still. You'd better talk to Harry. Whatever happened, he'll tell you."

"Mmm." Draco sounded thoughtful. "What about Finnegan?"

Ginny was taken aback. "Seamus?"

"You remember him? Quiet fellow, square jaw, Irish flag up his arse? Probably dyes his hair?"

Ginny frowned. "What about him?"

"Well, shouldn't he be around through all this? Lending you a massive, unsightly shoulder to lean on?"

Ginny sighed. "I think Seamus is upset with me."

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Really? Why?"

"It's complicated," she said, but she had the unnerving feeling that his clear gray eyes saw right through her. For a moment, he almost looked sympathetic.

"Well, don't break his heart," he said. "We've got enough broken hearts around here already," and with that, he pushed open the door to Ron's old room and went inside. Ginny caught a brief glimpse of Harry sitting on the edge of the empty bed before the door shut, blocking her view.

With a sigh, she headed off down the corridor. It was a small flight of steps and a turn to get to Hermione's room; the door was closed when she got there. She raised her hand to knock, then hesitated, trying to think what she should say. She had no idea, and no idea what Hermione might be feeling, and no idea if she would hate seeing Ginny at this moment. After all, she was Ron's sister. She slowly lowered her hand, and on impulse, put her ear to the door.

Hermione was crying. Ginny could hear it very clearly through the door. It was a terrible, sad, desperate sort of messy crying, the way a child might cry - the way her mother had cried, all those years ago, over Andrew, night after night for months. It was the crying of someone who knows they have lost something they will never get back.

Ginny hesitated, one hand on the doorknob. Then she slowly stepped back, and leaned against the wall. She slid slowly down it until she was sitting on the floor; then she put her head on her knees, and did not move for a long time.

Hermione had been standing shivering on the platform for nearly an hour when she finally understood it: he was not coming. It was almost midnight, and it was freezing cold, so cold that the chill seemed to have soaked into Hermione's bones. The Hogsmeade train station was utterly deserted; she was the only person on the empty platform, and a light, dusting snow had begun to fall.

With a sigh of resignation, she glanced down at the watch in her hand. It was Harry's watch, that he had thrown at her. She had not been able to bring herself to give it back to him. It was, apparently, five minutes to

midnight, and there was no point waiting any longer on the platform. He wasn't going to come.

She turned, climbed wearily onto the train and went into the nearest compartment. She sat down close to the window, and propped her chin on her hand. From here, she could see the lights of the castle, faint in the distance, glimmering on the cliff top. The mountains behind were wreathed in mist, and there was a shroud of vapor around the moon. She felt the sting of tears fierce at the back of her eyes. I can't leave him here, alone...he only has me...how can I?

And then she heard it: the sound of running footsteps on the platform. She stood up so fast she nearly banged her head on the overhead luggage rack; swiftly she seized at the window, and pulled it down hard, leaning as far out as she could. Someone was running along the platform towards her: a slender, shadowy figure, turned to a silhouette by the mist: she saw a black cloak, recognized the dark school clothes, and then as he emerged from the shadows she saw in the torchlight that the banding at the wrists of his cloak was green and silver, and she realized with a queer stab at her heart that it was not Harry after all, but Draco.

"I'm here!" she shouted. He had been gazing up and down the empty platform; now he turned, and blinked at her. "I'm here! Draco -"

He came quickly to stand below the train window. He threw the hood of his black cloak back; they were almost on a level, but he had to tilt his head to look up at her. He was flushed from exertion, his hair a crackling white halo around his head. Flakes of melting snow clung to the dark silver blades of his lashes. She drew in a breath: sometimes he was almost too beautiful to look at -- nearly girlishly pretty, but no, there was too much steel in his expression for that. "I know I'm not who you were expecting," he said, low-voiced. "He told me you would be here. I came as quickly as I could."

Her voice shook. "But he wouldn't...?"

Draco shook his head, a firm negative. "He wouldn't come."

"Oh." She blinked back tears. "Did he send you?"

"Not exactly." Draco shrugged, elegantly. "I hated the thought of you going off like this, with no one to say goodbye to you."

"Thank you," she whispered. She reached out then, and touched his shoulder gently; he looked at her in surprise. "I need you," she began, "I need you to promise me something."

He didn't move, only his eyes narrowed slightly. Harry would have said, "Yes, anything," and Ron would have said, "If I say I'll do it, I'll do it. You don't need to make me promise." But Draco just looked at her out of long diamond-gray eyes, and said, "That depends on what it is."

"It's about Harry," she said. "He doesn't understand."

"Why you left him, you mean?"

She nodded.

"I'm not sure I understand either."

"Because," she said, and paused - but it seemed right to explain, in fact, she could not imagine anyone else who would understand. "They used me to get to him, Draco," she whispered. "They used *me* - and Ron - they know how to hurt him the worst, and I can't be part of that. I won't be."

"But you didn't tell him that."

"No." She shook her head. "He wouldn't understand."

"Try him," said Draco, firmly.

She sighed. "The other things I said to him - they were true as well. Nothing else I say would change anything. He still wouldn't tell me what's been tormenting him, and I -" She sighed, and bowed her head down. "I don't suppose you know, do you?"

He shook his head. "No. I don't."

"And you wouldn't tell me if you did. Would you?"

He said nothing, only looked up and down the platform, and then back at her. The cold air ruffled his hair, turned it to blown silver tinsel. There

was no reading his expression, or his gray eyes; he had nothing of Harry's transparency. But there was no one else. And she trusted him, because she had to. "I still think you should talk to Harry again," he said stubbornly. "You shouldn't have to go. Not like this."

The train whistle sounded then: a long, high piercing shriek that made her jump. Draco took a step back away from the train.

"I haven't got time to talk about this any more," Hermione cried out, close to despair, "I need you to do this for me, I want you to promise, to swear it - swear it on your family honor, Draco Malfoy. Swear it on your own name."

He was properly alarmed now. "To do *what?*"

"Stay with him," she said. Draco looked taken aback. Hermione went on, not really knowing what she was saying, just letting the words come. "Stay with him always - and watch him - and make sure he's all right. Don't leave him, and don't let him go off on his own - and if he does, you have to follow him, because I can't now. I want to take care of him, but he won't let me. He won't let any of us near him. Until I know how to fix that, you'll have to do it. Owl me *every day* - tell me how he is, what he's doing, if he's all right."

"He's not," Draco said, a little distantly, "all right."

"Oh, you know what I mean!" Hermione cried out. "Keep him safe. Stay with him - promise me, please!"

There was a long silence. It stretched out between them like a length of silver cord unspooling. Hermione stared down at him, her hand still on his shoulder, although she hardly felt as if she were touching him - he seemed so far away, as if he had gone beyond the mountains, into some far cold place she couldn't imagine. His face was still, expressionless, the pale skin burned silver by moonlight, eyes opaque as mirror glass. When he finally spoke, his voice was as slow as it was steady. "Very well," he said. "I promise."

She tightened her grip on his shoulder. "Swear it."

"I swear it," he said, in a flat voice.

She might have imagined it, but she thought she felt something leap between them then, like an electrical spark. She slowly loosened her grip on his shoulder. "Oh, thank goodness," she whispered. "Thank goodness."

"I would have done it anyway," he said, looking down at his shoulder, where her hand rested. His voice was remote.

"I know," she said, "but now you have to."

The train whistle sounded again, shrill as a scream. The next few moments were a blur. She took her hand away from his shoulder, wondering at what she had just done, at what she had made him do. He raised his face to hers, his lips shaping words that were drowned out by the sound of the train's brakes releasing. Suddenly something snapped inside her. She could not bear to leave him here like this, alone and with such a burden placed on him. She leaned forward, and did something she had never done before: she kissed him on the forehead, and as she did he closed his eyes.



She drew back. "Draco..." she began.

His eyes opened, but there was no chance for him to reply, for with a jerk, the train began to move. Hermione grabbed at the window's edge to steady herself, and leaned as far out as she safely could, the cold stinging her eyelids, staring back towards the lighted platform and the solitary figure standing there - hands in his pockets, looking after her. He did not wave in farewell, and neither did she; she only stood watching as the platform and the station and Draco himself grew smaller and smaller in the distance and finally vanished altogether, swallowed up by the encroaching darkness.

At one in the morning, the Slytherin common room was deserted. Draco's boots left dark wet marks on the stone as he crossed through; he had not bothered to clean off his boots. He was enjoying making a mess. Something in his chest was twisting savagely - he felt angry, not at anyone in particular, but at life in general. Everything seemed to be falling apart around him in huge shattering chunks, and for a change, the mass destruction was due to nothing he'd done.

"Bloody Weasley," he muttered as he reached his door - and paused. "Right," he said to himself. "Better do it now," and he turned and went back along the hallway to the other side of the dungeon, where the girls' rooms were.

The door to the room Blaise shared with Pansy was closed - not surprisingly, since it was long past midnight. Draco raised his hand and rapped sharply on the door: one, two, three sharp knocks.

He heard the sound of swift feet, and the door opened. It was Blaise. Her red hair was down, tumbling around her shoulders, her face bare of makeup, but her glittery barrettes in place. She wore a long silky pale green dressing gown, printed with an embroidered blue dragon which curled across her shoulders and rested its head on her breast. Her eyes widened when she saw him. "Draco?"

"Hello, darling," he said, leaning against the door jamb. "All dressed up for Malcolm?"

She looked briefly surprised, then smug. "So you heard about that."

"Apparently, I heard about it late. Can I come in?"

She stood back from the door. "If you like."

Draco unpeeled himself from the door jamb and sauntered into the room. It was a large room, separated in half by a huge Chinese screen printed all over with blue and green water lilies. This side was Blaise's: decorated with an understated simplistic elegance, everything she owned was nevertheless obviously expensive. He turned to look at her. She stood with

her hands on her hips, her silk gown pulled tight across her chest. She was very obviously wearing nothing underneath.

"It's rude to point," Draco said, his tone kindly.

Blaise flushed and crossed her arms over her chest. "It's a bit rich you coming here and tweaking me about Malcolm," she snapped. "He told me he saw Hermione Granger coming out of your room this morning. Explain *that*, why don't you."

"I'd like to know what Malcolm was doing lurking around my room this morning," Draco said.

Blaise shook her head. "You're unbelievable."

"You should talk."

She threw up her hands. "I've never fooled around with Malcolm," she said. "I just started that rumor to see if you'd care. Which, patently, you don't."

Draco raised an eyebrow. "You started a rumor you were snogging that weasel-faced tosser just to annoy me? I'm touched."

"But not annoyed."

"Not particularly," he said.

Blaise shook her head. "Get out," she said. "I never want to see you again."

"Oh, no," Draco said, in a bored, deadpan voice. "Please reconsider."

Seizing a glass candlestick from the table by the bed, Blaise flung it at his head. Draco ducked, and it hit the wall and shattered. "I said get out!"

"You'll wake up Pansy," he said.

"She's...not...here," Blaise snarled.

"Good," Draco said. "Then she won't stop me from doing *this*," and he waved a hand at her. Silver cords sprang out of the air and snapped around her wrists and ankles. She shrieked in surprise, and sat down hard

on the floor, struggling against the cords. "What is your *problem?*" she hissed at him, her green eyes full of rage.

"I don't know," Draco said thoughtfully. "I guess I'm just not a very nice person."

"I hate you," Blaise snarled, but he had set himself to ignoring her. Walking quickly, he crossed the room and flung open the trunk at the foot of her bed. He kicked it, and it fell sideways, spilling clothes, books and papers all over the floor.

Blaise shrieked out loud. "What are you *doing?* You -- leave my things alone! Leave them *alone!*" Her voice rose into a piercing scream. "I hate you, Draco Malfoy, you lying, cheating, stealing, pointy-faced *bastard!* I hate you!"

Draco glanced over at her and smiled. "Scream if you want," he said pleasantly. "It won't make any difference. I'll stay here until I find what I'm looking for."

References:

Rhysenn's quote: "How art thou fallen from Heaven, oh Lucifer, son of the morning?" is from the Bible , a description of Satan's fall from grace. If that doesn't work, groveling makes a solid backup - Buffy
"And a total, total one at that" - Red Dwarf

Draco Veritas Chapter Eight: The Master of Malfoy Manor

No exorcisor harm thee,

And no witchcraft charm thee.

Ghost unlaid forbear thee,

Nothing ill come near thee.

-Cymbeline

When Draco was six years old, his father had given him a bird to carry his mail. The other children Draco knew had friendly owls, or the occasional bluebird, but Draco's father gave him a falcon, with bright black eyes and a beak that curved like the mark on a Sickle.

The falcon did not like Draco, and Draco didn't like it either. Its sharp beak made him nervous, and its bright eyes always seemed to be watching him. It would slash at him with beak and talons when he came near: for weeks, his wrists and hands were always bleeding. He did not know it, but his father had selected a falcon that had lived in the wild for over a year, and thus was nearly impossible to tame. But Draco tried, because his father had told him to make the falcon obedient, and he wanted to please his father.

He stayed with the falcon constantly, keeping it awake by talking to it and even playing music to it, because a tired bird was meant to be easier to tame. He learned the equipment: the jesses, the hood, the brail, the leash that bound the bird to his wrist. He was meant to keep the falcon blind, but he could not do it - instead he tried to sit where the bird could see him as he touched and stroked its wings, willing it to trust him. He fed it from his hand, and at first it would not eat: later it ate so savagely that its beak cut the skin of his palm. But he was glad, because it was progress, and because he wanted the bird to know him, even if it had to consume his blood to make that happen.

He began to see that the falcon was beautiful, that its slim wings were built for speed of flight, that it was strong and swift, fierce and gentle. When it dived to the ground, it moved like forked lightning. When it learned to circle and come to his wrist, he nearly cried with delight. Sometimes the bird would hop to his shoulder and put its beak in his hair. He knew his falcon loved him, and when he was certain it was not just tamed but perfectly tamed, he went to his father, and showed him what he had done, expecting him to be proud.

Instead, his father took the bird, now tame and trusting, in his hands, and broke its neck. "I told you to make it obedient," his father said, and dropped the falcon's lifeless body to the ground. "Instead, you taught it to love you. Falcons are not meant to be loving pets: they are fierce and wild, savage and cruel. This bird was not tamed; it was broken."

Later, when his father left him, Draco cried over his pet, until eventually his father sent a house-elf to take the body of the bird away and bury it. Draco never cried again, and he never forgot what he learned: that to be loved was to destroy, and that to love was to be the one destroyed.

Blaise's trunk was overturned; the contents spilled out onto the floor at Draco's feet. He sifted through them with a leisurely hand - books, makeup, jewelry, parchments, stacks of photographs. Nothing terribly interesting. He'd pulled the drawers of her bureau out as well, and her clothes were tossed haphazardly on the bed in a heap of blouses, skirts, camisoles, and expensive silk underthings. Her journal, a pale green book with a butterfly-shaped lock, had also fallen onto the bed, but some obscurely motivated chivalry prevented him from opening it.

"Are you done yet?" Blaise asked, breaking a half-hour's worth of silence. Her tone was cold and sharp. She sat where he had put her: propped against the wall, her hands still bound behind her back. The look on her face was one of such withering contempt that even Draco, no slouch at sneering himself, was somewhat daunted.

"Mostly," he replied.

"And did you find what you were looking for?" Her voice held so much frozen scorn, it could have kept a year's supply of Ice Mice from melting.

Draco sighed. If lime green push-up bras had been what he was looking for, he would have been in business. Alas, they were not. "How come you never wore any of these things while we were dating?" he asked, lifting a transparent black something or other off the bed with a crooked finger.

"Maybe I did. You never got far enough under my clothes to find out."

"Disappointed, are you?" Draco dropped the transparent lace object and looked narrowly at her.

"Not at all," she spat. "You're disgusting."

Draco decided to let that one pass. He got to his feet and went to crouch down beside her so that their faces were on a level. Her dark green eyes, minus their usual sparkle, looked into his with loathing. "In answer to your question," he said, "no. I didn't find what I was looking for. Which leads me to another question."

Her lips tightened. "What?"

"Where are the slippers I gave you for your birthday? Back in October?"

Her eyes widened with disbelief. "Why, do you want them back? You cheap son of a bitch, Draco Malfoy - just because I broke up with you -"

"You break up with *me*? I believe *I* was the one who broke up with you."

She called him a very rude name. Draco was impressed. "Nice one," he said. "This is not, however, addressing the matter at hand..."

"What matter? I don't even know what you're raving about now -"

"The slippers. Where are they? Remember them? They were very expensive, embroidered, raw gold silk -"

"They were not pure silk," Blaise snapped, looking haughty again. "They had some cheap material mixed in that irritated my skin. I couldn't wear them."

"So what did you do with them?"

She shrugged. "I gave them to Pansy."

Draco expelled a long breath. He wasn't sure if he felt relieved or not. "I didn't really think it was you," he said slowly. "But I had to make sure."

Her lips tightened. "You didn't think what was me?"

"I thought maybe you were trying to throw the blame on her, because it was you. You're devious enough."

"Because what was me?"

Draco shrugged and stood up. He pushed aside the hand-painted screen that separated Blaise's side of the room from Pansy's. Blaise's half of the room was slightly bigger; Pansy's was more crowded with things - several chairs, a sofa, a vanity table with a curved mirror. The surface of the vanity was thickly covered with jars, bottles, and tubes of unguents and cosmetics, just as Blaise had told him weeks ago. Why hadn't he known? *I knew she had to be a prefect, he thought. And a Slytherin. Only a Slytherin would think of this.*

He turned away from the vanity table and went over to the enormous, brass-bound trunk at the foot of Pansy's bed. Blaise leaned around the screen and glared at him. "You can't open it," she snapped vindictively. "It's got sixteen different anti-Alohomora charms on them and only Pansy knows the passwords -"

"Sixteen?" Draco said softly. "Really? That many?" He took another step towards the trunk and looked at it consideringly. With the tip of his dragonhide boot, he nudged lightly at the lock. Then he raised his foot and brought it down hard. Once, twice, three times, putting all his pent-up anger into it - a fourth time, and he heard the creaking protest as the wood began to splinter - a fifth time, and the lock ripped away from the wood and clattered to the floor. The lid of the trunk sprang open.

"Alohomora," Draco said.

Blaise said nothing. She seemed to have set herself to ignoring him. Still, she stared as he knelt down by the trunk and began to rifle through the contents. Books tumbled out first, neatly piled, and underneath them were empty jars and bottles, and underneath those were a pair of pale gold silk slippers and a neatly folded set of white pajamas sprigged all over with blue and yellow flowers.

Draco's heart began to pound like a triphammer. He'd been right. He had known he was right, but not that the proof would present itself so readily. She must have been positive that no one would guess. He plunged his hands into the trunk, shoving the pajamas and slippers aside - there were folded papers underneath them; he took them and shoved them haphazardly into his cloak pockets. Under them was a long enamel box, which sprang open when he put pressure on the ends. Folded inside was a long swath of multicolored fabric, which shimmered when he touched it...

"An Invisibility Cloak," he whispered under his breath. A smile came and twitched the corner of his mouth. *Clever Pansy*. He rolled the cloak into a small ball and stuffed it into his pocket. He was sure he was beginning to look extremely lumpy. He put his hands back into the trunk, but there was nothing else, just grit gathering under his fingernails. He stood up, and went back past the screen into Blaise's room. She twisted around to glare at him.

"Are you stealing Pansy's things?"

"Evidence," he said shortly.

"You're a thief," she said. "And a bastard. Turning on the members of your own House for a bunch of Gryffindor scum -"

"Shut up, Blaise."

"I'll tell. I'll tell everyone."

Draco knelt down and looked into her eyes. Face scrubbed clean of makeup, hair free of its jeweled barrettes and tangled around her face, she looked much less polished than he'd ever seen her. "Do it," he said evenly, "and I'll tell everyone exactly why you agreed to this dating charade with me in the first place."

Her breath hissed between her teeth. "You unbelievable bastard. You'd blackmail me?"

"Just keeping things fair. I don't like power imbalances. Unless, of course, I have the upper hand, which right now, I do."

"Maybe right now." Her eyes narrowed. "But not forever. Everyone knows where your loyalties really lie, Draco. And if there's one thing Slytherin House hates, it's a backstabbing traitor."

"I'm not sure what you're trying to say here, Blaise. Are you suggesting that I no longer have a shot at winning Most Popular Slytherin of the Year?"

"I protected you," she snarled at him, and he was startled to see that for a moment, her eyes were oddly bright, as if she might be about to cry. And for that moment, they reminded him so strongly of another, dissimilar, pair of green eyes that he felt a spark of sympathy for her light inside his chest. "You never paid attention, but I protected you - I lied for you - I covered up how much time you really spent with Potter and his little minions, invented reasons for you to be with him - lose me and you lose the last person in this House who had any faith you might come back to us. Lose me and you're on your own, Draco."

He sighed. "Then I'm on my own. Thanks for protecting me, if you really did, but it wasn't necessary. I'm not afraid of Slytherin House."

"You should be," Blaise said, and looked away from him. "You should be, Draco."

He fought back another sigh. He felt very tired. "I'm going to untie you now," he said. "I want you to promise not to hit me the second your hands are free."

"I promise," she said, without looking at him, and the moment that her hands were free, of course, she hit him anyway.

A light touch on the shoulder awoke him. Harry rolled over and blinked. The world was blurry, but he knew the shape hovering above him was Draco. He reached for his glasses and sat up slowly. His muscles were stiff and sore from falling asleep on the common room couch, but he had not wanted to go upstairs and face Seamus, Neville and Dean. "Hey," he said, his voice slightly rusty. "Is she...?"

"Hermione?" She's gone," Draco said, crouching down next to the sofa. The fire was high in the grate, and the room was very hot. Draco looked bright-eyed and almost feverish. A hectic red color flushed his high cheekbones. "I have to tell you something."

"Oh, God," said Harry, with finality. "Not something else." He looked at Draco more closely, taking in the disheveled hair, the muddy boots, the scratch marks along his left cheek, as if someone had raked him with their nails. "Is it something bad?"

"Not exactly," Draco said. "I found out who it was."

"Who what was - oh," Harry said. "Oh, you mean..."

"Ron's..." Draco grinned suddenly, a wolfish grin. "Ron's mystery woman."

Harry felt his heartbeat speed up. "And are you going to tell me?"

"That depends." Draco cocked his head to the side, fair hair falling in his eyes. "Do you want to know?"

Harry sat up straighter. It was very quiet in the common room. He could tell it was extremely late, just from the quality of the silence and even of the lightless dark he could see through the windows. The crackle of firewood was loud, like shattering ice. He could hear Draco breathing. Very tentatively, he reached towards Draco's mind with his own, trying to gauge what the other boy was feeling about the news he had to tell. Guilt, rage, pain, terror, amusement, horror? Was he afraid to tell Harry, did he worry that Harry couldn't handle it? Was it very bad? *Not exactly*, he had said. Whatever that meant.

"Is it someone I know well?" Harry asked softly, finally. "Is it a friend of mine? Is it someone I care about?"

"No," Draco said. "On all those counts."

A wave of relief so intense it was almost nausea passed over Harry. "Was it about me? Did it have anything to do with me?"

The light in Draco's eyes flickered. "I don't know for sure."

Harry crossed his arms over his chest, although it was hot in the room.
"What are you going to do?"

"Investigate," Draco said simply. "The uh, guilty party has already left school. But that's all right. Gives me some time. I have to look into things. Opportunities, motivation. Accomplices. Purpose."

Harry felt his lips curve into a shaky smile. "You sound like a detective."

"Read a lot of Auror comics as a kid," Draco said. "Always wanted a trenchcoat."

"Do you need my help?" Harry asked. "What should I do?"

Draco shook his head. "I don't need your help, not right now. If I do, I'll tell you. And if you want to know, I'll tell you. But maybe right now you don't need any more on your mind." He got to his feet, a swift graceful gesture. Harry looked at him hard, remembering Draco's weakness in the Quidditch game and while they were fencing. However, he did look much better. There was high color in his face, and his eyes sparkled. Hopefully he was over it. "Go to sleep," Draco said, and headed towards the door.
"I'll see you -"

"Will you make them sorry?" Harry said. He had gotten to his feet without realizing it, and he put his hand out to steady himself on the sofa arm. His legs prickled with waking-up pains.

Draco turned, one hand on the portrait door, and looked at him curiously. Even disheveled and tired he had an elegant remoteness that Harry vaguely envied. He knew he wore his own heart on his sleeve, not as a badge of honor but because he knew no other way to be. Whereas nothing ever seemed to touch Draco so much, or so deeply, that he could not control his expressions. Nothing ever put a slump in those straight shoulders. "Will I what?"

"Make them sorry," Harry said. His voice rasped slightly. "I know...that you can do things I couldn't do. You're ruthless in ways I could never be. And you know about revenge."

"I do?" Draco's expression was unreadable.

"I know you do," Harry said.

"Don't you?" Draco said. "That's what you told me..."

"Oh, I know about hating," Harry said, his voice flat and empty. "But I'm not clever about it, like you are. I couldn't think of a really imaginative way to make anyone suffer. Not like you could."

"Is that what you want?" Draco asked. His eyes were flat, metallic gray. Nothing came off him: no emotion, no fear or worry or regret. He stood where he was, illegible as a parchment written in Gobbeldygook.

"Yes," Harry said. "It's what I want."

"Then I'll do it," Draco said, and he smiled, and for a moment a faintly wicked inner brilliance illuminated his expression. If there was any bitterness or sorrow underneath it, Harry didn't see it. He was too busy fighting his own relief. "I'll make them sorry."

He went out, and shut the portrait door behind him.

Ginny had once read somewhere that the difference between memory and recall was that with memory, you knew empirically that you had been in a certain place in a certain time, while with recall you once again felt that you were there.

When she looked back on those last few days before the end of winter term her sixth year at Hogwarts, it was always with a sense of recollection. She could not have said exactly how the days proceeded, but various images and moments were burned into her brain - she remembered the cold that descended on the castle, both literal and figurative, after Ron and Hermione had gone home. The flowerlike slivers of ice that formed on the windowpanes overnight, the water freezing in the mug beside her bed. Sitting at the Gryffindor table with Seamus, waiting for Harry to come downstairs. Watching him sit alone, not saying anything. And Draco. Always with Harry, or watching him from across the room if he was not beside him. He seemed to have taken the words Dumbledore had spoken to him weeks before - "Harry is strong and can endure much, and for what he cannot endure he has you" - as if they were some sort of sacred trust.

She wondered if he was trying to expiate some sin he thought he had committed; she could imagine such devotion came only from guilt. Of course, she did not know until later that Hermione had made him promise to stay with Harry always - and he tried to, as best he could given the obvious restrictions. The professors, in those final days, turned a blind eye to the fact that Draco was sometimes in the Gryffindor common room. He never tried to go further than the common room, however, sensing probably that he was not welcome.

Harry seemed to notice all this only barely. He went through everything in a dazed sort of sleepwalking manner, probably because during the night he did not sleep - Seamus had told her as much. Apparently he spent the night sitting in the widow embrasure, looking out over the snowy grounds. He was starting to look translucent, as if he had been very ill, the bones showing sharply under his skin. Ginny had seen him walk accidentally into Draco several times, as if he'd forgotten Draco was there at all.

One afternoon she came into the common room and found that Harry was there, lying on the couch, a blanket over his legs, apparently asleep. She walked towards him, and reached to pull the blanket up over his shoulders, when a hand darted out of nowhere and seized her wrist.

"Shhh." It was Draco's voice. She turned her eyes towards him. He had been sitting sunk into the shadows of an overstuffed armchair next to the sofa, and had blended so completely with the darkness that she had not seen him. "Do not wake him up."

"I wasn't going to," she whispered back, annoyed. "I was just going to pull up his blankets."

Draco, looking weary, released her wrist. "Just...let him be," he said. "He hasn't slept in three days."

"I know," said Ginny. She looked down at Harry and her feeling of annoyance vanished, buried under a flood of sympathy. He looked like a little boy, curled sideways on the couch, his head pillowed on his arm, his pale cheeks flushed with feverish sleep. His dark hair curled all around his head in tangles like licks of dark flame. "How is he?" she asked, sitting down in the chair next to Draco. "How is he really?"

Draco looked considering. "Rotten," he said finally, and his voice was flat. "Pretty much like you'd expect."

She bit her lip. "I wish there was something I could do," she said. "he's had so much suffering in his life - I wish I could take it for him, you know?"

He looked at her, his gray eyes dark, slightly unfocused with tiredness. "You still love him," he said.

"I always will love him," said Ginny, "if not that way. We all do. He's like that."

"Not your brother," said Draco, and his tone was bitter.

Ginny sighed. "Especially my brother," she said. "I wouldn't expect you to understand."

"I don't want to understand," Draco said. "And I can't be bothered - I've got enough to be bothered with without pondering your brother's motivations for creating this fucking mess."

"He didn't create it," Ginny said sharply. "It was already there -"

"Shhhhh," Draco said. "Keep your voice down."

She looked more closely at him. "How long has it been since you slept?"

"Hey." Draco cocked a finger at her. "I slept a whole hour on Tuesday."

"You should sleep," she said firmly. "You'll crack otherwise."

He shrugged. "It's not so bad. I hallucinate occasionally and I think that takes care of the problem. Yesterday I thought I was a teapot. Which wouldn't have been so bad if I hadn't also thought that Malcolm Baddock was a teacup..."

Ginny smiled at him. The warmth of the fire was making her sleepy, and she was conscious of the slumbering form of Harry on the sofa. She wanted very much to hug him, and some part of her almost wanted to hug Draco as well, despite him being a prickly non-hugging sort of person. She recognized it was simply stress that was making her feel close

to both boys when really, it was Hermione who loved and mothered them, and was loved in return. But Hermione wasn't here...she shoved that thought down. "Draco..."

"Maybe I will take a walk," he said, his eyes going past her to the window. "I feel like I haven't seen the sun in days."

She nodded. "I'll sit with Harry, if you like."

A flicker of relief passed across his face. "Would you?" He stood up, and she held out his cloak, which had been draped across the back of the sofa. Their fingers touched briefly as he took it and shrugged it on, closing the heavy fastenings across the front. "I'll just be outside..."

"It's fine," she said. "Go," and he went, closing the door quietly behind him.

Ginny settled herself into the armchair he had vacated. She was about to reach for the paperback book in her pocket when a sudden movement startled her. It was Harry, who had lowered his arm from his face. His eyes were open.

"You're awake," she said, surprised.

"Yeah." Harry sat up and reached for the glasses propped on the arm of the sofa. "Sorry if I scared you."

"How long have you been awake for?" she asked.

"Hours," he said briefly. "I heard you come in..."

"You heard us talking? You should have said something."

"No, you were right. He should go for a walk. Get some air. It's got to be boring, watching over me all the time."

Ginny was fairly sure that Draco did not consider it boring, per se, but held her tongue.

"Anyway," Harry added, "I wanted to ask you something, and I wanted to ask you when we were alone."

"Me?" Ginny was surprised. "What did you want to ask me?"

Harry looked just past her at the fire. "I was wondering if you'd do me a favor and touch something for me."

Ginny looked at him incredulously. "Pardon?"

Harry blinked, then blushed. "That sounded bad, didn't it?"

"Yes," Ginny said. "It did."

Harry smiled. "Let me start over. I know that you can sometimes sense Dark magic if it's present in objects, or people. I was wondering if you would take a look at something for me, let me know if you feel anything unusual about it."

Ginny tugged nervously at the gold chain around her throat. "Of course."

"Thanks." Harry bent his head, then looked up at her again, quickly. "It's on my belt," he said, "hang on one second," and went back to sliding his leather belt through the loops on his trousers. As he bent his head, his hair fell away, showing the nape of his neck, cleanly exposed between the dark hair and the round collar of his black sweater. The knobs of his spine were faintly visible beneath the skin...he had gotten so thin. "Here," he said, and held out his hand.

She took what he offered: it was a heavy circle of what looked like red glass. But it was much heavier than glass. Its weight in her hand was as substantial as if it had been carved out of stone. She turned it over slowly between her fingers, marveling at its smooth texture, despite the engravings all around the edges.

"Do you feel anything?" he asked her, eyes anxious.

She shook her head. "No. Nothing." She handed it back to him, and he took it unsmilingly. "You weren't hoping it'd be something evil, then?" she asked, half-jokingly, but he seemed to take the question seriously.

"No, not really, but I was hoping for some kind of clue as to what it is," he said. "I hate not knowing things."

"Tell me about it," Ginny said. "I've about given up on feeling like we ever know anything, though. I mean, that cup you guys took from the museum - what did Hermione do with it?"

She immediately regretted the question. At the sound of Hermione's name, Harry stiffened and visibly retreated back into himself like a rabbit fleeing down a rabbit-hole. "I don't know," he said stiffly. "I have no idea what she did with it," and he stood up suddenly, tossing the covers back onto the couch. "I think I might go upstairs for a while," he said, shoving his hands into his pockets. "I'd probably benefit from some time alone. And I need to pack."

Ginny felt obscurely hurt. By now, however, she was a past master at hiding hurt feelings. All she said was, "When are you leaving, then?"

"Tomorrow morning, same as you," said Harry. He reached out and ruffled her hair lightly, as if she were a little girl. "Thanks," he said. "I appreciate you looking at the bracelet."

"Of course. If there's anything else I can do..."

"You could go keep Draco company. It'd be good for him, I think, to spend some time with someone who actually talks."

"I don't know where he went, though," Ginny protested.

Harry's eyes unfocused for a moment. "The lake," he said, took the blanket off the couch, and with a nod, headed towards the boys' staircase.

It was a brilliant winter's day outside. It had snowed the night before, which made it easier to follow Draco's distinctive boot prints in the snow. Ginny pulled the hood of her cloak up - it was very cold out, despite the sunshine glinting off the snow - and headed out to the lake.

She was halfway around the perimeter of the frozen water when she realized with an odd pang that Draco seemed to be following the exact path that Harry and Hermione usually took around the lake's edge. She could not count the times she had looked out a classroom window and

seen the two familiar figures walking together, shoulder to shoulder, around the same track. She wondered if Draco realized it.

It was not hard to find him. She rounded a bend and there he was, sitting on a black tree stump. Later, she could not remember exactly what he'd been doing at that moment. Tossing stones at the iced-over lake, or denuding an evergreen sprig of its last leaves. She stood for a moment and looked at him, at leisure to examine him without him noticing. Under his black cloak he had on slightly worn corduroys and a dark red pullover - she had rarely seen him look so un-put-together. He wore a strangely pensive expression, alert yet dreaming. It made her wonder what he was thinking about.

She took a step forward towards him and a patch of ice cracked under her boot heel. He looked up, and when he saw her, looked startled. He began to rise to his feet. "Is there a..."

"Harry's fine, you aren't needed," Ginny said. "Relax."

He didn't relax exactly, just shoved his hands in his pockets and looked at her with an expression almost of resentment.

"Well, if you want me to leave you alone..." she snapped.

His expression relaxed slightly. "That cloak," he said. "Is it new?"

She blinked at him, then down at her cloak. It was in fact new, her mother had sent to her as she had complained she was growing out of her last winter cloak. It was long, made of a pale yellow wool, not particularly distinctive. Draco noticed clothes more than other boys did, but she was surprised that even he would be struck by it. "Yes, early Christmas present."

"Huh. It looks familiar." He sat back down on the tree stump, hands still in his pockets, and looked away from her. Ginny turned to go, when his voice prevented her, "Wait," he said. She turned and saw him looking at her, an odd sort of pleading in his eyes. "Stay."

With a sigh, she went and joined him on the tree stump. For a moment they sat and looked out at the gray lake together in silence. The sunlight

touched it here and there through the pattern of bare branches, casting lucent patches of gold against the silver.

It was Draco who broke the silence. "Something in your robe pocket," he said evenly, "is banging against my leg."

"Oh." Ginny reached into her pocket and pulled out *Passionate Trousers*. She was about to tuck it into the pocket on the other side of her robe when Draco stopped her with a hand on her wrist.

"Aren't you done reading that yet? How long can it take?"

Ginny threw him a miffed glance. "Well, if I didn't keep getting interrupted by mad love triangles and grand-scale larceny I might be making better time."

Draco released her wrist and shrugged. "I just have to ask myself whether you're trying to punish yourself, or what. If you want a book, I have plenty of good books I could lend you. *A Tale of Two Wizards, Great Incantations...*"

"I do read good books. These are just...comforting."

"Comforting how?"

"Because they're predictable. You can tell what's going to happen just by looking at the front cover illustrations."

"Oh, really?" Draco leaned forward and looked over her shoulder at the book cover. "How do you figure that?"

"Well, look." She moved her finger across the page, acutely aware of his eyes following it. "That's Rhiannon, the girl in the white dress. She's the heroine. She'll go through some hard times, but basically, she'll win out in the end with her one true love by her side. And that guy, the one in the breeches, that's Tristan. He's brave and dashing and he only wants to be with Rhiannon, but sinister forces keep them apart. Not forever, of course. The girl in the tight red leather corset, that's Lady Stacia. She's evil and rather slutty, and she'll definitely die in the end, but not till she's shagged half the male characters first. And the man in the black cloak, that's the Dark Wizard Morgan, he's evil too."

"And who's the prat in the dress?" Draco inquired.

"That's not a dress, they're robes of state. And that's Geoffrey Montague, he's a childhood friend of Rhiannon's and very dependable. It's touch and go there. If Tristan dies, she'll probably wind up with him, but she'll always really be thinking of Tristan. If Tristan lives -" Ginny broke off. Draco's shoulders were shaking with silent laughter. "What is so funny?"

Draco made a sweeping gesture with his hand. "Let me tell you what really happens," he said. "Given the available information and these fabulous illustrations, I predict that Montague there will finally come out of the closet and run off with the Dark Wizard Morgan, who wasn't really all that evil, just lonely. They move to the country, buy a tower with a view, and spend the next sixty years renovating it and purchasing antiques. Rhiannon opens a convent school for young witches and installs Lady Stacia as the headmistress, where she amuses herself by trying to get the dress code changed to include leather corsets and spanking the girls when they get out of line."

Ginny glared at him. "What about Tristan?"

"Oh, him. he's far too vain to be a decent love interest for anyone. Look at his boots. It takes hours to polish boots like that. No, Tristan is better off alone."

"Tristan," said Ginny firmly, "wants to be with the one he loves."

Draco grinned at her. "Well, for that all he really needs is a pile of naughty magazines and a door that locks."

"Aaargh!" screamed Ginny, and threw the book at him. "You make it all sound so dirty!"

"Thank you," he said. "I make what sound dirty?"

"You know." She felt suddenly embarrassed. "Love."

Draco tilted his head back and looked consideringly up at the sky. "Well, it is dirty," he said. "It's not some holy, exalted thing, you know. It's about appetite and wanting and need and all those other things that make people do ugly things to each other. There's no betrayal without love, no

loss without it, no jealousy. Half the ugliness in this world comes from it. It cuts and burns and makes wounds that don't ever heal. Give me hatred any day. Now there's an emotion I can get behind. You always know where you stand with it."

"That isn't true. Love makes people unselfish -"

"Like your brother?" His voice was soft. "Like your brother was unselfish?"

"That wasn't about love -" Ginny was furious. How dare he bring up Ron.

"Oh, it was," Draco said. "I saw his face when he looked at her. He was in love with her, whatever you might think."

"Well, at least he was sincere about it," Ginny snapped. She knew she sounded spiteful. "He didn't pretend he didn't care."

That made Draco sit up. He opened his eyes and splashed his cold gray ice-water gaze over her. "Oh, and I do?" He shrugged. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I don't really care about anybody. Or maybe it just looks that way to your idealistic eyes, did you think about that?"

"I'm not idealistic. Just because I think it's ridiculous of you to pretend you don't care about anyone when you obviously do, doesn't make me idealistic. People can't live without someone to care about."

"No, people can't live without food, water, shelter, and in my case, 3000-thread count cotton percale sheets. Other people are a luxury and not a necessity."

"Then why are you taking such care of Harry?"

"That's different."

"How is it different?"

Something indefinable moved behind his gray eyes. "It just is."

Ginny felt suddenly very weary. There seemed no point in having this conversation. It was impossible to win an argument with Draco, especially an argument like this one. She had no idea why she kept bothering; it would be equally productive to try to tunnel her way into the Chamber of

Secrets using a spoon. "I'm going back to the castle," she said, and stood up abruptly, shielding her eyes with one hand - she didn't want him to see how close she was to crying. She held out her hand. "Could I have my book back, please?"

She heard a rustle of crackling snow, and then he was getting to his feet. "Are you all right? You're not crying, are you?"

"No - something in my eye," she lied.

"Oh. Come here, then." With brisk professionalism, he took her wrist and drew her towards him, his other hand under her chin. He tilted up her chin, and his eyes searched hers for a moment. "Stay still," he said.

She held his gaze without blinking. She hadn't stood this close to him since the night of the Yule Ball. (Later she realized this was not strictly true - she had been this close when he had kissed her in the museum, but that had been such an obvious attempt to annoy Seamus, that she barely considered it a real kiss.) In fact, she had just about never been this close to him in daylight. She wanted to not stare, but she couldn't help it - some part of her mind seemed determined to print this moment on her memory, as if somehow she felt as if she might never see him again. She tried to concentrate on the things that were wrong with his face, the imperfections - the scar under his eye where Harry's ink-bottle had cut him, the fact that his eyes were slightly different shapes, that one side of his mouth was higher than the other, which accounted for the fact that he smirked so well, even the fact that his hair wanted cutting and was falling in his eyes. No, he wasn't perfect-looking when you took it all apart, Seamus was just as handsome - more if you liked them less delicate-looking. It didn't matter, of course. Seamus couldn't send reverberations shuddering up her arms just by touching her wrists.

His eyes grazed her face like a touch. He spoke slowly. "I don't see anything," he said.

It took a moment for her even to realize what he was talking about. When she recollected herself, she firmly detached her wrist from his grasp and stepped away, barely noting his surprised look.

"I know," she said. "I know you don't."

The next day was the last day of term. Ginny rode from Hogsmeade back to King's Cross station in a train compartment with Dean, Seamus and Charlie. She could tell that Seamus was eager to talk to her alone but that the presence of Dean embarrassed him and the presence of her tall, muscular brother terrified him.

At one point she saw Harry and Draco pass by through the compartment window, but was not particularly surprised that they didn't come in - Harry would hardly want to be around Charlie, and Draco's loathing for Seamus was unabated. She waved at the two of them once they had disembarked onto Platform 9 3/4 at King's Cross. Harry waved back; Draco turned to see what he was looking at, and then they were blocked from her sight by Sirius and Narcissa.

Ginny turned away to see her own family coming towards her from the other end of the platform - her mother and father, the twins, Percy, (Bill, she knew, was still in Egypt) - but Ron was not with them. She felt a pang but supposed she could hardly blame him for not coming.

"Ginny..." said a voice in her ear. She turned and saw without surprise that it was Seamus. He had his hands in his pockets, and a black watch cap pulled down over his light hair. She realized she hadn't properly looked at him in days - he looked tired and downcast, but managed to smile at her. "I just wanted to say Merry Christmas."

"Oh, Merry Christmas," she replied awkwardly, but before she could say anything else they were engulfed in a sudden tide of Weasleys. Mrs. Weasley descended on Ginny and hugged and kissed her; Mr. Weasley clapped Charlie on the back, Percy made officious welcoming noises, and Fred set off a miniature Filibuster Firework that played 'Jingle Bells' at obnoxiously high volume. Only George seemed to notice Seamus' presence amongst them.

"Hey, Finnigan," he said equably.

Seamus, looking shell-shocked, did not reply.

Mrs. Weasley released Charlie from her embrace and turned a friendly glance on Seamus. "Oh, hello," she said. "And you are...?"

"This is Seamus, Mum," said Ginny pitching her voice an octave higher so that her mother could hear her over the sound of Jingle Bells. "He's the same year as Ron and he's a Chaser on our team and," she added, without having the faintest idea why, "he's my BOYFRIEND."

There was a startled silence. Everyone looked shocked, no one more so than Seamus.

"Your...boyfriend?" echoed Mrs. Weasley faintly.

"Well, well," said Mr. Weasley, and held out a hand to Seamus. "Nice to meet you, son."

Some of the color had come back into Seamus' face. "Nice to meet you too, sir," he replied, and shook Mr. Weasley's hand firmly. "My parents have always spoken very highly of you, my mum especially. She says you're the best Minister of Magic Britain's had since Felonius Plum."

Mr. Weasley flushed with pleasure and pumped Seamus' hand with renewed vigor. "Well, well," he said again. "That's good to hear, very good to hear. Will we be seeing your family at the wedding?"

Seamus shook his head regretfully. "No, I'm afraid not. Renovations on the family home..."

"Family home?" echoed Mrs. Weasley.

Seamus smiled at her. "Yes, you know how these big old castles are, always a bit tumbling down here or there. "

"Castle?" Mrs. Weasley said.

"Mum," Ginny half-groaned through gritted teeth.

Seamus flashed a bright smile at Mrs. Weasley, who dimpled in a way usually reserved only for Gilderoy Lockhart. "It must be lovely in Ireland in the winter," she said kindly.

"Oh, it is, although it's very cold," Seamus said, somehow managing to sound as if he found the conversation fascinating. "I could certainly use

one of those wonderful sweaters you're always knitting for Ron and Harry, Mrs. Weasley; I'd be the envy of my whole town."

Ginny thought her mother might be about to asphyxiate with joy. She knew Mrs. Weasley was excessively proud of the sweaters she knitted every Christmas. She also knew that Ron annually attempted to give his sweaters away to Seamus, Dean and Neville with no takers. "What use have I got for a sweater with a bloody great RW embroidered across the front?" Dean had demanded last Christmas with his usual diplomacy.

"You could pretend it stood for Royal Wanker," Harry had suggested amicably, and then he and Ron had fallen about laughing and making further suggestions, each ruder than the last.

Ginny snapped out of her reverie to find her mother gazing at Seamus as if he were a long-lost child. "Call me Molly," she was saying. "And Ireland sounds really lovely. I'm sure Ginny would enjoy a visit there."

"Muuuuuuuuuuuum," Ginny wailed, scandalized, but her father had thankfully begun tugging her mother towards the far end of the platform, suggesting that they say a quick hello to Narcissa, Sirius and Lupin.

"You two say your goodbyes," Mrs. Weasley beamed at Seamus and Ginny as her husband drew her away. Charlie and Percy followed them, and George and Fred sloped off to greet a few of their friends who had not yet graduated.

Ginny turned slowly to Seamus, who was wearing a smirk that would have done a Malfoy proud. "WELL," she said, in an accusatory tone. "What was that all about?"

Seamus opened his dark blue eyes very wide. "What was what all about?"

"You, Transfiguring yourself into Super Boyfriend Guy."

"Hey, you started it. I didn't even know I was your boyfriend. Was there a memo I didn't get?"

Ginny was suddenly contrite. "Oh, I know, I'm so sorry. That was awful. I have no idea what came over me."

"Neither do I," Seamus said. "But I hope it happens again."

Ginny looked at him quickly. She could tell he was nervous, because when he was nervous his soft Irish accent reasserted itself more strongly.

"I'm just glad you're not angry at me," he said.

She shook her head. "Of course not. Why would you think I would be?"

"Well," he said, "you haven't spoken to me in three days. I haven't even had a chance to give you your Christmas present."

"My Christmas present?" she echoed. "You got me a Christmas present?"

"Of course I did."

"Oh, but - I haven't gotten you anything!"

"That's all right," he replied with a smile. "You can bring me something when your mother makes you come visit me in Ireland."

"But I feel so guilty..."

"Don't." His voice was firm. "I want to give you this. I've been thinking about it for yonks, and well..there isn't anyone else I'd rather give it to. And it was kind of expensive, and it would look stupid on me."

"It better not be lacy underwear," she said.

"Hardly. Anyway, I look fabulous in lacy underwear." He reached into a pocket of his cloak and drew out a small box. It was not the sort of box you put books or clothing in. It was, most definitely, a jewelry box. She hesitated. "Take it," he said gently.

She took it, vaguely wondering if her family was watching all this and hoping desperately that it wasn't a ring. She herself was rather hoping it wasn't a ring, as she had no idea what she'd do if it was.

"Go on," he said, "open it," and something occurred to her. No boy who wasn't her brother had ever given her a present. Not once. Not ever.

She opened the box. Inside, on a bed of brightly colored tissue, lay a bracelet. And not just any kind of bracelet...the tag attached proclaimed it to be a Porte Bonheur Enchanted Charm Bracelet. Ginny almost dropped the box. Charm Bracelets were both very expensive and very famous, because each charm had to be handcrafted with intricate spells, then Transfigured into an object that could be activated later. In fact, she'd never met anyone who owned one.

"One of my uncles makes them," Seamus said a bit shyly as she took it out of the box and held it up to the light. The bracelet itself was a delicate but unremarkable band of silver links, but the Charms themselves were what was interesting - a tiny musical note, a small gold candelabra, a miniature arrow, a glass heart, a dish and spoon, a little quill, and a dozen more. "Just throw the charm into a fire to activate it - here, let me help you put it on..." She held out her hand and with a deft motion he snapped it closed around her wrist. He glanced up at her through his eyelashes. "Do you like it?"

Ginny realized she had not said one word for the past five minutes. "I am such a git," she gasped, without thinking. "Oh, it's wonderful. - I love it, and I -"

But her family was back, surging around them in a wave of red hair and loud voices, and now they were tugging Ginny towards the car. She had time to grasp Seamus' hand briefly before they were pulled apart as Ginny's mother led her away, taking excitedly into her ear as they walked.

Ginny made out only some of the words, "Castle, so polite, such nice manners, and so handsome too!" She nodded without replying as she looked back towards the platform, watching Seamus recede into the distance until he was lost from view. *I love it*, she had told him. And she had nearly added that she loved him too. What, she wondered, had prompted her to nearly say that when she was almost positively sure that it wasn't true?

Two days after arriving at the Manor, Draco lay on his back in the middle of his bed, staring out the window at the clouds racing across the pale-blue winter sky.

Lately he had decided that he rather liked his new bedroom. He had been initially annoyed when Harry had destroyed his old room. Then he had remembered that he'd never really liked it, with its ugly heavy dark furniture and gloomy black curtains. (He had once had somewhat fond memories of the wardrobe, but Harry had reduced that to matchsticks.) So he'd gathered up what belongings he wanted and relocated to a room farther down the hall, one he had always preferred. It had dark wood wainscotting, and the walls were painted a blue so light it was almost gray. It reminded him of winter sky, which he liked. He also liked the sizeable marble fireplace along the north wall - Harry had been right, Malfoy Manor could have used a better central heating system. The fireplace was hooked to the Floo Network, which had proved, lately, to be very useful.

"Are you listening to me, Draco?" Hermione's voice had taken on a slight edge of impatience.

Draco rolled over onto his stomach and rested his head on his crossed arms. "Do I ever do anything else?"

Hermione scowled at him through the flames. He supposed he didn't blame her; he knew it cost money to use the fireplaces at the Leaky Cauldron for private Floo Communication, and the service wasn't the best. Occasionally they would be interrupted by other people's conversations, and the day before, Hermione had reported to him, pink-faced, that she'd been taken to "quite the wrong fireplace" where she'd seen "really shocking things." To his great disappointment, she refused, despite being plied with curious questions ("Did they involve balloons, marmalade, or a live marmot?") to elaborate on what the shocking things had been.

"All right then," she sniffed, "what was I saying?"

"You were," said Draco in a bored tone, "telling me about Rhysenn and Nicholas Flamel."

"Oh, right, and the Four Worthy Objects...you know he was the last person ever to have assembled them all together?"

"Yes, you told me that."

"And then he was robbed and the objects were scattered and lost -"

"Was this before or after she died - Rhysenn, I mean?"

"Oh." Hermione consulted a book he could not see. "After. Although, like I told you, she did die in 1616 but that's not the last reported sighting of her."

"Considering that I sighted her last week, I'd think no, it wouldn't have been."

"Hmph!" said Hermione. "I meant the last historical sighting."

"Oh, did you?" Draco drawled.

She smiled despite herself. "I did."

"Well, then, tell me a bit more about these historical sightings."

She did. It appeared that Rhysenn, who had other surnames besides that of Malfoy, reappeared again and again in the illustrations of the books on alchemy Hermione had checked out of the big library on Diagon Alley. She was often in crowd pictures behind one Malfoy or another, dressed in the fashion of the day, instantly recognizable with her narrow pale face and waist-length black hair.



"So she trails Malfoys around, leaving a trail of blood, death and devastation in her wake, is that it?" Draco asked when Hermione was halfway through her recitation. "That's encouraging."

"The question is," Hermione said, "what does she want?"

"No," Draco countered, "the question is, how do we get her to leave us alone?"

"Maybe if we give her what she wants, she will," Hermione said.

Draco thought of Harry in the graveyard, being sick after Rhysenn had touched him, and the drugged look in his eyes. "You might not want to give her what she really wants."

"I've been thinking what she wants must be something in the possession of the Malfoys, since she seems so fascinated with your family. There are all sorts of examples of people being magically linked to objects, unable to be away from them. Souls can be embodied in various heirlooms, precious stones -"

"Like Epicyclical Charms," Draco said.

Hermione sighed. "Yes, Like Epicyclical Charms."

"Mmm." Draco plucked at his duvet cover. "What's the last recorded sighting of her?"

"In 1824, she was engaged as a nanny for the children of Octavian Malfoy - some great-uncle of yours - in Romania. She left when...oh, dear. The manor house he was living in burned down."

"More death and destruction?"

"Only Octavian died. He went back into the house to save his children...they all survived."

There was a short silence. Draco lay where he was, gazing dreamily at the fire. It licked up around Hermione in tendrils of blue, green, and dark violet. "I'd like to die like that," he said, a little distantly.

Hermione dropped what she'd been holding. "Burned to death? No you wouldn't, Draco, it's an awful way to die."

"No, not burned to death. Saving someone else's life - if you have to die, that's the way to do it, isn't it? Saving someone else's life."

Hermione's intake of breath was so sharp it sounded like snapping firewood. "Don't say that. Don't talk about death like that."

Another wave of tiredness rolled over Draco. "I guess you haven't had any luck researching..."

"Your injury? No," Hermione said in a small voice. "I'm telling you, I'm about reduced to cross-referencing "injury" and "magical things that glow" and just seeing if I come up with anything."

"Not a bad plan," Draco said equably.

"You said you were going to see a mediwizard -"

"I've got an appointment to see one tomorrow."

She squinted narrowly at him. "Are you really or are you just saying that to shut me up? And are you still having those dreams?"

"The ones about Snape's heart pajamas? No, thank God."

"Draco..." Hermione's voice came out on a wail. "Honestly, I don't even know what aspect of your life to worry about first."

Draco was spared answering as his bedroom door swung open with a bang, and Harry came in, scowling. "Malfoy, have you seen -"

He broke off, his eyes widening fractionally at the sight of Hermione in the fireplace. Hermione herself paled but said nothing. There followed several moments of a Very Uncomfortable Silence.

"I'd better be going," Hermione said finally. "They close the library at five o'clock, and I wanted to get in a few more hours of research. Give Sirius my best," she added, and with a slight wave, in the general direction of both Harry and Draco, she vanished.

Draco rolled into a sitting position and looked at Harry, still half-in and half-out of the doorway. The stricken look was gone from his face; now he looked as if he'd forgotten what he'd come for.

"It's all right, Potter, she's gone," he said. "Cue the sulking."

"I'm not going to sulk, it's just...I thought...her house wasn't connected to the Floo Network."

"It's not. She's in Diagon Alley at the Leaky Cauldron. She told her parents she had a research paper to work on. Which, I suppose, is partway true. She's looking into the Four Worthy Objects. Life goes on, you know."

"Right." Harry finally seemed to make up his mind, and came into the room, shutting the door behind him. On the small table by the door stood a collection of antique toy wizard soldiers; Harry picked up one desultorily and pretended to examine it. "So how often do you talk to her, then?"

"Every day," said Draco, who saw no reason to lie about it. They did talk every day; today had been the first time that the majority of the discussion hadn't been about Harry.

"Ouch," Harry said. It was a moment before Draco realized Harry wasn't reproaching him, but was in fact reacting to the fact that the toy wizard had stabbed him in the thumb with its wand. He dropped it back on the table and stuck his bleeding thumb in his mouth, which had the instant effect of making him look about eight. "Well," he began slowly, as if the words were being dragged out of him. "How is she doing, then?"

"Rotten," said Draco, quite honestly, "you're both doing rotten; not eating, not sleeping, thwarted young love, very tragic. Here, borrow my quill, you can go write a poem in your journal all about it."

Harry looked indignant. "I do not write poetry," he said, around the thumb.

"Well, perhaps now is a good time to start."

"I can't rhyme," Harry said. "I've tried."

"It's not that hard," Draco opined cheerily.

"Oh, yeah?" said Harry unwisely. "You try it."

Draco grinned evilly and knelt upright on the bed, one hand placed over his heart. "Woe! The pain that is my life," he declaimed.

Woe! The pain that is my life

The constant strain, the endless strife!

Hermione won't be my wife

Cause I'm a silly tart.

So now I'm pining for my ex,

I'm whining 'bout the lack of sex,

The wand of fate has cast a hex

Upon my noble heart.

My dearest friend has shagged my girl -"

"He did NOT SHAG HER," yelled Harry, turning approximately the color of an eggplant. "I hate you, Malfoy, and I hate your stupid poem!"

Draco looked vaguely offended. "I was simply taking artistic licence. Come to think of it, your life makes an excellent epic poem - in a pathetic kind of way. I wonder what rhymes with 'cupboard'? Or 'lonely nights of wanking off in the Gryffindor dormitory'-ow! OW!" he yelled as Harry launched himself onto the bed and vigorously attacked him with a green embroidered pillow. A furious but silent fight ensued, which ended when Harry managed to jam an elbow into Draco's solar plexus while simultaneously sitting on his legs.

"Take it back," he said.

Draco made a face at him. They were nose-to-nose, and Harry was looking even more wild-eyed and wild-haired than usual. "I'm sorry I said you were a tart," he said.

Harry ignored this. "You know what I mean! Why are you bringing up - you know - Ron and all that? Aren't you supposed to be being sensitive and brotherly and -"

"Yeah, well, I tried that but it didn't seem to be working. So I thought maybe I ought to just keep mentioning it as rudely as possible until you get desensitized."

"Oh that's a *great* idea. A real world-beater."

Draco struggled to prop himself up on his elbows, putting himself at eye level with Harry, who was still kneeling on his legs. "Look, Potter," he said evenly. "This wedding is tomorrow. And you know who's going to be here. Weasley, for one. Half Slytherin House - their parents are all friends with my mother. I know Blaise and Pansy will be here. You're not going to be living in a world of people who don't know or are too polite to say anything, not any more. And the way you are these days, the first nasty comment anyone makes will cut the legs out from under you. Better you start getting used to it now, and hearing it from someone who doesn't *really* want to hurt you."

The anger vanished from Harry's expression like a candle blown out. "You know, Malfoy," he said grudgingly. "You're probably the only person in the world who could be a huge jerk to me, then turn around and convince me that they're actually doing me a favor."

"Yes," Draco agreed, deadpan. "I am a unique and beautiful snowflake."

"Argh," said Harry, and rolled off him. He flopped onto his back and lay next to Draco, staring up at the ceiling. Draco manfully quashed the urge to tell Harry not to put his feet on the bedspread. "I guess..." Harry said slowly, his gaze unfocused, "I guess I have been a bit mopey lately..."

Draco almost fell off the bed. "A bit mopey? A bit mopey?"

"I - " Harry began, but Draco was having none of it.

"You call that a bit mopey? I suppose you'd say that the inhabitants of Pompeii were a bit surprised when the top blew off their local hill and buried them all in ash? Or that the crew of the Titanic was a bit annoyed about hitting that iceberg? Or that -"

"I get it," Harry interrupted, wriggling slightly with annoyance. "So I've been mopey."

"I'll tell you, Potter," Draco confided, "there've been times lately when I've been tempted to go hang about with Moaning Myrtle just to have someone upbeat to talk to."

"Well, why bother hanging around me at all then -" Harry began irritably, then caught himself. He bit his lip. "Look, I'm sorry," he said more quietly. "I know it hasn't been pleasant for you. I don't want to seem like I'm not grateful -"

"Grateful," echoed Draco, his voice faintly tinged with disgust. "Whatever. Look -"

"You think I don't notice what you do for me," Harry said flatly. "Well, I do notice. It might not seem like it, but I do notice."

Draco felt suddenly self-conscious. "I know," he said. "Look, I wasn't complaining -well, I was, actually, but now you've made me feel stupid about it. I hate that."

Harry almost smiled. "I need a favor," he said. "And it's a weird one."

Draco blinked. "Already this conversation has had more alarming twists than Snape doing the rumba." He shrugged. "I'm all ears."

Harry looked sideways at him, his expression open and confiding. It was that look that was very hard to say no to, because it made you want to trust him, and to believe that whatever idea he had was the right one. "I need you," Harry said, "to take my memories away."

"You don't have a choice about this, Ronald Weasley," his father said, in a tone that clearly indicated that he would brook no argument. "Do you understand me?"

"Yes," replied Ron, and his tone was as implacable as his father's. "But I'm still not going."

"Yes, you are. You're going."

"No," said Ron. "No, I'm not."

Ginny looked with mute appeal at her mother, who returned her gaze with one that was equally despondent. The two Weasley women sat together at the kitchen table; through the open door to the living room they could see both Ron and Mr. Weasley. Mr. Weasley was pacing furiously up and down on the hearth rug; Ron sat quietly on the sofa, his clasped hands dangling between his knees. His head was bowed, his tangled hair falling to hide his expression.

"Don't fret, love," said Mrs. Weasley and patted her daughter's hand across the table. "Your Dad will make him see reason."

Ginny just looked at her silently. For the first time in her life she felt briefly sorry for her mother, who really had no idea what was going on with her youngest son. Not as sorry as she felt for Ron, of course. She didn't blame him for not wanting to attend the wedding. Not at all.

"...At least offer me a decent explanation!" Arthur was thundering, having moved on from All the Arrangements Have Already Been Made and But The Whole Family Is Going to the more general, but still effective, There Is No Reason For This Kind of Behavior.

"I told you," Ron said in a monotone. "I had a fight with Harry. He won't want to see me. It'll make the whole wedding awkward. It's not fair on Sirius."

Mrs. Weasley sighed. "Poor baby," Ginny heard her murmur under her breath. She had no idea if her mother was referring to Ron or to Harry. Of course Mrs. Weasley adored her youngest boy, but she was also positively ridiculous about Harry, worrying over him as if he were another one of her children. Ginny thought to herself with an inward smile that it might perhaps be a good thing that she and Harry had never dated - her mother would have taken his side in any arguments, and she would have wound up hitting her mother over the head with a plank, or wanting to. For Mrs. Weasley, the idea of Ron and Harry not speaking was as distressing as Fred and George or Bill and Charlie not speaking - a horrid warp in the familial weft.

"And I told you," Mr. Weasley replied furiously, "that I received an owl from Sirius just this morning. He told me how much they're looking forward to seeing us at the Manor and how much, in particular, Harry is looking forward to seeing *you*."

"Sirius has to say that," Ron said woodenly.

"No, he doesn't! And if you two really did have a fight, then maybe this is your chance to patch it up. You've fought before. It never lasts."

Ron didn't reply but Ginny knew what he was thinking. *This will last.*

"Your absence would really mar the happiness of this event for Sirius and Narcissa," Mr. Weasley said calmly. "It really would."

Ron's head snapped up at that. He stared at his father. "You can't honestly expect me to believe that they'd care. Why would they?" he said, and his voice was so toneless that it was hardly a question. "Why do you?"

"Of course I care!" Mr. Weasley began explosively. Then he threw up his hands. "I can't talk to you," he glowered. "I can't talk to you at all!" He spun on his heel and stomped out of the study into the kitchen. He paused to glare at Ginny and her mother, his face tomato-red. "TEENAGERS," he announced, in the same tone Wizard Wireless Network reporters usually reserved for reporting an outbreak of goblin fever, and flung himself out the kitchen door and into the garden.

Mrs. Weasley's face was the picture of dismay. "Oh, dear," she said, gazing anxiously out the window at her husband, who had begun a violent and probably unnecessary de-gnoming of the lettuce patch. "I suppose I'd better go talk to Ron."

"No." Ginny got to her feet with a sigh. "Let me do it. I think I understand what's going on."

She left the kitchen without another glance at her mother, shutting the connecting door to the study firmly behind her. Was it her imagination, she wondered, or was the temperature in the study actually several degrees colder than the temperature in the rest of the house? Certainly a chill seemed to be emanating from Ron, who was still sitting on the sofa in the same position he'd been in for the past two hours - head down,

shoulders bowed. She went and sat down on the sofa next to him. He didn't move.

"I'm not going, Ginny," he said.

"I know," she said. "But you have to."

His head went up and he looked at her, betrayal evident in his eyes. Ginny winced. When she'd been eleven, the summer after the diary incident, she'd been plagued by nightmares. Her brothers had taken turns sleeping on the floor by her bed so that she wouldn't be alone. Her parents had offered to do the same, but Ginny had wanted her brothers there. Brothers were for protecting you. It was what they did.

"Don't look like that," she said. "You know why."

"Because of Mum and Dad -"

"No, not because of Mum and Dad. Because of Harry."

"Harry? Harry's the reason I want to stay away! He can't possibly want me there."

"No," Ginny admitted. "Possibly not. But think about it for a minute, Ron. Harry is famous. Draco is famous. Sirius and Narcissa are both famous. This wedding is going to be a huge media event and there *will* be reporters there. If you don't go, they'll have a field day with it. 'Harry Potter's best friend, son of the Minister of Magic, was conspicuous by his absence from the gala affair...'"

Ron buried his face in his hands with a groan. "Don't," he said. "Anyway, fine, maybe I have to go to the wedding but why do I have to go a day early with the rest of you? I thought the luncheon thing tomorrow was supposed to be top secret anyway, there won't be any reporters there, nobody even knows about it except the people who're invited."

"I know, Ron, but don't think they won't ask around at the wedding and find out who was there the day before."

"They wouldn't," said Ron, miserably.

"They would," Ginny replied flatly. "They'll dig around, too, and they'll find someone willing to talk. And then they'll splash it all over the gossip pages of Teen Witch Weekly just like they did third year with that Krum business, and fourth year with that whole Harry and Cho thing - and none of that stuff was even true. And Harry will be humiliated all over again. Do you want that?"

"No! No, of course I don't!" Ron flung himself to his feet and paced over to the fireplace. The hearth was empty and cold; there was no fire lit. In the momentary silence between them, Ginny could hear that it had begun to rain outside. "If I could go back and change things, don't you think I would?"

"It doesn't matter. You can't," she said. "You can't fix what you did in the past. But you can maybe make the present a little more bearable."

"If you had told me a year ago," Ron said quietly, still staring down into the empty fireplace, "that I'd be expected to go to Malfoy Manor on my Christmas holidays, to attend a wedding of all things, and that Harry would be there too because he *lives there now* - and that I'd be expected to be happy about this, because everyone else is - I would have laughed at you. I hate Malfoy. I hate all the Malfoys and everything they stand for. And sometimes, still, I wonder if Draco is the only one besides me who remembers how things used to be. I can tell by the way he looks at me - like he's gloating about how he's finally won. He always wanted Harry on his side and now he's got him. I miss him, Ginny -" Ron's voice broke, and she stood up, wanting to go over to him, but she could hear the live undercurrent of pain in his voice, and was afraid that any expression of sympathy might crack the last of his self-control. "I miss my best friend," Ron said, more quietly. "He loved what I loved and hated what I hated, and always put me first. And now - now I don't know. If we had to go through that Second Task again right now, who do you think he'd be rescuing from the bottom of the lake? Not me, that's for sure."

"Ron," Ginny said softly. "People change."

"I don't. I don't change." Ron looked at her and through her; she knew he wasn't really seeing her at all. "I'll go," he said. "I'll go to the wedding, for all the reasons you said. But I have a bad feeling about it. Something is telling me that there's darkness coming. Bad things are going to happen - terrible things."

Ginny was suddenly on the alert. "Bad things? Are you just saying that, Ron, or do you see something? Because if you do -"

Ron smiled bitterly. "It doesn't matter what I do. It doesn't matter what any of us does. What's coming will come and we can't stop it."

Draco sat bolt upright and stared. "You want me to *what?*"

"You heard me," Harry said.

"Uh-huh," Draco said. "Would this be select memories, or do you want them all gone? Planning to start life over again as somebody else? Going to enter the Wizarding Witness Protection Program? Spend the rest of your life wondering where that funny-looking mark on your head came from, are you?"

"Ahem," Harry said. "You're hysterical."

"I am not hysterical," Draco said with dignity.

"Yes you are, and anyway, I never said anything about you taking all my memories away. I don't want you to take all of them away, or even most of them. I just want to not remember..." His voice trailed off.

Draco sat very still. In the past seven days, he had only once heard Harry say Ron's name, and that had been because he was angry. He had not said Hermione's name either, referring to her only as "she" and "her" when he absolutely had to. Despite Draco's light words about desensitization he was, on some very deep internal level, badly frightened by Harry's reaction to everything that had happened. He would never have admitted it to himself or anyone else, but he was.

"I just want not to remember all of that," Harry finished. "You know. Just for tonight, because it's Sirius' party and I don't want to ruin it by being miserable. I ought to be happy for him, and I am, it's just..." Harry closed his eyes, and for a moment, held his breath. Eyes shut, his eyelashes brushed the tops of his cheekbones in fine black penstrokes. "I'm so tired," he said finally, wearily. "It's such an effort, acting normal."

"It's just a night," Draco said.

"I know," Harry replied, opening his eyes, "and then there's the next night, and the night after that, and I have to get through them all, and I will - I will. It's just tonight - tonight is special. It's Sirius, you know?"

His last sentence hung in the air with a plaintive sound. Draco did indeed know. Sirius was indeed special, even more so now when Harry felt he had so little left to depend on. Draco cleared his throat. "No," he said. "I won't do it."

Harry struggled into a sitting position and stared. "Why not?"

"Because I'm not trained to do Memory Charms. Because they can backfire. You might lose the wrong memories, or lose your memories altogether."

"But I thought you - I mean, with all that Dark Arts training..."

"Memory Charms aren't a Dark Art!" Draco almost yelled. "And I can't believe you'd be dim enough to think that if they were a Dark Art, I'd go about practicing them on you!"

Harry looked startled. "I..."

"Sirius would kill me, for a start," Draco said angrily. "Anyway, think how it'd look if, in the middle of the party, you forgot his name or something."

"Oh, all right. I reckon I see your point. But there must be something..."

"How about a Cheering Charm?" Draco asked grudgingly. Internally it was his opinion that asking Draco Malfoy for a Cheering Charm was not unlike asking Snape for a love potion, or Filch for a pink-iced birthday cake. "It couldn't do you too much damage."

Harry shrugged. "Can you do one?"

"It's bloody third-year magic, of course I can do one."

"I suppose I meant, will you do one?"

Draco sighed. "Against my better judgement, yes I will. But not right now. I need to look them up, and anyway, I don't want you going around grinning like a lunatic all afternoon."

Harry grinned - in a calm and un-lunatic-like manner - and rolled off the bed, landing lightly on his feet. "Thanks. I'll come back before the party, then."

"What joyous news. Potter -"

Harry turned. "What?"

"Nothing."

Malfoy Manor was so huge, Harry thought crossly, that he wished Sirius would just break down and draw a Marauder's Map for the place. He seemed to be able to find his way around fairly well when he didn't think about it - probably another leftover from the botched Polyjuice spell, an echo of the little bit of Draco still lodged at the back of his skull. *Hey there Malfoy*, he thought with dark amusement as he approached a drafty intersection of two corridors, *which way do I go?*

He went left, partly because instinct told him to, and partly because Draco was on his mind and he associated Draco with all things leftwards and sinister. The turn brought him to another corridor, this one lit by candelabras in jade brackets. It didn't take a Hermione-level genius to realize he was in the Green Wing - green tapestries depended from the walls, and the floor was overlapping tiles of white and green marble. Green, green and more green. *Bleh*, Harry thought. At least he was going the right direction, however. The conservatory was in the Green Wing.

He ducked past a sour-faced Malfoy ancestor glaring from a green-framed portrait and around another corridor, and there he was, in the conservatory.

Harry looked around him in quiet wonder. He knew Draco's family had money. They were money, almost the richest wizarding family in England. But he himself was possessed of such an abstracted nature, especially lately, that he had never really paused to think about, or notice, the

Manor's grandiose interiors. Probably because most of the house, while impressive, was coldly ornate without being beautiful; the conservatory, however, was beautiful. The walls were tinted glass, rising high above his head, and the pale winter sunlight poured through, turning the air to a silvery-gold haze. Hyacinths floated atop still pools of water. Huge trees rose overhead, wreathed in melancholy moss; there were palms, tree ferns, a pine and a giant bird-of-paradise plant. And of course, this being the home of the Malfoys, one wall was devoted to carnivorous plants which Harry recognized from Herbology class: among them sundews, butterworts, pitcher plants, Venus flytraps and bladderworts.

He whistled through his teeth, and the sharp sound echoed off the glass. It recollected him to his task. Quickly crossing the conservatory floor, he knelt down by a freshly turned bed of earth, like an altar boy kneeling at a railing. He reached into his cloak, and began to draw the objects he had brought with him out, one by one, placing them on the marble floor by his right knee.

He had no idea what he was doing, really; he was proceeding almost entirely on instinct, but then what he was trying to reproduce was an instant of the most instinctual magic he could imagine. So the objects he had brought with him had not been collected with a specific purpose in mind, exactly. They were simply what seemed to him right at the time: the Pensieve Draco had given him for his birthday and the album Hagrid had once given him full of photos of his parents. The eagle feather quill that had been his twelfth birthday present from Hermione. A playful line drawing Sirius had once sketched for him, showing the Gryffindor team on their broomsticks. A letter from Lupin.

He had wanted to bring something Ron-related as well, but had been unable to look at any of the gifts his best friend had once given him. He could have forced himself, but it would have required a soul-searching he felt himself incapable of. He didn't want to think too much about what he was doing. Thinking might destroy the fragile web he was weaving here, a web spun out of instinct, love and desperation. It was as if the instructions he was following had been laid down for him in dreams. He had not consulted any spellbooks, had not been to the library. His mouth twitched as he imagined how horrified Hermione would be by what he was doing.

Hermione. The thought of her brought a sour taste to the back of his throat. He looked at the small scatter of objects on the floor at his feet, then stretched out his right hand. "*Apparecium incendio*," he whispered, and a fire leaped up from the stone floor in front of him, making him jerk his hand back quickly. It was *hot*, hotter than a normal fire. He waited a moment to see if it would spread, but it remained contained within a small, inviolate space about the size of his own outstretched arms making a circle. Keeping his mind blank, he took the eagle feather quill and hurled it into the heart of the fire.

The flames burned blue for a moment. Harry took hold of Sirius' sketch, and tossed that in as well. The letters from Lupin followed, the ink showing up black and brilliant as the pages crumbled away into ash. Harry lifted the photo album - hesitated a moment - threw it in. Tears he was unaware of spilled from his stinging eyes as the fire turned a violent azure color, flared up, and went out, leaving a handful of ashes behind.

Harry took the handful of ash, and slowly sifted it through his fingers into the bowl of the Pensieve. His heart was beating hard against his ribcage. The inchoate white smoky stuff inside the Pensieve turned to scarlet, and began to swirl faster, like angry thunderclouds.

Harry reached into his back pocket, and took out his much-used pocket knife. He flicked the blade open, wrapped his fingers around it, held out his hand, and squeezed tightly. A zinging silvery pain shot up his arm, and a slow thread of scarlet blood unraveled from his clenched fist and spilled into the Pensieve.

The smoke's scarlet color deepened. Now it was the color of old blood. Harry felt it was time. He dropped the knife, and with his bloody hand reached inside his shirt, and drew out the small glass vial of dirt on the end of its frayed cord. He uncapped it and poured the dirt into the Pensieve, then threw the vial aside. He heard the glass smash on the stone floor; it sounded like distant rain.

The next words Harry spoke left his lips without any conscious thought at all. The smoke, the dizziness of not having eaten for days, the pain in his hand, and the instinctual magic he was conjuring had put him into almost a trance state. In that state, his mind reached back into itself for what was almost his earliest memory - his mother, leaning over him and singing softly, and the song she sang was one of magic and protection.

No exorcisor harm thee,

And no witchcraft charm thee.

Ghost unlaid forbear thee,

Nothing ill come near thee.

There was a soft sound, like the threads of a frayed rope parting under strain. The smoke in the Pensieve suddenly shot upwards, out of the bowl, like a serpent rising up under the ministrations of a snake-charmer. The scarlet smoke rose up and up, winding around Harry. It wound around him three times, tightly, and he felt the pressure as if the smoke were a silk cord binding him - once around his forehead, once around his throat, and once around his heart. He was, for a moment, blinded by the red smoke, and deafened by it, too. He saw only scarlet shadows, heard only the beat of his own heart.

Then the silence was broken. He heard a voice inside his head. It spoke to him as he had thought only Draco could speak to him : without words, but saying everything.

It is done. You are protected.

And the smoke vanished, funneling back into the Pensieve like water being sucked back down a drain. Within a moment, the smoke had returned to its previous color, and the Pensieve looked just as it had an hour before, entirely untouched.

Harry blinked and gasped in air - his throat burned from breathing the acrid smoke, and his face was sticky where his tears had made tracks in the dirt and soot that covered him. He felt worn with exhaustion, but strangely relieved. Slowly, he lowered his head, and rested it on his bleeding hand. *It's done*, he told himself, echoing the voice in his head. *I am protected. Now I can do what I have to do. What I was born to do.*

Now I can kill.

Hermione scrubbed the back of her hand wearily across her eyes. This was the third afternoon she'd spent inside the Althea Thoon Memorial Library in Diagon Alley. She'd never thought she'd feel this way, but she was sick of the inside of the library. Probably because her research wasn't getting anywhere.

Hermione had always been able to bury herself in work, the more complicated the better. But she had never been quite so preoccupied as she was now - thoughts of Ron and Harry crowded her mind, compounded by worry over Draco, who looked worse each time she talked to him - and didn't anyone else *notice*? Didn't they *care*? She knew he was clever enough to hide things from Sirius, but what about Harry, the one person who should have known instinctively, the one person who might actually be able to get Draco to do something about it. She itched to owl Harry but she knew perfectly well that he'd tear up any letter she sent without reading it. Oh, he was stubborn. *Damn it.*

She glanced up and around her and sighed. The library walls were paneled mahogany, very dark, and hung with paintings of famous witches and wizards. Hermione had taken a seat underneath a portrait of Rowena Ravenclaw in dark blue robes, hoping it would give her inspiration. Instead she was haunted by the lingering feeling that Rowena looked disappointed in her.

She stood up, stretched her aching muscles, and went back to the floating card catalogue along the east wall. She'd already asked the bookworms to do at least four searches for her, and she was fairly sure they were tired of her requests - it was hard to tell, though, when dealing with worms, even extremely intelligent, magical, slightly fuzzy ones.

One slithered over along the top of the catalogue and waved its pale gold antennae at her curiously. Hermione sighed again. She'd already run searches on poison, injuries, blood, glowing, silver, weakness/debilitation spells, and *phosphorescent*. She hadn't come up with anything - there didn't seem to be a potion or poison that caused blood to glow. There were potions that caused people to glow, and several cosmetic spells that promised glowing and revitalized skin, but she had a feeling that this wasn't a cosmetic spell gone horribly awry. (Although, with Draco, anything was possible.)

The bookworm waved its antennae impatiently. Hermione sighed again and gave it her last shot, "Could you search the Magical Armaments section for me? I want to know what weapons glow themselves, or cause glowing injuries to be inflicted."

The antennae waved again, and the bookworm wriggled busily away. Hermione watched it go, stifling a yawn. She knew it could take hours for the worm to scour all the books in the Weaponry section, and she really was deathly sick of being indoors. With a resolute shrug of her shoulders, she went back to her desk, retrieved her blue wool cloak, and hurried out the doors of the library into the weak winter sunshine.

Diagon Alley was a hive of activity. Less than five days were left until Christmas, and it seemed as if every witch and wizard in England had descended on the narrow maze of shopping streets around the Alley. Floating red and green ribbons wreathed the tall metal lanterns, tiny enchanted gold angel statuettes trilled from the tops of Christmas trees. Hundreds of owls swooped overhead, carrying packages emblazoned with the WPS logo (the Wizarding Postal Service, for those who didn't own owls of their own - the owls were notorious for losing packages en route, and Ron tended to call the WPS "Whoops" for short.) Hermione passed a brass colliery band energetically playing "Adeste Fidelis" as she rounded the corner of Petticoat Lane.

The windows of the Lane were devoted now to displays of beautiful winter dresses and dress robes. Hermione slowed her pace, looking in the windows. She had never been terribly interested in clothes, and still wasn't - she liked to look nice and clean and presentable, and every once in a while to wear a smart skirt or sweater, but the sad truth was that everything she owned tended to get ink stains on it after a while. She liked pretty things but never seemed to have the time or inclination to work tirelessly on her appearance the way Blaise or Pansy did, unless it was a special occasion.

Having Harry in her life a boyfriend had made her think about her appearance more, but now...she looked at her reflection in the nearest shop window and sighed. Tangled hair, draggled face, nubby old sweater and wrinkles in her tights. Ugh. Her gaze drifted upwards towards the dresses in the window display. She narrowed her gaze. Hermione loathed frothy party dresses, anything covered in lace or beads or masses of

flowers made her queasy. But these were really rather nice - straight clean lines and jewel-colors, dark reds and greens and blues. And she did need a dress for the wedding. And she didn't want to arrive looking like she'd been dragged backwards through a jungle of Fluttering Ferns, since Harry was going to be there. She intended to look fabulous and sweep past him with a haughty glare that would crush him like a bug. Well, she didn't want him crushed, really. Perhaps just slightly squashed. Dented, maybe.

It was decided. Hermione squared her shoulders and pushed the shop door open, smoothing her hair down as best she could with her gloved hand. She knew she didn't look her best, but it was unlikely she'd run into anyone she knew.

Unlikely, but apparently not impossible. Hermione took a few steps into the store, her eyes adjusting to the dimmer light. Rose-shaded lamps threw a pinkish glow over everything: elegant dresses were displayed like bonbons under glass cases and hanging on walls. There were daring short dresses, long dramatic black sheaths, and confectionery-pink frocks with lace edgings. Over by the window, a short-haired brunette girl stood patiently while a tall witch with an iron-gray bun deftly applied Pinning Charms to the hem of her rose-printed dress.

The bell chimed as the door shut behind Hermione, and the tall witch turned. "Hello, dear," she said. Her voice was cool and remote, belying her warm words. "I'm Madam Magsby, and this is my shop. If you'll wait, I can be with you in a moment."

Hermione didn't reply; she was too surprised. For the girl in the rose dress had turned around, and was staring at her with a look of utter horror on her face.

It was Pansy Parkinson.

Draco stood and surveyed himself in the mirror that hung on the inside of his wardrobe door. He looked good - well, this was a given. He always looked good. He would probably have possessed the same amount of natural arrogance had he been born plain or even unfortunate-looking; the fact that his arrogance, looks-wise, was justified, was something he rarely even thought about. The Malfoys were a good-looking family and

always had been. Girls had started staring at Draco (and some boys, too) around the time he was fifteen; before that, as his mother kindly put it, he hadn't quite grown into himself yet. He'd always been small and slight, like Harry, and had started to grow at the same time Harry had. He suspected he'd willed himself into it - he couldn't have borne being shorter than Harry Potter.

He made a minute adjustment to his tie, tilted his head, and gave himself a last critical once-over. He wasn't sure what one was supposed to wear to a stag night that wasn't really a stag night. Sirius had been very clear on that point. There would be no naked witches lunging out of pastries, he'd said - just a quiet night at the Cold Christmas Inn with friends and some of the locals from Malfoy Park, who Sirius was hoping to become more friendly with. The Park denizens had always had a touchy relationship with the Malfoys of the Manor, and Sirius was hoping things could be patched up. Draco knew Sirius was doing this for his own benefit, and was grateful. The idea of Sirius at the Cold Christmas Inn also made Draco smile - the Inn had been a staple lounging-place of his father's for years.

"Quit fiddling with your tie," said a voice behind him. "You always fiddle about with it and it always winds up looking just the same."

He spun around. Harry stood just inside the doorway, an inquiring look on his face. He wore Kenneth Troll dark blue trousers and a dove-gray pullover under a long wool winter cloak; Draco recognized the clothes as ones he had suggested Harry ought to buy. Harry had no fashion sense of his own, Draco mused, but at least he could take instruction.

"Merlin's bloody ghost," Draco muttered. "Don't you ever knock?"

Harry looked indignant. "I did knock. You were too busy admiring your own reflection to notice."

"Knock twice, then. Don't just come waltzing in. What would you have done if I'd been sitting here stark naked covering myself in tapioca pudding?"

An alarmed look passed over Harry's face. "I don't know, is it the sort of thing you're likely to do?"

"I might," Draco said haughtily. "It's my room, I can do what I like in it."

"Well," Harry said diplomatically, "to be honest, I'd have to say I'd think you were very strange."

Draco glared at him.

"Besides," Harry added. "You hate tapioca."

"I think you're missing the point."

"Oh, you had a point? I'm sorry, it must have gotten buried under all the pudding."

"Ahem." The sound of a polite cough interrupted their discourse. "I'm not even going to ask what this is about." It was Narcissa, peering in around the open door and looking amused. "Draco, darling - five-minute warning. Sirius is waiting for you two downstairs."

She left with a smile. Harry looked anxiously at Draco. "We'd better do it now," he said,

"What? Oh - the Cheering Charm. Yeah, all right. Come over here." Draco sighed and reached for his winter cloak, shrugging it on while Harry came slowly across the room towards him. "You sure about this?"

Harry paused in front of him. "Yeah, I'm sure. It's just a Charm, anyway."

"All right." Draco finished fastening the gryphon-shaped brooch that held his cloak together in the front, pushed his sleeves up, and regarded Harry for a thoughtful moment. "Close your eyes," he said.

Harry looked worried.

"Potter," Draco said in a warning voice.

Harry sighed and shut his eyes. Draco reached out and hesitantly put his forefingers to Harry's temples; Harry didn't react at all, just bent his head so his dark hair fell forward over Draco's hands. It was still damp from being washed, and the strands were cold on Draco's skin. Just below Harry's temples, there were streaks of soot; Draco wondered what on earth that was about.

"Stay still," Draco ordered him, and thought as hard as he could of cheerful things - the more cheerful the thoughts of the spellcaster, the more effective the spell, in this particular case. He thought determinedly of Quidditch victories, Christmas presents, amusing jokes...the look on Seamus' face when, somewhere in Ireland, he unwrapped his Christmas gifts and found that an anonymous benefactor had sent him a brand new shovel set...

A small smile came and tugged at the corner of Draco's mouth. He bent his own head and concentrated as hard as he could on sharpening his will into a point as sharp as the point of a knife, as strong as unbendable adamantine. Tension like a strung bow tautened along his nerves, gathering - he shut his eyes -

"*Felicitus*," he said.

He felt the magic leave his fingertips like an exhaled breath. Harry stiffened; Draco dropped his hands and stepped back.

Harry's eyes had opened wide. "Wow," he said.

Draco gave him a narrow look. "Why wow?"

Harry grinned. It was a happy grin, full of life and light and joy, the sort of grin no one would possibly fake. "Amazing," he said.

"Amazing...?" Draco echoed.

"I feel like a thousand pound weight's been lifted off me," Harry said, staring down at himself, then back up at Draco. "I feel - normal. Thanks, Malfoy." He looked at Draco, wide-eyed. "I mean it. Thanks."

"Sure," Draco said. A sense of vague disquiet had settled on him. "Glad it worked."

"Worked..." Harry seemed to be speechless, and possibly on the verge of dispensing hugs, flowers, bunnies, and God only knew what else. Draco backpedaled hastily, picked his gloves up off the table, and gestured at Harry.

"We ought to go," he said. "Isn't your adoptive father downstairs waiting for us?"

"Right, right." Harry nodded and headed for the door. He paused there, hand on the knob, and swung around to look at Draco. "You've done a good thing, Malfoy," he said simply.

Draco paused and stared at him, arrested in the act of putting on his gloves. Harry's eyes were full of light; he hadn't seen him like this in months. He was not sure if Harry was looking at him or through him - *What is he seeing? Not me, someone better than that.*

"I hope so," Draco said, and followed Harry out of the room with an unshakable sense of profound misgiving.

"Hi," Hermione said, after a very awkward moment had passed. "Hi, Pansy."

Pansy did not reply. Hermione looked at her in astonishment. All the blood had drained out of the other girl's face and the bright, pretty color of her dress stood out in stark contrast to her papery skin. Her dark brown eyes were wide with horror, as if Hermione were some hideous ghost.

"I take it you two know each other," said the witch with the iron-gray bun, looking amused.

"We're in the same year," Hermione said, still staring at Pansy.

"At Hogwarts?" the witch inquired.

"Y-yes," Hermione said, since Pansy appeared to have been stunned into silence. A strange idea was beginning to take shape in Hermione's head. But no. That was ludicrous. "Seventh year."

"I take it you are also attending the Malfoy-Black wedding on Saturday?" the witch began, but this time Pansy interrupted her.

"You're going to the wedding? I thought you --" Pansy began, then snapped her lips shut. Color had come back into her face in a flood; she was as pink as one of the roses on her dress. "I mean, after -"

"Of course I'm going," Hermione said evenly, struggling to conceal her annoyance. It wasn't entirely amazing that Pansy would know about her breakup with Harry - surely the whole school knew that. Still, it was rude of Pansy to bring it up. Then again, when had Pansy not been rude? "I wouldn't dream of missing Sirius' wedding."

"Well," Pansy said, her voice unnaturally shrill, "Just a word of advice: it looks a bit pathetic showing up at the family home of a bloke who's just binned you. I wouldn't do it if I were you."

It took Hermione about four seconds to go absolutely rigid as she digested Pansy's truly appalling remark. When she spoke again, her voice had a rasping note, as if she were struggling to keep it even. "I don't like you, Pansy, and I never have," she said. "But it seems to me that lately you've been even more vicious than usual. What, exactly, is your problem with me?"

Pansy's features thickened, her eyes hardening and almost sliding together. "What do you care," she hissed, and the seamstress who'd been fixing her gown stepped back, her eyebrows raised. "You, with your perfect little life and your perfect *boyfriend*, and Ron and Draco drooling over you as if you were something special, which you aren't. You treat them like they were less than you are, and they're *pureblood wizards*. How dare you? Mudblood!" she yelled at Hermione, in a paroxysm of abandoned rage. "*Mudblood!*"

"Pansy, has it ever occurred to you that none of those boys like you because you're a complete *bitch*?" Hermione snapped, fed up at last. "I don't treat them like they're less than me, but I don't drool and fawn over them just because they're boys, and purebloods - you even fawn over Ron, and he hates you -"

Pansy screamed aloud, and seemed for a moment as if she'd throw herself at Hermione, but Madam Magsby caught at her and held her back. "Now, now, dear," she said. "You'll damage the material."

"You're pitiful!" Pansy cried at Hermione, her eyes wet. "Dangling Potter and Draco along after you like you have all the time in the world to make up your mind, you think we all don't look at them and laugh? You've made a laughingstock out of them, and they're pureblooded wizards, whatever else they might be. Everyone thinks you're so special and clever - well, I see right through you. Just because you're *popular* and you're Head Girl doesn't mean -"

"You want to settle this with a duel? Is that what you want?" Hermione interrupted, her voice careening upward. "I'll duel with you, Pansy - I'll duel with you, and when I'm done with you there won't be enough left of you to stuff a Pumpkin Pasty!"

"Oooh," said Madam Magsby. "I do love a Pumpkin Pasty."

Pansy burst into tears. As Hermione looked on in astonishment, she tore herself away from the seamstress, raced across the room, and flung herself into one of the dressing compartments. The door banged shut behind her, and the sound of loud crying was audible therein.

"Honestly!" said Hermione, to no one in particular.

"Well, well," said Madam Magsby, a small smile crossing her face. "Very impressive, my dear. Would you like to try a dress on now?"

"I.." Hermione wanted nothing less. She wanted to go back to the Leaky Cauldron, get a pillow, and cry. But she was determined not to let a snob like Pansy drive her out of the nicest shop on Petticoat Lane. "I suppose I could."

"Well, stand over here by the window, then, and do take off that cardigan. It's frightful."

Hermione did as she was bid, and was soon swathed in layers of a peach-gold chiffon material printed with tiny birds. She felt tense all over, waiting for Pansy to emerge from the dressing room, and Madam Magsby kept sticking her in the neck with pins. Hermione held her hair away from the collar of her dress and sighed a martyred sigh.

The bell at the front door of the shop sounded. Hermione craned her neck around and was rewarded with another pin in the neck. A tall, stylish-

looking witch had entered the shop. She had a tight, attractive face and lacquered-looking blond hair. Her eyes scanned the room quickly, and landed on Hermione. "Darling, have you -" she began, then broke off. "You're not my daughter," she said, as if Hermione had somehow affronted her personally.

The door to the dressing room banged open. "Mummy!" exclaimed Pansy, and ran towards the tall witch. "You're late."

Mrs. Parkinson looked down at her daughter with amusement. "You cannot possibly be getting all those dresses, Pansy."

"Oh," Pansy gasped, and glanced down at the pile of clothing she'd removed from the changing room. "No, I - I -"

"Do decide quickly, darling, Daddy's waiting at Nutkin's Beauty Supply; he's just delivered a shipment and you know how he hates to wait."

"I'll - I'll take this one," Pansy declared, and seized a dress from the pile, obviously at random: it was a hideous pale green with frilly cuffs and collar. She tossed the rest of them over the back of a padded chair.

"Does it fit?" her mother asked, "it looks a bit -"

"It fits fine, Mummy," Pansy said, so obviously eager to leave that even her mother noticed.

"Very well," Mrs. Parkinson sighed. She glanced up at Madam Magsby, "Put it on our account," she declared, took the dress from her daughter, and swept regally from the shop like a boat departing from a harbor under full sail.

She is the strangest girl, Hermione thought to herself, as the door banged shut behind Pansy. *Now, what was that all really about?*

The sun was going down outside the windows of the Cold Christmas Inn in a torrent of gold and blood: a Gryffindor sunset. Sirius watched it through the diamond-paned windows from his place at the bar next to Lupin, and felt that all was well with the world.

"Try some elm wine," Lupin said, and pushed a glass towards him. It was filled with a pale-gray liquid that shimmered like mother-of-pearl and smelled vaguely of socks. "Romanian wizards swear by it."

"I bet they do," said Sirius with deep suspicion. "I bet they say, 'What the bloody hell is this stuff?'"

"True," said Lupin. "Only they say it in Romanian." He grinned, and his gray eyes lit up. "Come on, you have to try it. The Mayor bought a whole bottle of it in your honor."

Sirius groaned to himself. This particular gathering was something of a political move, along with a social one. He'd invited both the Mayor of the town of Malfoy Park and the bailiff as well, since the township had rarely gotten along well with the Manor - Lucius had kept them crushed under an iron boot heel. He was hoping they'd have a better relationship with the Manor's current occupants, and inviting them to the party seemed like a step in the right direction. He waved down the bar at the Mayor now - both he and the Bailiff were tall, spare, gray-faced men - and reached out for the glass of Elm wine.

He drank it. "Bleh," he said under his breath, and set it down.

Lupin chuckled. "Better you than me."

"I thought the Romanian wizards swear by this stuff?"

"They do," Lupin said agreeably. "But then, they also eat bats."

"You're dead to me," said Sirius. "I hope you know that."

Lupin chuckled again, and puffed on his cigar. Blue smoke swirled up from the tip. "You could go sit with Snape," he said. "He looks bored."

"He's not bored. He's playing darts."

"He sucks at darts. He's always sucked at darts. And he uses 'Expelliarmus' to cheat."

"Surely he doesn't do that any more."

"Hush," said Lupin.

Sirius hushed. A moment later a faint "Expelliarmus!" could be heard from the far end of the bar, and he glanced up to see a badly-aimed dart go zooming back into Snape's hand.

"He's evil," said Sirius, impressed.

"Hey," said Lupin. "You invited him."

"I invited everyone here," Sirius said. "I seem to know a lot of gits, don't I?" He smiled politely and waved down the bar at the Mayor again. The Mayor waved back; the bailiff, a Mr. Stebbins, just glowered. "See what I mean? Gits."

Lupin pointed. "They're not gits."

"Who?"

Lupin pointed again, and this time Sirius followed his gesture and saw that he was pointing at Draco and Harry, who sat apart from the rest, over by the enormous dressed stone fireplace that occupied most of the south wall. Sirius hadn't been particularly surprised that they'd wanted to sit off on their own; they were fifteen years younger than the rest of the partygoers, after all, and Harry especially had been very quiet lately.

Sirius smiled. "No," he said, turning to study them more closely. "No, they aren't."

The two boys sat side by side on one of the long, pillow-strewn couches, both looking into the fire, both silent, or apparently so. Sirius knew, however, by the intent, inward expressions on both their faces, by the half-smiles that came to tug at their mouths at the same time, prompted by some unseen and unheard joke, that they were not silent at all; they were talking, inhabiting a locked world of conversation only they could hear. Like any teenagers, he thought with amusement, they have their own private world - take the secretiveness of ordinary adolescence to its logical extreme, and it would look a lot like this.

Not, of course, that they were ordinary, either one of them. Sirius looked more carefully. The candles and bracketed torches, coupled with the fire in the grate, seemed to catch them both in a net of dark gold light, turning the drinks in their hands to transparent jewels. He could not

really see the details of what they wore, only that they were dressed similarly, in dark clothes of expensive material, elegantly cut. It was a little odd, or perhaps just interesting, that Draco, who had always been so careful about his appearance, had lately let his hair grow untidily too long, while Harry, who always looked as if he got dressed in the dark and cut his hair with nail scissors, had finally seemed to come to some understanding and appreciation of clothes: what looked good on him and what didn't, what colors did and didn't suit him. He dressed well, now. They even had some of the same mannerisms, although who was mimicking who, Sirius couldn't have said. It all contributed to that peculiar juxtaposition of like and unlike that characterized them when they were together. Dark and light, candle and shadow: two halves of one imperfect whole.

"It's funny to see you looking fatherly," Lupin said.

"Not as funny as it is to see you smoking a cigar."

"The trick is not inhaling."

"So I've been told." Sirius looked away from Draco and Harry and back at his friend. "Do I look fatherly, then?"

"Well, you look a bit like I remember my father looking. Pleased and worried at the same time. Of course, my father had reason to worry about me."

"And I don't have reason to worry?"

Lupin made a face at his cigar and spoke quietly. "No. You do. They're very special, your boys."

"My boys? I suppose they are that," Sirius said. He waited a moment, wondering how he felt about that, and decided he felt good about it. "Not boys very much longer."

"Oh, I don't know." Lupin put the cigar down, still frowning. "They're very young."

"They are and they aren't. I mean...look at them."

"I have been. They look like they're having a good time."

"That's not what I meant. I meant, think of all they've dealt with. Loss, parental death, difficult decisions..."

"I know. I'm glad they have each other to talk to." Lupin smiled.

"Remember when we were that age and we used to talk about everything?"

Sirius nodded. "I do remember. I wonder what they're talking about right now? Something of life and death significance, I'm sure..."

"It is *not* a stupid girly drink," Draco said.

Harry snorted, in the process almost inhaling the rest of his drink through his nose. "It *so* is. Look at it. It's pink. Why do you drink that stuff? It even tastes nasty."

Draco glared down at the drink in his hand. "It does not taste nasty."

"Oh, yeah?" Harry plonked his own drink down on the table, reached out, plucked Draco's glass out of his unresisting fingers, and drained it. He coughed, made a face, and handed the empty glass back to Draco. "It tastes like lighter fluid," Harry said. "Lighter fluid with sugar."

Draco fought the urge to stick his tongue out. "It's not that sweet."

"It's sweet, it's fruity, it's *pink* - it comes in a poncy little glass -"

"Oh all RIGHT!" Draco yelled. "I didn't know Mai Tais were pink! I thought they were green! That's why I ordered one that time - and now I can't go back. It's my thing. It's my signature drink."

"Can I just say what a prat you are for having a signature drink? I mean, you're seventeen, you should be allowed to change your mind. What's next? Signature outfits, signature broomsticks, endorsing lines of products, soon you'll be such a pillock that no one will be able to stand you -"

"Thank you, Potter. Thank you for that vote of confidence in my future."

"Apple martinis," said Harry.

"What?"

"Apple martinis are green. I'm almost positive."

"Really?"

Harry grinned. "Yeah, really." He waved a hand at a passing levitating silver platter. "Apple martini," he said, and a cocktail glass appeared. The liquid inside it was, indeed, pale green. He handed the glass to Draco.

"Potter?" Draco said, accepting the drink.

"What?"

"I thought I was already such a pillock that no one could stand me."

"Oh, shut up, Malfoy, and drink your drink."

"So does he know about Lucius and Peter yet?"

"Harry? No, no he doesn't. I appreciate you telling me, by the way," said Sirius, taking a sip of Archenland beer to wash down the taste of the elm wine.

"I thought you should know, and anyway, Draco didn't ask me not to tell you."

"Did he ask you not to tell Harry?"

"No," Lupin said slowly, "not in so many words, no. But I think he was probably right. I think that Harry would take it badly. I think whether it made logical sense or not, he'd feel somehow that he couldn't talk to Draco about it and he really has no one else to talk to right now. He's very dependent on Draco. I think he'd feel terribly alone."

"He could talk to me," Sirius said.

"No he can't." Lupin grinned. "You're old."

"Ahem," said Sirius. "Pot. Kettle. Black."

Someone in the vicinity cleared their throat. "Pardon me, Mister Black, Mister Lupin." It was the round, gray-haired Mayor and his ever-present sidekick, the rail-thin bailiff. Sirius recollected that the Mayor's proper name was Michael Gray, which seemed to fit, as his hair, eyes and skin were all a grayish color. The bailiff, thin as a reed with a narrow, beaklike nose, was also gray all over. Sirius had never once heard him speak, even though he had met him before at the Manor when he'd come by to officiate over the notarization of some papers. "I just wanted to thank you, Mister Black, for extending us an invitation to this event. I'd always wanted an opportunity to meet the inhabitants of the Manor socially, so to speak."

"Ah, yes. It's a pleasure to meet you, too," Sirius lied. "Did you, er, meet Harry yet?"

"Yes, yes, young Draco introduced us. Harry Potter! Very exciting."

"He's exciting all right," Sirius agreed, deadpan. There followed at least a quarter hour of polite and slightly stilted conversation. The Mayor wanted to know if Sirius found the weather too severe; Sirius replied that it was quite pleasant to have a white Christmas. Lupin asked about the history of the town, and the Mayor shared some salient facts. The Mayor then opined that the fellow over in the corner in the black cloak was cheating at darts by using the Expelliarmus spell, and Sirius told him in confidence that the fellow in the corner was his distant cousin Dunforth who had a reputation for eccentricity and tended to grow violent when harassed. The Mayor sidled away, and the bailiff followed.

"And it only took fifteen minutes for you to scare them off," said Lupin. "A new record!"

"Bah," said Sirius, and hid a grin. "Sorry."

"It's Snape you ought to apologize to," began Lupin with mock severity, then broke off as a echoing crash sounded from outside the Inn. He blinked. "What on earth was that?"

Sirius sat up straight, and stared. Out of some newly acquired paternal instinct, his eyes went immediately to the sofa by the fireplace to see if

the boys were all right. The sofa was empty. "I don't know," he said. "But...where are Draco and Harry?"

"How are you doing, Harry?"

"Fine. I guess."

He didn't look fine. Draco felt anxiety stir in a knot underneath his ribcage. Harry was sunk down in the armchair beside him, staring vaguely at the fire. He seemed taut and strung up and feverish. Bright spots of color burned atop his angular cheekbones and his eyes were very bright. There were three empty glasses on the table beside him.

"I don't think you should drink any more," Draco said.

"I know," Harry said. Draco noted with growing alarm that Harry was very flushed, and that his dark hair was pasted down to his forehead with sweat. "It's just hot in here - because of the fire -" Harry unknotted at the tie around his neck and tilted back his head as if he were having trouble getting enough air. "Doesn't it bother you?"

"No. You just drank too much. It's the alcohol. Maybe you should go in the back and lie down."

"I don't want to. I want to go outside. I need air." Harry got to his feet, using the back of the armchair to brace himself. "I need a walk."

"You'll fall into the river," Draco said.

Harry blinked. "There's a river?"

Draco wondered if Sirius would notice them leaving, but he seemed to have fallen into a deep conversation with Lupin and the Mayor, and did not look up as they went out into the anteroom. Harry paused to pull down their cloaks from the rack, then pushed the door open. The fierce cold hit Draco so hard he was dazed for a moment, drawing his cloak on over his head hurriedly. When he emerged from it, the doorway was empty. He ran out onto the front steps, looking around for Harry, his feet skidding on the iced-over brick.

"I'm here," Harry said.

He was down at the bottom of the path already, his cloak pulled awkwardly about his shoulders. He seemed to be staring at something just beyond the border of hedges. Draco went slowly down the stairs and joined him.

"What is it, Potter? What are you looking at?"

"It's beautiful," Harry said. "Isn't it beautiful?"

Draco looked at him in surprise, and then back at the winter landscape. The moonlight had the clear unblemished purity peculiar to very cold winter nights. It lit the surrounding snow to white fire and silvered the dark air and the tops of the distant trees. Above the trees a mass of winter stars glittered with crystal flashes of vivid green and icy blue, while down at the bottom of the hill, Draco could hear the water of the river running underneath its shroud of ice. It was indeed a very beautiful night, although he doubted he would have thought to notice it if Harry hadn't pointed it out.

He turned to look at Harry. In the darkness he could see the other boy only as textures of light and shadow: dark hair, white skin, dark clothes. His eyes had lost some of their smoky hollowed exhaustion and were alight behind his glasses.

"I want to fly," Harry said.

"That's nice," Draco said. "We haven't got broomsticks."

"I know where some are," said Harry, and sat down on the frozen ground rather suddenly. "Ouch," he said. "Help me up - I'll show you."

"Potter - you're in no shape to do anything."

"I'm not drunk," Harry said very clearly. "I'm just happy - let me be happy. It's been a long time since I last was."

"Harry," Draco protested. "Don't."

Harry took no notice. He had managed to get his legs back under him, and held up his hand. "Help me up," he said again.

Draco took the proffered hand and pulled Harry up to his feet. Harry smiled at him. It was a smile filled with light and happiness, and yet Draco knew that it was almost entirely artificial. Draco felt a little sick. "What are we doing?" he asked.

"Come on," Harry said, turning and starting off across the frozen lawn.

Draco followed him. He was getting used to this. It seemed to him that all he did these days was follow Harry various places. It was like having a toddler, albeit an oversized and crabby one.

The lawn sloped down behind the Cold Christmas Inn to the service road. The carriages they had come in were lined up along the low kerb, in an orderly procession. Harry skidded sideways down the last of the incline and fetched up alongside Sirius' carriage. Draco saw him tap the boot with his right hand, and it popped open. Harry reached into and drew out two objects, both wrapped in colored paper. They were long and narrow, each flared at one end. The shape was unmistakable.

"Broomsticks?" Draco said blankly. "What the hell...?"

"Our Christmas presents," Harry said. "I heard Sirius telling your mother he got us these. They're Cloudbursts. Brand new."

"I know what Cloudbursts are." The prototypes for the Cloudburst broom had been featured in the last issue of Quidditch World News. They had been designed by a well-known company and featured a number of experimental additions, the unremembered details of which were nagging at the back of Draco's mind in an annoying manner. "I read the same Quidditch journals you do."

"Good. So catch."

Harry tossed one of the wrapped packages to Draco, who caught it instinctively. Harry turned his attention to ripping the wrapping paper off his own broomstick. It came away quickly under his swift fingers, and he looked up and grinned. The grin vanished when he saw Draco was still standing staring down at his own broomstick, without moving.

Harry made an impatient gesture with his right hand. "Relasio," he said, and the wrapping paper melted away from Draco's broom like snow under sunlight.

For a moment, Draco forgot all about Harry and the cold air and his burgeoning anxiety, and just stared in admiration. The Cloudburst was a sleek, narrow object that felt almost more like metal than wood under his hands, it was so dense and so smoothly polished. The shaft was black, the twigs at the far end jet-colored and banded with silver. It hummed when he touched it, a sound like the purr of a curious cat.

"You like it?"

Harry's voice. Draco looked up. The wind whipped his hair across his face. For a moment, he could see nothing. "Oh, yes. It would have been a great surprise gift." He reached up a hand and pushed back his hair, and saw that Harry was already sitting astride his Cloudburst, and his grin was back. "Potter, what are you -"

Harry pushed off, and his Cloudburst rocketed into the air at approximately the speed of a hurtling comet.

"...doing?" Draco finished. He sighed. "Goddammit," he said wearily, swung his leg over the stick, and kicked off from the ground.

Immediately it felt wrong. The broom soared upward after Harry's on a near vertical pitch with a soundless, slippery, gliding motion that made Draco feel as if he were about to fall off. He grabbed desperately at the broom, which succeeded only in canting him violently to the right. He held on tightly as the Cloudburst spun once, righted itself and subsided into stillness.

Cold air whistled in his lungs as he gasped mouthfuls of oxygen. His heart was pounding. I'm sick. I shouldn't be doing this. I'm sick. I can't fly properly. Harry knows that. Where is he?

Draco tilted his head back. The icy air stung his eyes to tears, but he could see Harry just beyond the immediate blurred field of his vision, hovering above him, a patch of darkness against the silver clouds. Harry looked down at him, laughing, then took off again. Later, Draco would wonder why he'd followed; at the time, it seemed the only thing to do. He

leaned forward and the Cloudburst exploded under him, rocketing up into the sky like a meteor in reverse.

In winter, the Hogwarts teams usually flew in heavy sweaters, with shin guards and elbow guards and high leather boots. Now, the elegant party clothes Draco was wearing provided hardly any barrier to the cold. He shivered as he soared upward and the wind cut through the fabric of his shirt like so many tiny knives. His cloak blew back; up ahead, he could see that Harry's cloak was doing the same, snapping behind him like a flag in the wind. He fixed his eyes on that as a target and willed his broom forward.

It banked sideways instead.

Draco's hands, icy and numb with cold, clutched convulsively at the broomstick's shaft. His heart was pounding. He had remembered, suddenly, what he had read in that issue of Quidditch World News.

The new Cloudburst models carry a unique anti-theft charm. Before being used, the broomstick must be calibrated to its specific user, or it will not respond properly to attempts to fly it.

"Hell," he muttered. "Bloody, bloody hell." He threw his head back. Harry was a disappearing speck high above him. "Potter!" he shouted, and pulled back on his broom. It jerked upwards several feet, went into a lazy slow roll, and righted itself reluctantly. "Potter!" he shouted again, leaning far forward.

This turned out to be a mistake. As if shot from a cannon, the Cloudburst hurtled forward so swiftly that Draco had no chance to do anything other than clutch at it blindly. It veered hard to the left, and then to the right, and then shot forward, as straight as an arrow.

Directly towards a large oak tree.

Draco jerked hard at the Cloudburst, but it would not be budged from its course. He thundered towards the tree as inexorably as the Hogwarts Express - the branches scraped at his face - he threw his arms up - and something hit him hard, not from the front but from the side, knocking him decidedly off his broom. The same something tangled in his cloak

and then he was falling, which felt almost like flying but was far more terrifying.

It only lasted a moment, though. He hit soft-packed snow and the impact knocked the wind out of him. He choked and rolled over, spitting snow, blinded by it. There was a sharp stinging pain in his arm.

"Hey - Malfoy -" It was Harry, of course. Draco sat up, pushing wet hair out of his eyes. Harry was kneeling on the snow next to him. His glasses were frosted with snow; so were his clothes. "Sorry about knocking you off your broom, but you were going to hit the tree. Why didn't you steer away from it?"

"I'm fine, thanks for asking," Draco said, through his teeth. "Potter - where are the broomsticks?"

Harry waved grandiosely in the direction of the oak tree they had narrowly avoided smacking into, and almost overbalanced. "They weren't as lucky as we were."

A feeling of foreboding in his heart, Draco got shakily to his feet and looked where Harry had indicated. At first he didn't see what Harry meant; then, craning his neck back, he saw both broomsticks, high above their heads. The force of impact had driven them *into* the tree; they looked like two oversized arrows that had been fired, willy-nilly, through the branches and into the tree's trunk.

"Those Cloudbursts must be made of something really tough," Harry observed, with desultory interest. "You'd think they just would have *shattered*, really."

"You mean like our skulls would have, if we'd hit that tree?" Draco said, seething coldly. "Is that what you mean?"

"But we didn't hit the tree," Harry pointed out breezily.

"No thanks to you, you daft bloody Gryffindor!" Draco exploded. "'Let's just ride these broomsticks, shall we, never mind that they need to be calibrated first, never mind we're going to get ourselves killed--'"

"I didn't know that," Harry said, surprised.

"Five more seconds and I would've been splattered all over like an Impressionist painting. 'Head Smashed Into Oak Tree,' you could've called it."

"Don't joke about that. Look, if you knew they needed to be calibrated then you should have said -"

"I didn't have time, did I? You just jumped on that broomstick and took off -"

"You didn't have to come after me!"

"I always have to come after you!"

"Good God, what's all this yelling?" said a voice, and Draco whirled around to see Sirius standing just behind him, Lupin at his side. Several other figures were standing on the path back where the carriages were; Draco couldn't see who they were, but knew that they were staring.

His heart sank as he stared up at Sirius. Sirius looked absolutely furious. "What on earth have you been doing?" he demanded coldly.

The two boys looked up at Sirius with their mouths open. Draco had never really seen his stepfather-to-be angry before. He seemed to loom over them, his eyes black with anger. "And just what is this meaning of all this noise?" he demanded.

Lupin cleared his throat. "Ahem," he said. "Sirius..."

Sirius turned to look at his friend. "Yes?"

In answer, Lupin pointed upward. Sirius turned to follow his gesture, and gaped up at the two broomsticks embedded in the tree. "I see," he said slowly, his voice flat. "I knew you two were flying. But I didn't think you'd be quite such bloody fools as to fly two uncalibrated Cloudbursts!"

"We didn't know they needed to be calibrated," said Draco in a small voice. He turned to Harry for some assistance, but immediately realized

there would be no help from this corner. Harry had his hand over his mouth and appeared to be laughing.

"Ah, but you still felt qualified to fly them? Not even addressing the issue that those were your Christmas presents, which I will certainly not be replacing. Of all this damn fool, impetuous, thoughtless, rash and stupid things you could have done -"

"We're sorry," Draco interrupted desperately. Harry was still giggling beside him. He resisted the urge to smack Harry across the back of the head.

"I don't think you realize how serious this is," Sirius glowered.

The laughter finally escaped from behind Harry's hand. "Sirius," he said. "Your name means two things. Hee."

Sirius blinked at his godson. "Harry? What on earth is wrong with you?"

Harry just giggled in response.

"He's fine," Draco said in a small voice. "It's just an, er....a Cheering Charm. I put it on him earlier."

To his surprise, Sirius reacted as if he'd said "It's just a bucket of poison" instead. "A Cheering Charm? You gave him a Cheering Charm and then you let him drink *alcohol!*"

"Er..." Draco said, watching Harry out of the corner of his eye. "Well, yes a bit. Sort of. Why?"

"Were you trying to get him *killed?*" Sirius demanded.

"Yes," Draco said, anger sparking in him. "Yes, that was my brilliant plan."

"You, Draco - you of all people should know better than to mix Cheering Charms and alcohol."

"Why? Why should I know better? Cheering Charms wouldn't exactly have been something my father would have accepted. They're for weak people. According to him. Why should I know about them?"

Some of the anger died out of Sirius' expression. "Yes, but still. Couldn't you see there was something *wrong* going on with Harry?"

Draco almost shouted. He wanted to say that of course there was something wrong going on, there'd been something wrong going on for months, and this was in fact the most normal he'd seen Harry in ages. But he couldn't. He swallowed the words, and his resentment along with them. "It all happened fast," he said, instead. "Besides, I didn't even know what I was supposed to be looking out for."

"Hysteria," Sirius said. "Sudden mood swings."

"Wibble," said Harry, gloomily, from the snow. "I don't feel at all well."

"Ah," Sirius added. "Also nausea."

Draco sighed. "Will he be all right?"

"Probably," Sirius said, bent down, and helped Harry to his feet. "He just needs to sleep it off, is all." Harry swayed slightly, and Sirius' expression softened further. He bent down to lift Harry up into his arms as if he were still a child who weighed next to nothing. "Come here," Draco heard him whisper, in a gentle tone. Draco would have thought Harry was long past hearing much of anything, but at the sound of Sirius' voice, Harry turned his head into his godfather's chest, made a little sighing noise, and went limp.

Sirius straightened up, cradling Harry in his arms, then looked up and over at Lupin. "I haven't carried him since he was a baby," he said, "he hardly weighs anything, even now."

Lupin said something back, so softly that Draco didn't hear it, and then both of them turned, and began to walk back towards the lights of Malfoy Park.

Sirius turned and looked back at Draco. "Are you coming?" he demanded. "We're taking a carriage."

Draco shook his head. "I'll Floo back on my own," he said. He wanted to be alone to think for a bit.

Alas, it was not to be. No sooner had he reached the door of the Inn than Snape stepped out of the shadows and accosted him. "Mister Malfoy," said Snape. "A word with you?"

Draco gazed dispiritedly at his grim-faced Potions professor. "I don't suppose," he said, "that if I passed out right here, you'd be likely to carry me home?"

Snape's eyes had narrowed, and he raised a black-gloved hand. "What," he said coolly, "is that?"

Draco looked where Snape was pointing, and felt a shock like a punch at his heart - the right sleeve of his shirt, where his cloak fell away from it, glittered with threads of silver that seemed to glow in the moonlight. Blood. He pulled his cloak closed quickly but it was too late; Snape had seen.

"Professor..." Draco began.

"Let me see your arm," Snape said.

Draco didn't move. "It's not what it -"

"Let me see your arm, Mister Malfoy!" Snape barked, and Draco jumped. "We may not be at Hogwarts, but I can still take points from your House!"

This seemed monstrously unfair to Draco, who gaped. "But it's Christmas holidays!"

"Yes," Snape concurred. "And my Christmas gift to you will be that I will not immediately take points, but will instead give you a second chance to show me your arm." He tapped a booted foot on the snow. "I'm waiting."

With a rebellious glare, Draco stepped forward and threw his cloak back over his left shoulder. He held his arm out towards the Potion Master, who took hold of it - much more gently than his fierce expression might lead one to believe he would - and peeled back the sleeve of Draco's sweater. His immediate sharp intake of breath was loudly audible in the still air. Reluctantly, Draco glanced down and saw what Snape was looking at : a long, shallow gash ran along his forearm where he had thrown up his arm to shield his face. The gash itself didn't look serious; what had caused

Snape to gasp was that the blood leaking from the wound was dark red-silver, the color of mercury seen through scarlet glass.

"What is this?" Snape demanded. "Is this the first you've seen of this? You don't seem surprised."

Draco shrugged. "I don't know. It's nothing."

"I find it very unlikely that it is nothing." Snape dropped Draco's arm, took hold of his shoulder, and steered him forcibly back towards the Inn. Draco stumbled slightly on the uneven snow but Snape didn't slow his rapid pace until they reached the nearest lantern, where he paused, turned, took hold of Draco's shoulders, and thrust him under the bright pool of light cast by the lantern. Draco blinked in the sudden bright light and tried to twist away, but Snape held him fast, his coal-black eyes studying Draco's face with an unblinking intensity. "How long has this been going on?" he demanded finally.

Draco tried to hold his professor's gaze, and failed. "How long has what been going on? The blood thing? Because - I can explain that."

"Really?" Snape cocked an eyebrow. "Do go ahead."

Draco fidgeted. "I, er...."

"Yes? Overdosed on Jelly Glow Worms? Got sozzled and ate a pack of fairy lights? Tried to practice on of those charms on yourself that assures you'll light up a room with your smile, but got one of the incantations dreadfully wrong?"

"Well, if you're just going to be sarcastic..."

"Explain yourself, Mister Malfoy, and truthfully. It is cold, and I would like to go back inside."

"Well, so would I," Draco muttered. "Look, I don't know what it is. I'm meant to see a mediwizard, and I will, it's just..."

"Then you told Madam Pomfrey about this?"

"Sort of."

"What do you mean sort of?"

"I mean, I told her, sort of, in that way where I didn't actually."

"I rather thought so." Snape released his hold on Draco's shoulders, and out of nowhere, it seemed, produced a white handkerchief. He handed it to Draco. "Bind this around your cut," he instructed. "And then tell me how long this has been going on."

"How long what's been going on?" Draco demanded, doing as instructed. "The funny-looking blood thing? I don't honestly know. A few weeks maybe. It's not serious -"

"The hell it isn't serious. You're ill. You know that. I'd say you look like you're suffering the effects of a serious Dark curse or hex -"

"I haven't been hexed."

"Can you be sure of that?" Snape demanded.

Draco nodded. "I'm sure." He suddenly felt very tired. "It's not a curse or a hex - or if it is one, it's not one that I've been able to detect, and you know I'm not ignorant where Dark magic is concerned. I don't know what it is."

"Well, you look like death." Snape spoke bluntly. "I shall speak to Sirius Black immediately."

"No!" Draco bolted upright in alarm. "No - don't do that. Not Sirius."

"It is out of your hands, Draco. And Black is your guardian. Were we at school, I would speak to Dumbledore -"

"The wedding is the day after tomorrow," Draco said desperately. "Guests start arriving tomorrow for the rehearsal dinner. Can't it wait two days?"

"I cannot help but feel that with some unknown magic affecting your health, it would be irresponsible of me not to -"

"Please," Draco said. "I'm not that sick, I'm not dying right now. It would ruin the wedding - my mother would panic - and for what? For me to find

out that there's something terribly wrong with me a few days earlier? I already know that. Thanks but no thanks."

Snape looked hesitant. "Does anyone else know about this? Does Potter?"

"Harry? He knows a little. Hermione knows. She's looking into it."

"Oh, indeed," Snape said acidly. "You're well taken care of then, aren't you?"

"Please," Draco said again. He could think of no elegant argument, and no grounds on which he could logically appeal to Snape. Snape was probably right; Sirius should know. It was just that Draco hated the idea. Once everyone knew, it would become real. Something with which he would have to cope. And there would be mediwizards and infirmaries and people panicking and none of it would help - of that he was sure - and he wouldn't be any use to Harry after that. "Isn't there anything..."

"Very well," Snape said, unexpectedly.

Draco blinked at him. "Pardon?"

"I said very well. We will wait until after the wedding. It will give me time..." Snape removed the handkerchief from Draco's arm, folded it, and slipped it into his pocket. Draco watched with wide eyes. "It will give me a chance to run some tests on your blood. I'm hardly a mediwizard, but I can certainly detect if a potion has been used on you."

There was a long pause. "Thanks," Draco said finally.

Snape's coal-black eyes glittered. "Do not thank me. It is unnecessary. I will return to my laboratory and run some tests on the blood. It will give me an excuse to miss the rehearsal dinner."

Draco found himself almost smiling. "Glad I could help out."

"I do not enjoy parties," Snape ruminated. "Unless, of course, there is karaoke."

"Right," Draco said tactfully.

"In any case, you should return to the house. You should not be out in the cold when you are ill. Shall I Apparate you back?"

Draco shook his head. "I'll take a carriage. It's fine. Thanks again."

For a moment, Snape seemed to hesitate, and Draco had the thought that Snape might pat him on the shoulder - but the moment passed, and the thought with it. Snape released his hold on Draco's arm, nodded briefly, and Apparated away, leaving Draco standing in the snow under the lantern, lost in thought.

Harry had recovered enough by the time they reached the Manor to make it up the stairs to his bedroom without any assistance. He left Sirius and Lupin looking half-worried, half-amused in the entry hall, staggered up the steps, found the door to his bedroom, yanked it open, and half-collapsed inside.

Someone had lit the fire in the grate and the candles bracketed on the walls. Usually this sort of thing bothered Harry, who liked to do things himself, but now he was happy not to have to fumble for a light. Dizzy and swaying on his feet, he stripped down to his boxers, folded his clothes and left them in a neat pile outside the door for the laundry elves, and crawled between the sheets on his bed.

He had thought he would drop off instantly, and he would have, if only the bed would have stopped spinning. He could feel it rotating under him, the world tilting slightly. The buoyant happiness of the Cheering Charm was fading, replaced by a whirling pale-gold dizziness. It felt a little like flying, if one could fly lying down.

Harry would have expected it to fade as he sank towards sleep, but it did not. Instead, it intensified. Eyes closed, he saw again the vast and inky winter sky above him, the shards of stars, the broken clouds; he felt the icy wind in his hair, tearing at him, heard his own voice cry out as he fell. *I cannot die, he had thought, tumbling through the air, I cannot die, because I have not yet done what I must do. Therefore I must be invulnerable.* And if he was invulnerable, surely Draco was also immune to harm, because it was impossible that one of them might cease to exist

and the other one would still continue. Draco's anger had confused him for this reason. Didn't he understand?

And Harry had not died. Here he was, and he felt better than he had in months and months. He both seemed to have left his body and to be acutely aware of every molecule. The soft rasp of the wool blankets against his skin as he turned over; the loud crackle of the fire popping in the grate, the heat in the room pressing down on him, pressing down, as if a heavy weight had settled on top of him. It was all part of the same dream of ice and fever.

Something brushed against his face. Eyes still shut, he turned his head aside, but the light touch on his face remained. He raised his hand to brush it away, but stopped: it felt pleasant. Where he had been too hot, he felt cool fingers brush across his skin - and they were fingers, he realized that - and the same light cool touch at his temples and at his throat and in his hair. Someone was brushing his hair back, softly. Only one person had ever done that for him. Hermione, he thought, and then, I'm having a dream. I don't want to wake up.

He kept his eyes shut, firmly. He was dreaming, of that he was positive. He had dreamed of her several times since he had come to the Manor again. Each time he woke up against his will, miserable at leaving the dream world behind. This, though, this felt realer than anything he'd ever dreamed. He felt the light touch of hands on his face again, and then a shadow moved beyond his eyelids, and he felt lips against his own lips, cool and smooth. His breath caught in his throat; he was suddenly dizzy, so dizzy he felt as if he were tumbling off the edge of the world. He fell through a radiating cool darkness; he felt pleasure, and the pleasure was sickening; he felt pain, and welcomed the pain. He hurt, he burned, he froze and shivered; he *felt* - and he had not felt in a long, long time. This was what he had been reaching for that night in the alley with Hermione; this was what he could not bring himself to tell her he wanted, because she would hate him for it. But now he was dreaming, and he could have this from her in dreams; she would forgive him for that; she would never know.

"Harry," she said. He opened his eyes; he could see only crazily swinging shadows. Her hair fell down around them both like a tent. She was a genie in a bottle: a dream born out of loneliness and alcohol. It was a dream,

and he knew it was a dream, but he did not want to leave the dream, and could not have if he had wanted to. Lassitude like nothing he'd ever experienced had invaded his body; his blood had been replaced by slowly flowing golden syrup. It burned in his veins. "Keep your eyes open," she said, and her voice was as sweet as poisoned candy. "Look at me."

He tried to, and maybe he did. He would never know, later, if he had. A darkness as black as her hair came rolling down over him; he fought it for a moment, but the current swept him away and he remembered nothing else after that.

Draco woke early the next morning after passing a restless night to find the rest of his Christmas present from Sirius in a small envelope next to the bed. It was the instruction manual for a brand-new Cloudburst broom. "Here's the rest of your bloody present," said the note attached. "Hint: it doesn't fly."

"That's what you think," Draco announced rebelliously, and proceeded to make a paper airplane out of the front cover.

He abandoned this amusing pastime when an eagle owl bearing a rolled letter tapped on the window with its beak. He threw the window open, letting in great bursts of cold air, and took the parchment from the bird. Propping his elbows on the windowsill, he read aloud to himself:

Draco,

Albus asked me to send along a word of reassurance as he was afraid you might be worrying. I say worry is good for a growing boy. However, he wanted me to let you know that all the plans are in place for tomorrow and we have everything under control. The Constant Vigilance Synchronized Auror Auto Response Team will be at your disposal in case of any unexpected or unwanted guests who make it past our wards system. Enjoy today, try not to worry about tomorrow. I look forward to the wedding itself and will be sure to wear my festive leg.

Yours,

Alastor Moody.

"Mad as a brush," Draco announced, and tossed the crumpled-up parchment onto his bed. Still, he did feel somewhat reassured although a small knot of nervousness did form in his stomach when he thought about the wedding. It was likely to be somewhat socially awkward, and on top of that...

The sound of wheels on snow interrupted his thoughts. He glanced down to see a carriage pull up at the base of the enormous stone staircase that fronted the Manor. It was one of the hired carriages from the village that had brought them to the Cold Christmas Inn the night before, and would be bringing all the guests from Malfoy Park to the house today. The carriages were black, with the Malfoy Park emblem on them - a wand crossed with a dagger on a silver field. Draco had already watched several guests arrive, including the Parkinsons and the Zabini. Blaise had not been with her parents; Draco suspected she didn't think they should see each other, which, it seemed to him, was probably the one opinion they had ever held in common.

The carriage pulled to a halt and the doors opened. The occupants began to pile out. A witch and a wizard in dark blue cloaks with the hoods pulled up exited first, then a tall wizard whose hood was down, his red hair bright and unmistakable in the bright winter sunshine. Charlie Weasley. He turned and held out a hand to help his sister down next: Draco couldn't see her clearly, just her familiar yellow cloak and the scarlet curls like a river of bright fire down her back.

And after her, moving slowly and reluctantly, came Ron.

Draco looked down at him for a moment, then pulled back from the window and stood for a moment, lost in thought. He'd wondered if Weasley would actually show up; had suspected he would, but had not been entirely sure. Now that he was here, Draco found his tiredness falling away and a faint anticipatory nervousness taking its place.

Make them sorry, Harry had said.

Draco smiled. Then he went to the wardrobe and began to get dressed.

It was so dark when Harry finally opened his eyes the next day that he thought it was still the middle of the night. It was a moment before he realized that the curtains had been drawn firmly closed around his bed. He blinked. How odd, he thought. I never do that. One of the house elves must have come in and closed them.

He sat up slowly, wincing, and fumbled for his glasses. He slid them on, his head pounding. He felt decidedly peculiar. And he was fairly sure that he'd had a most unusual dream...

"Hey there, tiger," said a voice at his elbow.

Harry whipped around so quickly that later he'd be surprised that he hadn't dislocated anything. He knew, somehow, what he'd see before he even turned - and yet it hardly lessened the shock: black hair tumbling down over white shoulders, big gray eyes full of mischief, and a sheet wrapped around an obviously naked body.

Rhysenn.

Harry tried to say something, but all that came out was a whistling noise like a teakettle on the boil.

Her smile widened. "Speechless, are you?" she said. "I'm not surprised, after last night. I'd be shocked if you were in any shape to talk at all."

That freed his voice. "What - what - what -" he stammered. "What are you doing here? How did you get into my bedroom? Where are your clothes?"

She waved a breezy hand. "Probably where you threw them, kitten."

Harry goggled speechlessly. Surely this was a horrible nightmare. Surely he would wake up soon. "But," he began. "But I was dreaming."

"Tsk ts." She pursed her lips. "Really, now. Do I look like a dream to you? Do these?" And she held out her thin white arms. There were bruises all up and down them: the marks of fingers. "I had no idea you'd be so forceful. I mean, I knew you were something special. The Boy Who Lived -"

"Shut up!" Harry hissed, and covered his face with his hands. "Just shut up - I wouldn't. I couldn't have."

"Oh, but you would and you could." Her voice hardened, although she still sounded amused. "How upsetting that you don't remember. Last night was certainly one of the most unique nights of my life. Things happened to me last night that - well, that have never happened to me before."

Harry made a gurgling sound, low in his throat. "I don't believe this," he whispered. "I don't believe it. I have a girlfriend."

Rhysenn looked interested. "I thought you broke up?"

"I - no - but - where do you get off knowing so much about my personal life?"

She shrugged, and the sheet slipped down. Harry averted his eyes. "I get the paper," she said. "Everyone knows you're broken up. Except you, apparently."

"We're just - we're taking a break."

"Well, darling, in that case, next time you can bring her."

"Next time? There isn't going to be a next time! There wasn't a this time!"

The left corner of her mouth twitched. "Can you say that for sure?"

Harry was silent.

Rhysenn leaned forward. "You said her name last night," she said softly, and reached out her hand to touch his face; Harry jerked away. "You said Hermione. But you only said it once."

Harry shrank away from her even farther, or tried to. But he found he couldn't move. Something about her, despite his horror and feeling of nausea, still compelled him; her gaze mesmerized him like a cobra's gaze. It wasn't that she was beautiful; she was, but in a strange, removed, adult way that unsettled him more than anything else. And her eyes, those Malfoy eyes, gray as winter seas, they frightened him. And yet he still found he could not pull away from her as she reached her hand out, brushed the backs of her long fingers against his cheek, and he felt it like the pain of biting down on a broken tooth, all his nerve-ending screaming at once -

He would probably have tumbled off the bed had there not been a knock on the bedroom door at precisely that moment. Harry snapped out of his befuddled state instantly, and stared in horror.

Rhysenn sighed and looked vexed. "Are you going to get the door, or should I?"

"Mister Potter," said a voice at the door, quite loud and sepulchral. One of the Manor's ghost servants, most likely. "Mister Black has sent me to wake you up. It is noon, sir."

"Go away!" Harry shouted desperately in response. "I'm - I'm not here!"

Rhysenn snorted. "Oh, well done."

The knock sounded again, more powerfully this time. "Mister Potter, I am afraid Mister Black impressed upon me the need to awaken you without delay."

"Aaaaaaargh." With a half-wail of despair, Harry got to his feet, wrapping a sheet around himself, and staggered to the door. He opened it a bare crack to see Anton, the ghost butler, hovering just in front of him, looking severe. "Mister Potter," he said. "Mister Black also instructed me to bring you your clothes for the par--"

"Oh, yes, thank you, I'll take those," Harry stammered, seized the pile of clothes from the ghost, and hurled them to the floor behind him. "Thank you, Anton, now if there's nothing else -"

"Oh, but there is," the butler said.

Harry hesitated miserably. "What?"

"Mister Malfoy also required me to pass along a message for him. I believe it was, 'Get downstairs now, you big oversleeping git.'"

"That's great," Harry said, and began to push the door closed again.

"Mister Potter! A moment, please. There is one more thing," said the butler, and held out a half-transparent hand. Shimmering in the middle of the ghost's palm was a familiar circle of scarlet glass, shot through with

gold and black. Harry stared at his runic band, his mind racing. It was impossible - he wore it always - he'd been wearing it last night on his belt - he remembered unbuckling the belt and - and *leaving his clothes out for the house-elves to take away*. "The laundry elves asked me to return this to you, sir."

"Thank you," Harry replied mechanically. "Thank you, Anton," and he reached to take the runic band from the ghost. Then he shut the door, and turned slowly to face the girl sitting in his bed.

Only, of course, she had vanished.

Hermione was not in good spirits when she arrived at the library at noon. She had slept badly the night before - very badly. Her room at the Leaky Cauldron had seemed too hot, and she'd been plagued with awful nightmares of a weight pressing down on her, cutting off her breath. She'd awoken at dawn with the sound of Pansy's voice shouting "Mudblood!" at her ringing in her ears and had been unable to get back to sleep. All in all, a bad evening.

She had to wait in a longish line before she reached the bookworms. She passed the time by fretting about the upcoming party. The thought of seeing Harry was like a black wall of dread rising up in front of her; he would mope around the party looking depressed and handsome and she would want to drown him in a bowl of fruit punch. Or, even worse, he would have gotten over her completely and would be in the peak of high spirits. Draco would have set him up with some fabulously sexy veela cousin who would be draped all over his lap, feeding him peeled grapes with a pair of solid gold tongs. And she would still want to drown him in a bowl of fruit punch.

"Grapes," she said in a deathly voice to the bookworm when she reached the head of the line. "Who eats peeled grapes? How lazy is that?"

The bookworm waved its antennae in a worried manner. Hermione sighed. "Never mind," she said. "I'm Hermione Granger. Reference number #97356. You were cross-referencing for me...?"

The worm scurried away and returned with a trolley trundling along behind it, piled with several books. Hermione took them and retreated to her now-familiar corner of the library under the portrait of Rowena Ravenclaw.

Most of the books were ones she had already looked at. Several seemed to be general weaponry guides. She began flipping through them dispiritedly. There were chapters on Living Blades, pages on elf-arrows that never ran out or missed their targets, knives that cut stone, shillelaghs and maces and daggers and

Hermione paused, and flipped back several pages to a full-page illustration of a dagger. It had a unicorn bone handle and a sturdy silver blade, and the box of text underneath it was slightly blurred with age:

The Angurvadel Blade. Only one known to exist, on display in the Stonehenge Museum of Wizardry. The exact nature of the dagger is not known, but it produces cuts that never heal. When touched by a witch or wizard who is bound by a Dark Oath, they glow phosphorescent blue.

Hermione stared at the words, her mind whirling. A Dark Oath? But only a true necromancer could bind anyone by a Dark Oath - they were horrible dark magic, deadly and impervious - but she remembered the blade of the knife turning blue as Ron pushed it aside and her stomach churned. *Ron!* she thought. She bolted to her feet, almost knocking over her chair, and began to cram her books haphazardly back into her bag.

Harry gazed bleakly at his reflection in the mirror. He actually looked better than he felt. Although, he suspected, if he'd looked like he felt he would have been gazing at the reflection of a severed head on a pole.

Instead, he looked all right. Mostly due to the clothes he was wearing, which were expensive and very well cut. They took away from the fact that he was deadly pale, with black shadows under his eyes. He began to see why Draco was so attached to clothes. They made you feel that at least you looked all right, even if you felt like hell.

There's something wrong with me, he thought, looking glumly at himself in the mirror. Rhysenn had never affected Draco the way she affected

him. Obviously there was some terrible flaw that he possessed that other people did not. Either that, or he was a sex fiend. Some kind of demented sex fiend that nobody else would ever want to be around. Hermione - she would never want to touch him or be anywhere near him again. Sirius would be horrified. So would Narcissa. They wouldn't let him stay in the house anymore; he'd have to move out and live in the toolshed at the bottom of the garden. Draco would go off and find other friends, friends who weren't depressed all the time, friends who didn't sleep with sex demons.

Then again, maybe not. He realized that Draco would find his current train of thought infinitely amusing. *You, a sex fiend?* he'd smirk. *Potter, you couldn't possibly be an anything fiend. I mean, just look at you.* Or, Oh, good, congratulations, you've found something else to beat yourself up about. It's a red-letter day! Let's make the most of it!

Harry looked down at his hands; they had, for the moment, stopped shaking. Yes, he definitely needed to talk to Draco. He had no idea how he'd face the party otherwise. Thank God Hermione had said she wouldn't be there; she was coming to the wedding proper, but not the luncheon today. He couldn't possibly face her. It was nearly killing him just to think about it.

He turned away from his white-faced reflection in the mirror, and caught sight of the bed with its rumpled covers. Nausea rose in his throat. He grabbed for his cloak and hurried out the door.

"Do I look all right?" Ginny asked Ron for the third time as they ascended the steps of Malfoy Manor. She'd forgotten what a forbidding building it was. A pile of steel-gray stone, necklaced with dozens of balconies, crowned with spires and turrets, fronted by a huge double staircase the size of the Burrow itself. And there were gardens around the Manor; there had not been the last time she had been there. They were filled with roses, scarlet roses, which showed up like blood against the snow. The charms that kept them alive in this weather must have been very expensive ones.

Ron, who had already told his sister she looked beautiful twice, sighed a martyred sigh. "I keep telling you that you look pretty," he said. "Is that

not what you want to hear? Fine. You look horrible. Just looking at you makes me sick."

Ginny glared at him. "I hate you."

"Yeah," Ron said. "I get that a lot."

Ginny didn't say anything to that; she just speeded up her pace slightly in hopes of catching up with her parents. Both she and Ron had been lagging behind; Ron out of obvious reluctance, Ginny out of nerves. After all, she'd been planning for this day for several weeks now.

She and Ron went through the double doors to the entrance hall just after Fred and George; Ginny looked around, pleased and amazed as always by the beauty of the Manor. It was a cold beauty, but it was still beautiful. The black-and-white parquet floor shone, and the walls were strung with thousands of diamond-like crystal globes, each of which flickered with a single pale flame.

Sirius was there, greeting people; Narcissa, he said, was somewhere inside the main hall, entertaining guests. Ginny barely heard her parents exchanging small talk with Sirius, who looked extremely handsome in a black suit. "I believe Draco is also in the Hall, and we're still waiting for Harry to come down...out a bit too late last night," he was saying, and the Weasleys laughed.

Ginny couldn't stand it another moment; she was too impatient. Refusing the house-elves' offer to take her cloak, she excused herself and went into the Hall; the only person who even seemed to notice that she was leaving was Ron, who muttered that he would catch up with her in a moment.

"Oh, no you won't," she murmured under her breath.

The room that Malfoys had for years called the Greater Hall was already half-filled with guests: women in casually pretty dresses, men in suits and robes. Ginny recognized Lupin, Pansy Parkinson in a hideous green dress, and a few other faces in the crowd. She cut diagonally across the room, heading for a small door on the west side of the hall, and ducked through it quickly.

She was in a stairwell, one she remembered well. A narrow staircase led upward, and there were bracketed torches on the walls on either side of a square mirror. Ginny glanced into it, seeing her own face very pale between her yellow cloak and her curling red hair. The gold chain around her throat gleamed brightly. She reached a hand up to draw it out from under her dress -

"Ginny, what are you doing back here?"

She turned. It was Harry, standing on the lowest step of the staircase. He wore a dark shirt that made his skin look very pale, and black trousers. In the dim light, she could not clearly see his face, but she thought he was frowning.

"Are you lost?" he asked.

She let the gold chain drop. "No. I was just - I was -"

"Are you looking for Draco? Because I don't know where he is."

Ginny almost smiled. "That's very helpful, Harry. But no, I wasn't looking for Draco. I was just - going to fix my hair. The wind ruined it."

Harry blinked. "It looks fine to me. You look pretty."

"Thanks." Ginny looked at him, oddly touched. He looked somehow distracted and a little lost, as he had looked lost seven years ago standing on the platform at King's Cross Station, and that lostness seemed to cling to him even now and forever would. Women would always fall all over Harry, Ginny thought, he was somehow vulnerable without ever being weak, attractive without seeming to know it. One never asked oneself if he was handsome because his face was so familiar and so arresting in its detail: the smoky-hollowed green eyes, the jet blades of lashes, the sharp fine bones. Even now, when he looked so unhappy, his melancholy seemed to suit him. "Are you all right, Harry?"

"Oh. Yes." He shook himself a little, like a dog shaking off water. "Just tired. I had a late night."

"I know, Sirius told us."

"Us?"

"Yes," Ginny said slowly. "We're all here. And Harry - Ron's here as well."

Harry's expression didn't change; only the shadows under his eyes darkened. "I had rather thought he wouldn't come."

"Well, he did. It's for the best, Harry, really -"

"Hell," Harry said flatly. He took his hands and shoved them in his pockets. "Now I really wish I could find Draco."

"Can't you..." She tapped the side of her head. "You know. Find him?"

Harry shook his head. "He seems to be blocked at the moment. Busy probably." He shrugged, and tried to smile; it wasn't very successful. "I guess I'd better head in there and face the music."

"It'll be fine. Really."

He squared his shoulders. "I hope so."

She watched him as he went past her and through the door, closing it quietly behind him. Her heart went out to him. It went out to her brother as well, and to Hermione. And then there was Draco. It wasn't sympathy she felt for him, exactly. It was fear. She was afraid for him. She had been for a while now.

Her hand went back to the chain at her throat. She gripped it once, tightly. Then she began to climb the stairs.

Draco was lurking.

He'd never thought of himself as much of a lurker - he liked the spotlight too much - but there was no other word for it; he was lurking. In a disused hallway, no less, lit only by a single torch. He was waiting for Pansy Parkinson.

He was tired. His head hurt. He'd slept poorly the night before, and he suspected his hair looked bad. But time, tide and revenge waited for no

man, and he'd stood on an upper balcony until he'd seen Pansy in her green dress walk up the Manor stairs with her parents. Then he'd headed back inside.

He needed, he'd realized immediately, to detach her from her parents. So he'd sent a house-elf along with a message for Pansy that an urgent note was waiting for her in the Green Room. The house-elf had instructions to lead her to this hallway, and then leave her there. Draco wasn't fond of house-elves - they made him nervous - but sometimes their unquestioning obedience had its advantages.

It seemed like an hour, although was probably more like half of one, before he heard the sound of someone walking towards him along the corridor. The someone was walking fast, and was obviously wearing high heels. Draco smiled to himself. It was time. He waited until she was almost upon him, then stepped out of the shadows and swung around to face her.

It was as rewarding as he could have hoped; she shrieked, and almost staggered backward.

"Hello, Pansy darling," he said. "Nice to see you here."

"Draco!" Pansy gasped, her hand ostentatiously over her heart. "Scaring me like that! I mean, really." She lowered her hand, glaring. "Now, If you couldn't tell, I was on my way somewhere -"

"To get an urgent message. I know." The urge to twirl his moustache was almost overwhelming; luckily, Draco didn't have a moustache. "Only the message doesn't exist. I made it up. I wanted to get you alone so I could talk to you."

"You what?" Pansy was the picture of outraged respectability. "Do you mind? I was busy at the party and I should get back."

"You didn't look all that busy to me," Draco interrupted. He spoke softly, but there was a menace in his tone that made Pansy look up sharply. He began to circle slowly around her and could feel her resisting the urge to turn around and look at him. "Although I've heard you've been very busy lately."

Pansy's irritable expression wavered. "What do you mean by that?"

"I think you know." Draco was looming over her now. Her curls trembled just above the round collar of her ill-fitting green dress. "You know, Pansy, the point of social climbing is to make your way up the social ladder. Not slither down it. Although I've heard you're talented in that area, too."

"In what area?"

He leaned close, so that his whisper stirred her hair. "Going down," he said.

It took Pansy a moment to react to Draco's appalling remark. Then she jerked, and whirled around. "That's disgusting. *You're* disgusting. I don't know why you'd say a thing like that, but -"

"Don't you?" His voice was suddenly sharp, and she winced as if he had quite literally cut at her. He could see the fear in her dark eyes. "Well, maybe I can jolt your memory with a little recitation session. You don't mind if I read out loud, do you?" He cleared his throat ostentatiously, and drew a folded parchment from his pocket. "This is a little something I like to call 'Sonnets from the Tragically Deluded.' I think you'll like it." He snapped the parchment open with a flick of the wrist and read out loud:

Hermione -

I'm writing this in Potions class. I'm sitting here looking at you from across the room, but you can't see me. You're looking straight ahead. I can see your hand moving over your parchment as you take notes. Maybe you're writing to me, as I'm writing to you.

I'm not good at this. This letter writing business. Harry would be better. Hell, Malfoy would be better at it. But I'm writing you because I have to. Because it hurts to be this far away from you, especially after -"

"Stop it," Pansy whispered. "Stop."

"But why? It's catchy. You can dance to it." Draco smiled at her. She didn't seem to notice. "*Don't worry,*" he continued, reading from the letter's

end, "*I will leave this for you in our usual hiding place. I'm sorry about what I said last night - about us coming clean and telling everyone. You were right. And even if you weren't, it doesn't matter. We're so beyond all the arguing we used to do - when I see the way you look at me, I feel -*"

"Stop it!" Pansy shrieked. "Stop it, stop it, stop it!" And Draco knew he had hit pay dirt. Her voice was raw and uncontrolled, her eyes rounded into grotesquely huge ovals. "Give me that - give it to me -"

She wrenched the note out of his grasp and tore it into shreds, which she scattered over the floor with a triumphant air.

Draco laughed. "There's thirty more where that came from. Weasley seems to have been an astonishingly dedicated correspondent."

"How -" She was staring at him. "How did you - my trunk - it's impossible -"

"Sometimes the simplest solutions are the best ones."

"Does he know? Does Potter know?"

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Are you more afraid of him than you are of me?" he inquired sweetly. "You shouldn't be."

She looked dazed. "What are you going to do?"

"Before or after I go to your parents and tell them everything about what you've been up to lately?"

Surprisingly, some of the color came back to her face. "Maybe you should try telling them something they *don't* know."

It was his turn to stare. "Don't tell me you confessed to them in a fit of tormented guilt."

"It was their *idea*, Draco," Pansy said flatly, having recovered some of her self-possession. "My father's the one who developed the glamour charms - where did you think I got them, anyway? They're prototypes - brand new."

"And you expect me to believe they'd think it was a good idea to whore out their only daughter to a Weasley?" Draco struggled to put the disgust he was feeling into words. "I don't-" He paused, and fell silent. He could almost hear the cogs buzzing and whirring inside his head as things fell into place. "No. They wouldn't do that. They'd support you disguising yourself as Hermione, to get information, to spy - but sleeping with him, that was *your* idea. Either you hate him that much, or - but no, I don't think you hate him. You fell in love with him, didn't you? With a Gryffindor. Oh, that must have hurt your pride."

Pansy's head snapped back. Her eyes were very bright. "It was..."

"It was what?"

His tone was cruel, but cruelty seemed to be what she was expecting. She spoke softly, "It was the way he looked at me," she whispered. "Nobody's ever looked at me like that."

"It wasn't you he was looking at. It was never *you*."

"And you don't know what that's like, I suppose?" Her tone was suddenly spiked with venom. "Being loved even for something you aren't - it feels real, doesn't it, Draco?"

Her eyes were very bright. And for a moment, he was speechless. He had no idea how much she knew, and how much of what she had said was a wild jab in the dark, but uncontrollably the memory of Hermione putting her arms around him in the wardrobe rose up in his mind, of her voice calling him Harry. And Harry's voice earlier that day, *You've done a good thing, Malfoy*. And that moment, looking back at Harry, and wondering, *What does he see when he looks at me? Not me. Somebody else. Somebody better.*

And for just that moment, a arrow-thrust of sympathy for Pansy went through him, and he felt pity for her, and then Harry's voice recollected itself to him, telling him to make her pay. Because, of course, he possessed reserves of cruelty that Harry didn't. Didn't he?

"They don't know who you really are," Pansy said, breaking his reverie. He noted with a disconnected interest that her voice was very peculiar: both husky and squeaky at the same time. "And I'm beginning to think

you don't, either. Blaise always said differently - she always said you were a true Slytherin, in your heart. *I don't believe that. I think you turned on us the first chance you got. Well, you picked the losing side, Draco Malfoy. I know things you don't - we all do - none of us trust you anymore, we keep you out of our plans. But that doesn't mean we don't have plans -*

"Pansy?" Draco interrupted.

She blinked, cut off in the middle of her tirade. "What?"

"Shut up," he said.

She compressed her lips into a thin line. "Fine. Stick your head in the sand. But you'll think about what I said, later - I know you will -"

"Pansy," Draco remarked kindly. "I didn't think about what you said while you were saying it. Now come on." He took hold of her arm, and she didn't pull away - she seemed to have gone beyond panic, into a cold, trapped fury. "We're going back to the party."



Several wrong turns had led Ginny nearly to the wine cellars, and it was only with the assistance of a passing ghost butler that she managed to find her way back towards the front of the house. Finally she found herself in a long wood-paneled hallway that ran the length of the house's façade; just outside the window she could see the stone balcony that looked out over the gardens. Right now it was piled with snow, the diamond-paned windows fastened shut against the cold.

Just down the hall was the doorway she remembered: when she'd been at the Manor before, they'd spent most of their time in this room. She went to the door and pushed it open and stepped through it into the library.

It looked just the same. The same blue and green glass in the windows; the same high shelves full of books. It was quiet in here, so quiet that she could hear the beat of her own heart over the soft ticking of the gold clock on the north wall.

Ginny took a deep breath. Then she reached into the neck of her dress and drew out her Time-Turner on its thin gold chain.

Harry badly wanted a glass of wine, but had forbidden himself to have one. After the events of the previous night, he never wanted to drink again. What he really wanted, in his heart of hearts, was to go back to bed and never get up. Failing that, he wanted Draco to talk to. But Draco seemed to be missing - he was nowhere in the Greater Hall and when Harry reached to try to find his mind, he felt only a faint buzz in the distance like an interrupted radio signal. Draco was obviously still busy.

"Oh, Harry, lovely to see you - don't you look handsome." It was Mrs. Weasley, bending to kiss his cheek, smoothing down his hair, admiring his new clothes. Harry made small talk with her without really looking at her - she looked too much like Ron, it was painful. Ron himself was hanging back against the far wall with the rest of his brothers. Harry could see him in the mirror that hung over the long table covered with plates of food. He could also see himself, Mrs. Weasley tilting her head back to look up at him - he remembered when she had had to bend down to talk to him. He

could also see the scarlet gleam of the runic band at his waist. Why had he been stupid enough to take it off?

"Although all black seems a little depressing for a wedding," Mrs. Weasley added. This time Harry looked at her, and wondered suddenly what she knew - although he knew Ron well enough to be certain Ron wouldn't have told his parents anything. He was about to reply when he saw a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye, and in the mirror saw the double doors at the far end of the hall open and Draco come through them. He wasn't alone either; he was holding Pansy Parkinson by the elbow. Maybe he'd promised to escort her for some reason?

"Excuse me," Harry said to Mrs. Weasley. "I have to - uh - I have to - I have to go over there," and he beat a hasty retreat, leaving her looking after him in surprise.

Draco was standing just inside the door with Pansy, his eyes roving over the room. As Harry drew closer to them, he noticed that Draco seemed to be less steering Pansy by the arm than gripping her tightly against her will. She was pulling away, a look of obvious distress on her pale, fox-like little face. As Harry approached, Draco looked up and his face cleared. "Ah, Potter - glad you're here."

"Where have you *been*?" Harry asked under his breath, aware that a significant portion of the room's occupants were looking at them.

Draco looked at him, obviously frazzled. "What?"

"Where have you been? I need to talk to you."

"I went spear-fishing in Alaska. Where do you think I've been? Anyway, Potter - I'm a bit busy here. Hang around for a minute, will you? You'll see what I mean." His eyes went past Harry, scanning the room. "The Weasleys get here yet?"

Pansy made a squeaking noise and redoubled her efforts to pull away. Harry blinked and pointed. "Yeah, they're over there - Malfoy, it's important."

"This is important too." Draco began to walk across the room, pulling Pansy with him. Harry fell into step beside him, feeling that something

very strange was going on. "Pansy here forgot to bring a wedding present. She's in big trouble."

"Oh, who cares about wedding presents?" Harry demanded.

Draco shot him a look. "You know, for someone so bright you can be a blinkered idiot much of the time." His eyes suddenly narrowed. "You look different, Potter - did you cut your hair or something?"

Harry made a strangled sound. Pansy glanced over at him. "You do look a bit different," she agreed.

Harry choked, and grabbed at Draco's sleeve. "Dammit - Malfoy, listen to me - I *have* to talk to you!"

"Harry, not now!" Draco hissed, stopping dead in his tracks. He still, amazingly, had hold of Pansy, who had ceased trying to get away and was staring at Harry with what looked like curiosity.

"Can't you see I need to talk to you?" Harry said desperately, abandoning all pretense.

"What I see is you doing a dead-on impression of an electric squirrel. Stop hopping up and down and just wait a second -"

"It can't wait -"

"Are you dying?"

Harry's eyes flew wide. "No."

"Then it can wait. WEASLEY!" Draco shouted unexpectedly, pitching his voice very loudly. Most of the room turned around and stared, and all the Weasleys, who were grouped by the punch bowl, turned as well. Draco's narrow mouth curled into a long smile, "Ron! Oi! Over here!"

Ron, arrested mid-motion with a glass of pumpkin juice halfway to his lips, stared. Draco reached out his free hand and made a beckoning motion. Ron's eyes went to Harry; Harry stared him down, challenging him to come near, to look away. With a nervous glance at his brothers,

Ron set his glass down on the table and began to make his way across the room towards Draco and his two companions.

Pansy, a stricken look on her face, began trying to get away again. Draco only held her tighter. Harry could see that his fingers were digging hard into her upper arms; it must have hurt her badly. Under other circumstances he might have been appalled at Draco's ruthlessness; now he was not. He was beginning to have an inkling of what was going on, and his heart started to beat faster against his ribs. *What did Draco think he was doing?*

The world seemed to narrow down to a single path of motion: Ron, walking towards them. He passed by Pansy's parents, who were close by and observing. Heads turned as he walked. Everyone was staring, with the half-embarrassed, half-fascinated expressions of people watching A Scene take place.

Ron stopped in front of Draco. Harry had not been this close to Ron in almost two weeks. He could see violet shadows under his friend's eyes. They stirred no compassion in him. His rage consumed any compassion he might have felt and left him speechless.

"What's this about, then," Ron said, softly, looking not at Harry but at Draco. "If you wanted my attention, Malfoy..."

"If I wanted your attention, I'd dress up like Hermione and try to shag you in the broom closet," Draco said with a smile like the edge of a knife.

Ron colored slightly, but didn't move. "Say whatever you want, Malfoy," he said. "But don't ruin this wedding. I'm asking you."

"It's not the wedding yet," Draco said, the same wicked brilliant smile never leaving his face. "It's the rehearsal dinner."

At that, Harry looked past his friend and saw that Sirius was coming towards them. Behind him, Lupin stood frozen. Everyone was still staring. He felt himself shrink under their gazes, knew Ron must be curdled with humiliation beside him, but Draco was at his best when everyone was watching. Draco alone among them looked as if he was enjoying himself.

"The rehearsal dinner," Draco went on smoothly, "is meant for family and close friends of the family. You, I think, are neither."

"That's not for you to say," Ron said. "I came for Harry's sake, not yours." His eyes went to Harry, and they were huge and almost black with entreaty, "Harry," he whispered. "Harry, I'm so sorry, I'm so so sorry --"

Harry felt each apologetic word like a knife point driven into his skin. "Don't," he whispered. "Don't, I don't want to hear it -"

"Harry -" Ron said.

"No!" Harry shouted. "Don't you know I -"

"Shut up, Potter! Just - shut up!" It was Pansy, speaking for the first time, her squeaky little voice trembling with emotion, and Harry knew - in that moment, he knew. She had started away from Draco, who still held her arm tightly from behind, and her eyes were on Ron's face. Harry had seen that look before. Hermione looking at him, Draco looking at her, Seamus looking at Ginny, the same look on his own face, caught in photographs or mirrors - "Leave him alone," Pansy cried. "Like you've never done anything wrong -"



She broke off, as if she realized she had said too much. Harry could see by the dawning look of horror on Ron's face that he, too, was beginning to understand. But it was Draco who acted. It was Draco who bent his head, and spoke into Pansy's ear. It was low enough that she didn't pull away, loud enough that they could all hear it.

"He never has done anything wrong, Pansy darling," he whispered, and his voice was velvet soft. "*But I have.*"

And he pushed her, suddenly and violently and hard, towards Ron. Who, being Ron, caught her instead of letting her fall. She stumbled and clutched at him, and Draco laughed.

"That's right, Weasley," he said. "Cop a decent grab, would you? See if you feel anything familiar? You should - whatever glamour spells she used, I'd think she'd still feel the same. And you ought to know that body pretty well - so many nights together in the prefects' room. You seem the type

for clumsy fumblings to me, but after all that time even you ought to have
_"

With a guttural little exclamation of horror, Ron pushed Pansy away, and wrapped his arms around himself; he was shaking. Draco made no move to recapture her and she made no move to run away, just threw her hands up over her face and burst into loud, spasmodic sobbing. Ron stared at her, turning rapidly green.

"Now you know," Draco said to Ron, and smiled.

Harry was conscious that there was movement all around them; Sirius hurrying towards them, the Parkinsons almost running to their crying daughter, the whole room bursting into whispers - but he saw, as if lit by a single spotlight, only the narrow circle that held himself and Ron, Pansy and Draco. Pansy weeping, Ron shocked and silent, and Draco - Draco looked like nothing on earth. He looked like drawings Harry had seen in his childhood of avenging angels. There was something inexorable about him and Harry knew he himself was the one who had set this in motion - he had asked Draco to make her pay, and pay she would. Somewhere in the back of Draco's eyes, he seemed to be asking Harry a question, *Is this what you wanted? Is this enough? Is this as you imagined it would be?*

And some part of Harry, some cruel undreamed-of part, whispered back to Draco that he should not stop.

The smile left Draco's face. He was still looking at Ron. "Now you know," he said again. "What you threw everything away for - for this, for her. For a girl you can't even stand. For a pack of stupid lies. For a fantasy that wasn't even worth having. I would have given everything to have what you had once, Weasley." Harry looked at Draco in surprise, but he wasn't lying - he meant it. "I would have given everything, and you threw it all away for nothing, and you'll never have it back. Nobody will. It's ruined now. One of the only truly good things I've ever seen in this rotten world, and you ruined it." Draco looked at Ron as if he loathed him; Harry wondered how much of it was acting. "Was it worth it, Weasley? Was she?"

It was worse than any insult he could have thrown at either of them. Ron went an agonized white, and his voice broke as he replied, still looking past Draco at Harry. "What do you think, Malfoy?" he whispered.

Draco was silent. His silence said everything he could have needed to say. Pansy's sobbing crescendoed to a shriek that could have shattered glass. Harry stared at her and stared at Ron and a sick feeling began to spread through his stomach. He raised his eyes and met Draco's gaze over Pansy's head, and he didn't know what he would have done or asked Draco to do after that and he never got a chance to know, because at that moment the double doors to the Hall opened and Lucius Malfoy came walking in.

"What do you mean they aren't working?" Hermione demanded, half-hysterical, of the harried-looking man behind the desk at the Leaky Cauldron. "How can they all not be working? I've tried three times to reach Malfoy Manor, and I can't! There must be something wrong with your fireplaces! Do something! Get a - a chimney sweep!"

The desk clerk looked amused. "One with an enormous broom, I suppose?"

"Don't you try to be clever with me!" Hermione shrieked, so forcefully that he quailed before her.

"Look, Miss," he said. "There's nothing wrong with our fireplaces here. There must be something wrong with the remote fireplaces at the Manor. Obviously, they're blocked. Someone in the Manor must be blocking all Floo connections."

"But why would they do that?"

The clerk shrugged. "I really couldn't tell you."

"Well, what can I do?" Hermione wailed. "I have to reach Ron or Draco, and they're both there, and it'll take forever to get an owl, they're all booked up taking Christmas presents!"

The clerk looked as if he obviously regarded this as Somebody Else's Problem. "Can't you Apparate wherever you're going?"

"No! I haven't got a license, and besides, there are anti-Apparition charms there."

"Well, why don't you fly then?"

"I haven't got a broomstick..." Hermione suddenly narrowed her eyes at him. "Have you got a broomstick?"

"Er," he said. "You want to borrow my broomstick?"

Hermione crossed her arms and glared at him. "The future of the wizarding world might depend on me getting to Malfoy Manor," she said.

His eyes widened. "Really?"

"Well, no," she admitted. "But I'm very worried about a friend of mine. Please let me borrow your broomstick? Please?"

The clerk appeared to waver.

"If you don't," she added, "I'll tell the manager you drill holes in the doors so you can watch people getting undressed in their rooms."

His eyes popped. "You wouldn't."

"I would."

He glared at her. "You must be a Slytherin," he said.

Hermione smiled. "I'm not," she said. "But thanks for saying so."

The clock continued to tick and Ginny stared at the tiny hourglass in her hand as the minutes went by.

It had not been easy getting her Time-Turner back. In fact, it had been very difficult; but, in the end, not as difficult as perhaps it should have been. If she had been the sort of person people paid attention to, it would have been impossible. But they ignored her, and so she could slip away.

And slip away she had, at the crucial moment. And it had gone unnoticed by everyone, even Draco, sharp-eyed Draco who saw everything. And she had put the Time-Turner back on its chain and kept it hidden and only

Seamus had asked about her new necklace, and he didn't know enough to be suspicious.

She had planned this. She had been planning it for weeks. So why was she so nervous? It wasn't as if she hadn't gone back in time before. *You've gone back hundreds of years*, she told herself. This is only five. What are you afraid of?

She shut her eyes, and slowly raised the hand with the hourglass in it. She heard the sound of a rushing wind and people shouting - *they're looking for me*, she thought in terror, although later she would realize that what she had heard was something quite different.

Quickly, she flipped the Time-Turner over, and the world disappeared.

"Greeting, everyone," said Lucius Malfoy. "How kind of you all to come to my homecoming party."

Someone cried out; a champagne glass dropped and shattered on the floor. Otherwise, the room was deathly silent. Harry would have expected himself to be more shocked, but instead he felt merely a weary sense of inevitability. Then again, he had known Lucius was alive. Everyone else must have thought they were looking at the ghost of a man dead for six months.

"Oh, my God," Pansy whispered, distracted from her weeping. Her eyes were huge. "Oh, my God, Draco - your *father* just walked in."

"Yes," Draco said, woodenly. "Yes, I had noticed that."

Harry wanted to lay a hand on Draco's shoulder but didn't dare. It seemed like the sort of thing that would be unwise to do in front of Lucius. Not that Lucius didn't know they were friends. But still. Harry felt as if his thoughts were being strained through several layers of cheesecloth. Perhaps it was the result of too many shocks, one after the other. He watched with a disconnected horror as Lucius made his leisurely way into the room. He was not alone, either; at least ten Death Eaters in their signature black and hooded robes were with him. Two of them had

their hoods down; Harry recognized them as the Mayor and the bailiff of Malfoy Park.

The occupants of the room backed away as Lucius and his entourage passed by them. Harry could not blame them. Very few of them would have their wands with them, and Death Eaters were terrifying at the best of times. Sirius was white-faced with shock, and had hold of Lupin's arm; the Weasleys were crowded around him.

There was a raised dais at one end of the hall, surrounded by a gold railing. It was where the band had performed at Harry's birthday party. Now Lucius reached it, mounted the steps, and turned to face the crowded Hall with the Mayor and the bailiff at his side. The rest of his Death Eaters had broken away and spread themselves out against the wall. More Death Eaters were coming in through the open double doors and joining them. The room was surrounded.

Lucius leaned against the railing and smiled. He was impeccably dressed - elegant black suit, black cloak, expensive shoes, hands ringed with silver. His gray eyes roamed over the crowd, appraising them as he might have appraised the quality of a painting. "To quote a Muggle writer," he said, "Rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated."

Pansy made a choked little sound in her throat; it could have been a giggle or a sob. Draco stared grimly at his father. His eyes were unreadable.

"I'm sure very few of you are delighted to hear it," Lucius said. "However, it remains the truth. I am alive, and I have returned home. As I imagine that my son knew I would. Didn't you, Draco?"

Harry whirled around and looked at Draco, who had gone a chalky sort of color and was staring disbelievingly at his father. "But you were going to - I thought - the wedding," he choked out, his voice cracking.

Lucius smiled. It was a bright, malevolent smile. "Stupid little boy," he said. "did you never realize that we knew you could see us? Did you truly think you could spy on me without my knowledge? Did you think to set yourself against the Dark Lord and all his powers?"

Draco said nothing at all. For once it seemed he had nothing to say. He slumped back against the table and looked as devastated as Harry had ever seen him look. It was, in fact, Ron who broke the silence. He whirled, not on Lucius, but on Draco, and glared at him accusingly. "You knew?" he said. "You knew your father was alive and you didn't tell anyone?"

Forgetting his promise to himself in the sudden spurt of white hot rage that possessed him, Harry whirled around, his back to Draco, and faced Ron in a fury. "I knew, too," he spat. "He told me. If you're going to blame Draco, blame me as well."

Ron flinched and stepped back.

As if Harry's sudden announcement had freed his voice, Draco spoke. "Dumbledore told me not to tell anyone," he said. Harry turned his head and found that Draco was looking over his head, at Sirius. "I'm sorry."

"Dumbledore is the one who should be sorry," Lucius said. "The senile old fool, making his clever little plans, thinking he could head us off, all the while relying on you and your dreams for his information. And you, believing all our lies."

"It was all lies - all of it?" Draco said, and for a moment Harry thought a flash of what looked almost like hope crossed his friend's face.

Lucius looked at his son. His gray eyes gave nothing away. "Well," he said. "Perhaps not all of it."

"That is enough." It was Sirius, Harry saw, detaching himself from the rest of the crowd and stepping forward. "There is no need for these cat and mouse games, Lucius. You're an escaped mental patient -" He laughed, although there was no humor in it. "They'll bring you back to St. Mungo's before you can even -"

"I rather think not," Lucius interrupted. "It is, in fact, all of you, who are in violation of the law."

Sirius whitened. "And what do you mean by that?"

"I, not you, am the Master of Malfoy Manor," Lucius said, looking coldly at Sirius. "The laws of the Manor are old, old laws, and the Manor knows its master."

Potter! The word echoed so forcefully in Harry's head that for a moment he thought Draco had shouted it out loud. *Potter - get behind me, quickly.*

What? Harry half-turned, and stared at the other boy, whose chalky color had returned. *Why?*

The Manor - it's charmed against trespassers, and the master of the Manor has ultimate control over the charms. If my father decides we're all trespassing - he could hurl us out of here without lifting a hand -

What about you?

Get behind me. The charms won't work on me, because -

I know. Malfoy blood, Harry replied, backing up slightly. *You guys need a new security system. Maybe one that isn't, dare I say it, blood-based?*

Draco looked grimly, fleetingly amused. *Pureblood pride,* he said. *You wouldn't understand it.*

Sirius had folded his arms and was glaring. The rest of the wedding party was massed behind him, staring in confusion. "Say your piece, then, Lucius," he snapped. "What do you want?"

Lucius leaned thoughtfully on the railing. For a moment, Harry was reminded of Draco...the same insolent grace, the same catlike lazy movements that were somehow menacing. Of course, Draco must have learned it somewhere. But when Draco did it, it had a certain ironic charm; with Lucius, it was merely sinister. "I want you all," he said slowly, "who are not my family or my servants, to get the hell out of this house. There will be no rehearsal dinner, because there will be no wedding. There will be no wedding, because I say so. Now get out, all of you."

"I will not leave Draco here alone with you," Sirius protested hotly. "He comes with us."

"You won't need to leave him here alone," replied Lucius in a voice like silk. "He'll have Harry for company."

Harry blinked. Surely he'd heard wrong. He glanced sideways towards Draco. Draco was staring intently at his father. He wore an expression Harry had never seen before - a dazed, horrified look. "Leave Harry out of this, Father," he said, his voice firm. "It's me you want -"

"Please refrain from being presumptuous," said Lucius. "If it was you I wanted, I'd say so. Harry stays here."

"Don't I get a say in this?" Harry demanded, somewhat plaintively.

Sirius and Lucius both whirled on him. "No!" they said in unison.

Harry took another step backward. "Right," he said. "Just checking."

Sirius was tugging at his tie, livid with rage. "You honestly think you can keep him here, with you-?" he sputtered at Lucius. "The Ministry -"

"Has no choice in the matter," Lucius said. It was beginning to dawn on Harry that Lucius was serious. "Draco is my son by blood and this is his home; you have no right to take him from me. And Harry..." Lucius' eyes brushed briefly over Harry; they were icy cold. "Harry is my property."

Sirius gave a furious bark of laughter. "You really do belong back in St. Mungo's, Lucius."

"Oh, I assure you I am very much sane," Lucius smiled. "And that I have the law on my side. Harry Potter has been a domiciled resident of this house for six months today. He is underage under wizarding law. Therefore, I am his official guardian."

"That's ridiculous," Arthur Weasley burst out, stepping forward to stand next to Sirius. "Sirius Black is his official guardian; I signed the adoption papers myself."

"Ah, yes, you," Lucius said, grinning now, his eyes on Arthur. "Our false Minister. I'll get to you in a moment." He turned to the pale man at his side who Harry knew as The Bailiff of Malfoy Park. "Mr. Stebbins, if you would be so kind..."

With a curt nod, the Bailiff unrolled a long strip of parchment and began to read aloud:

"Under wizarding law, a domicile is the place where a person has his true, fixed, permanent home and principal establishment, entered into under sciens, and to which, whenever he is absent, he has the intention of returning -"

"Then Harry's place of residence is obviously Hogwarts," Sirius protested. "It's his principal home - isn't it, Remus?" he demanded, whirling on his friend.

But Lupin, looking as dazed as the rest of the crowd, only dropped his eyes. "Actually, Sirius, legally speaking..."

"Ahem," Stebbins interrupted. He was obviously enjoying himself - probably nobody had paid this much attention to him in years. "If I may continue:

'Individual wizards who are enrolled to study at Hogwarts are, as determined under the In Loco Parentis Chattel Expiditor of 1721, not deemed domiciled at Hogwarts, as there is no presumption by the castle itself that such students deem said locale as the permanent or principal establishment, as such students have no expectation of remaining within the grounds ad infinitum. Evidence of intent to be a resident of a particular residence is demonstrated by the absence of ties to a former residence; in the instant matter, such absence of ties is demonstrated, ab initio, by the lack of any correspondence between Mr Potter, or in fact, any resident of Malfoy Manor, with those who are still in residence at Number Four Privet Drive, except, of course, for this letter sent by Mr. Sirius Black, and signed by the same, which provides the Manor as a return address and which states, in part, that - quote - *Harry will be living here with me, my fiance and her son, and he has no interest in hearing from you, your wife or your son, so I must ask that any further communications with him be made through me at the address provided above* - end quote. *Ipsissima verba*, Mr Potter is considered legally domiciled at Malfoy Manor.'"

"On the strength of a letter I wrote to the Dursleys? That's ludicrous!" Sirius protested. "There was nothing legal about that letter - I sent it without the Ministry's knowledge -"

"Six months ago," Stebbins interrupted, "Mr. Potter changed his address records at Hogwarts to state that his guardian was Mr Black, and as Hogwarts had accepted letters signed by Mr Black in loco parentis for Mr Potter for over three years prior to such change, *ceteris peribus*, the records at Hogwarts do indicate that Mr Potter is a resident of Malfoy Park, is that correct ... Mr Lupin?"

"That's correct," Lupin said in a barely audible voice. "To the best of my knowledge."

"There's also Muggle law," Sirius said in a constricted voice. "The Dursleys - they're Harry's blood family -"

"So they are," said Stebbins, whom Harry was growing to loathe. Lucius himself was saying nothing; leaning against the rail, letting the bailiff do the talking. "But we do have other evidence here on the issue of domiciliary location. We also are in possession of a letter from Mr Dursley in which he states that he was advised that his guardianship of Mr. Potter had ended on Mr Potter's seventeenth birthday. I believe he ended the letter with - quote - *good riddance and never come near me or my family again* - end quote. A ruling was issued this morning deeming all magical paraphenalia within the purview of Privet Drive to be *Bona Vacantia*, and was confiscated by the Ministry Response Division approximately seventeen minutes ago. As further evidence that Mr. Potter is now domiciled at the Manor, Ministry records clearly show that various wards and protections on and around the Dursley home were removed during the month of July of this year."

"They were?" Sirius whirled on Mr. Weasley. "Arthur, is that true?"

Mr. Weasley nodded, looking shellshocked. "Well, yes - the Auror Response Team thought, since Harry wouldn't be there any more, and there's a high expense involved in keeping such an extensive ward system in place..."

"My God," Sirius whispered. "How long have they been planning this...?"

Lucius gave a delighted laugh. "Do be quiet for a moment, Black," he said. "The best is yet to come, I think. Stebbins..?"

The Bailiff smiled a thin smile. "Very well. '*Ex concessis*, the Bar of Malfoy Park has considered the evidence presented, in comportment with the Amicus Curae pleadings filed by Lucius Malfoy, then filing in absentia. In our hearing no complaint thereto, *cadit quaestio*, we issue this Writ of Praeceptum and Replevin. Lucius Malfoy is now deemed by this court, *per curiam and de lege lata*, the guardian of his son by blood, Draco Malfoy, and also has full custody, pursuant to the acts and determinations discussed herein, with regard to Harry Potter, as his period of residence, and thus his domicile, at Malfoy Manor predates the date on which he will turn eighteen. *Nemo dat quod non habet, and res gestae*. Signed by Lucius Malfoy and six officers of the Ministry, as well as the Bailiff of Malfoy Park, in this, the year nineteen ninety-eight.' And that," he finished, rolling up the parchment, "is all."

"Six officers of the Ministry? *Which six officers of the Ministry?*" Sirius demanded; Harry had never seen him look so angry, not even on his Wanted posters.

"I'm so sorry," Lucius replied brightly. "That's confidential."

Sirius lunged at him, but Lupin and Mr. Weasley each caught at his arms, and held him back. "Sirius," Harry heard him whisper, "The Ministry will take care of this, don't panic, we can handle this..."

Sirius didn't seem comforted by this and Harry hardly blamed him. "The Ministry is obviously in on this," he hissed back. "How can you not realize that, Arthur -"

"Mr. Malfoy." It was Lupin speaking, his voice firm and collected. "You may be correct. You may be able to keep Harry here for a certain amount of time, although you'd be a fool to think you could make it permanent, and I don't think you're a fool. However, that doesn't change the fact that any harm that comes to him while he's in your custody is your responsibility. If you hurt him...if you harm either boy in any way...it's still murder, and you'll go to Azkaban."

Lucius sighed, and waved a heavily ringed hand in a dismissive gesture. "I have no intention of harming the boys," he said. "What one-track minds you all have."

"The Ministry will be watching you!" Arthur Weasley shouted unexpectedly. "If you so much as touch a hair of Harry's head -"

Lucius snorted. "Tedious little petty bureaucrat," he said, "I've no patience at all. I've taken care of you, anyway. Let the Ministry rage and roar. Everything I've done here is perfectly legal. And now...I'd like you all to leave me alone, please."

Lucius raised his wand. Harry felt Draco catch involuntarily at his sleeve and pull him back hard; he ducked his head; there was a roaring in his ears. Lucius shouted an incantation Harry could barely hear, and something like a powerful wind tore past him, ripping at his clothes and hair. He remembered the Whirlwind Spell he had cast last year that had hurled Lucius out of the Manor - wondered if this was the same thing - how ironic it would be if it was. He held his breath -

And it was over. The wind stilled and was gone. Draco's released his grip on Harry's sleeve, and Harry opened his eyes.

The room was nearly empty. Lucius still stood where he had, untouched by the storm, the smirk on his narrow face making him look far more like his son than Harry had ever seen him. The Death Eaters were still there as well, standing near Lucius. All that remained of those who had been at the party before Lucius had arrived was Draco, Harry himself, and Ron - huddled in a small semicircle together.

Lucius looked at them with an expression of calm interest. Then he snapped his fingers at his Death Eaters, and they began walk towards him.

Draco cleared his throat. "Father," he said, and jerked his chin towards Ron. "I think you forgot a Weasley. I know there's a lot of them; it's hard to keep track, but..."

Ron made a choked little sound in his throat.

"Be quiet," Lucius snapped. "Do not speak on subjects you know nothing about."

"Sorry," Draco said. "I didn't realize you'd decided Ron was your property as well. I mean, what's next after this? Pseudo-adopting the rest of my

class and renaming the Manor 'Lucius Malfoy's Home for Wayward Young Wizards'?"

Lucius looked coldly at his son. "I think," he said, "that you have not been very wise in either your speech or your judgements recently, Draco. I would hate to lose you."

Draco blinked. "Yes," he said. "That would be very careless of you."

"And what did I tell you when you were a child? That it's wrong to be careless with your possessions? I believe I did tell you that."

"Probably," Draco said. He looked frightened and tired and it made Harry nervous - he was not used to Draco looking frightened, even when he was. "Father - whatever it is, please get on with it."

Without any change in expression, Lucius stepped down from the platform he had been standing on, took a few steps towards his son, and slapped him hard across the face. It was loud in the still room, like the sound of a whip cracking. Draco put his hand to his face; Harry tensed and spoke before he could stop himself, "You're not allowed to hurt him," he protested fiercely - "You said you knew that."

"Surely a father can reprimand his son," Lucius said calmly, not looking at Harry. His gaze was on Draco, who had taken his hand away from his face. A red mark remained there, like a whip weal, across his cheek.

"I expected a worse punishment," Draco said, his voice toneless. "Considering all that I've done."

"That was not your punishment," Lucius said. His voice was chillingly soft. "That was my forgiveness of you." He raised his head, and looked at his Death Eaters. "Take them," he said, gesturing at Harry and Draco. "Lock them up on the North Tower. No - not him as well," he added, and laid a long-fingered hand on Ron's sleeve. "Leave this one here with me."

Harry heard Ron's sharp intake of breath, and even now, even after everything that had happened and everything he had told himself, he felt it like a blow to his stomach - he spun around towards Ron, but the Mayor, behind him, had already seized him and jerked his right arm up behind his back. The pain was immediate and intense, and Harry cried

out, and kicked backwards with his feet. His left foot connected satisfyingly with something soft and fleshy, and the Mayor nearly dropped him.

"Stop that," he heard Lucius say sharply, and tapped Harry with his wand. Instantly, Harry's muscles froze as if he'd been encased in ice. He couldn't even turn his head to look at Ron, or at Draco. Behind him the Mayor chuckled, low in his throat. Then he took hold of Harry once again and began to drag him out of the Hall.

Sunset had passed and night had fallen completely over the castle. The shadows lengthened in each room; the girl in her golden cage looked up, bright-eyed, at the rising moon outside the window. Near the cage, the Dark Lord, playing chess with himself, used the green knight to capture the red king.

"Someone is coming," said the girl in the cage.

The small man with the silver hand who sat in the shadows raised his head; his eyes were white in the dimness. "Who is it?" he said.

"It is Lucius," said the demon girl. "And he has someone with him."

"I will let them in," said the silver-handed man, who was often called Wormtail by his master, but who did not like that name. He stood and crossed the room, giving the gold cage and the girl inside it a wide berth.

The Dark Lord continued to play his solitary game. Soon he would have to sacrifice his knight. He did not look up as Wormtail opened the brass double doors and stood back to let Lucius Malfoy pass into the room. He seemed to sense, however, that the girl had been correct: his servant was not alone.

"Lucius," he said. "You have brought me someone. A prisoner?"

Lucius cleared his throat. "I have brought you the boy," he said.

At that, the Dark Lord rose to his feet and turned; the girl in the cage raised herself up on her knees and stared. Lucius, calm and composed,

was holding the arm of a tall boy with red hair, dressed in disheveled party clothes. The boy's face was very white.

"Lucius," whispered the girl inside the cage, and reached a hand through the bars. "Lucius, look at me."

Lucius ignored her, although the red-headed boy stared at her with wide eyes. Instead, he spoke to the boy, "Greet the Dark Lord," he said.

The red-headed boy was silent.

The Dark Lord had a small smile on his face. "And you are sure he is the one?"

"Lucius," wailed the girl inside the cage. "You *promised*."

Lucius did not appear to hear her; he chuckled low in his throat. "I am quite sure he is the one," he said.

The red-headed boy spoke. "I don't understand," he said. "The one what? Why am I here?"

The Dark Lord looked at him, and a faint amused smile touched the edge of his inhuman mouth. "You really do not know? You cannot guess?"

The boy shook his head. "No."

"Well, then." The Dark Lord laid a hand on the boy's shoulder and the boy winced in pain. "Perhaps this is something we should discuss. Come over here with me to the table. Do you...play chess?"

Draco Veritas Chapter Nine: The Knight, Death and the Devil

She would always remember the light in the room that day: gray hospital light. Her father had carried her from Dumbledore's office, although she could walk perfectly well, her mother hurrying behind. Madam Pomfrey had readied a bed for her; Ginny winced as her father set her down on it, not from any physical pain but out of guilt over what the blood and dirt all over her would do to the scrupulously white sheets and pillows. "I'm so sorry," she said to Madam Pomfrey, but her parents only hushed her and drew the curtains closed around her bed, urging her to rest.

But she could not rest. Her body would not allow it; it did not want to lie still. It was restless, as if it wanted to crawl away from her. Crawl back to Tom, perhaps. She did not know what he had taught her body to do during the long darknessness that she did not remember. When she stood, and went to the window, she found herself reaching to draw it up with her left hand. It took a moment of fumbling before she recollected herself: she was right-handed.

The window opened noiselessly onto a clear spring day: the front of the school was bathed in sunlight. The light stung Ginny's eyes, but she kept them open. When she closed them, she saw him again. She had seen his face only briefly; before today, he had been a dream trapped in diary

pages, an insubstantial phantom conjured out of her own loneliness and need. She had reached out for him then, but he had slipped away from her like water. But there in the Chamber, it was different. As the life pulsed out of her with every beat of her heart, he seemed to evolve in strength and substance, until at last she could see him whole: the black, tangled hair, the white face, the slightness of him, the tensile strength in the slender hands. The young-old eyes whose color she could no longer recall, but they had been clear and unshadowed. Eyes that opened onto a mind like a cauldron of snakes.

The sound of raised voices drifted up to her window, recollecting her to the present moment. Ginny looked down listlessly. A carriage had drawn up to the foot of the front steps: it was black, and the design upon the door was of a wand crossed with a sword. There was a word etched in gilt lettering underneath: she couldn't read it. But it was not the carriage that caught her eye, nor the blond man who stood impatiently by it. She knew him. She knew the boy who stood at his side as well, hunched and miserable-looking despite the warm weather. The sunlight was bright on his pale hair. She knew him, and she hated him, but it wasn't him she looked at either: it was the book his father held in his narrow-fingered hand. Black, tattered, shabby....

The carriage door opened. The blond man tucked the book under his arm as he gestured for his son to get in.

"No," Ginny whispered. "You can't take it..."

That book was hers. Somewhere in its poisoned pages were her words, the dreams she had poured into it, the wishes and the nightmares. Who else could be said to have a claim upon it? Tom, but Tom was gone now. Harry perhaps, who had bought its destruction and her own salvation with blood and venomous death. But Harry would not have wanted it, and who else had a right? Not Lucius Malfoy, whom she loathed, nor his equally loathsome son. She saw him jerk hard on his son's arm as he pushed him into the carriage and climbed in after. The boy winced; Ginny was glad.

"Home, Anton," the man said, his clipped tones clearly audible through the still air. "Now."

The carriage pulled away from the stairs. As it did, the sunlight struck it, and the gilt letters along the side flashed out like fire:

MALFOY.

The top of the tower was smooth and slightly tilted, as if it had been sheared off at an angle by a pair of giant scissors. It was square, and surrounded by crenellated walls just high enough to lean against while sitting down.

Draco climbed atop the crenellated wall and looked around thoughtfully. He was familiar enough with this tower from his childhood to know what he'd see : sheer walls falling away to the ground, gleaming dark silver in the twilight, the gardens below like dark smudges against snow, the distant road that led down to the lights of Malfoy Park. The sun was sinking far to the west, layering the sky with gradually deepening shades of scarlet: seashell, rose petals, blood. Under other circumstances he would have thought it was beautiful.

"Are you sure you should stand up there?" asked Harry, who was hovering back by the bolted door in the tower wall. "You could fall."

"I won't fall," Draco said.

Harry muttered something under his breath. Draco turned around and looked down at him. Harry had his arms folded across his chest and was gazing up, his face a white smudge between the dark collar of the cloak he wore and his darker hair. The cold air had whipped bright color into his cheeks.

"I said I won't fall," Draco said.

"I know," Harry said. "Just come down anyway."

Draco shrugged, and jumped down from the wall, landing lightly on the flagstones. The adamantine cuff around his wrist banged against his side as he leaped. Lucius had cuffed his left wrist and Harry's right before locking the tower door: they had discovered that, almost as effectively as an adamantine cell, this prevented them from doing any magic.

"I'm down now," Draco said, stating the obvious. "Feel better?"

"I´d feel better if you came over here and helped me try to open this door," Harry said.

Draco shook his head. "Don´t bother," he said. "You can´t force it."

Harry stopped tugging at the door and turned to look at him. There was a rebellious set to his chin. "Enchanted, is it?"

"Of course."

"And I don´t suppose you know how to get the locking spell off?"

"It´s not a locking spell exactly. The door is enchanted to open only from the inside. It can´t be opened from the outside. Not ever. And no, I don´t think it´s a reversible spell."

"All spells are reversible," Harry said.

"Well, you´re welcome to knock yourself silly trying. I, for one, am going to sit here and try to think of a plan."

Draco sat down, his back against the stone parapet. A faint dizziness washed over him as he sat, and he closed his eyes, willing it to pass. Eyes shut, he sensed rather than saw Harry sit down beside him. He could feel Harry´s proximity, as if his friend´s physical presence stirred some psychic current between them. It helped somehow, and the dizziness vanished entirely.

"Are you all right?" he heard Harry say.

He opened his eyes. "Yes," he said.

"You look peaky."

Draco tilted his head to the side and looked at Harry. He seemed a bit tired, but overall his strung-up and exhausted look was gone. It had been replaced by an alert and burning energy. His eyes shone, his cheeks were flushed, and his hands danced across his lap with an eager rhythm. The adamantine cuff around his wrist gleamed as his hands moved. Quick, deft hands, they said: *Find me a sword to wield, a banner to wave; find me a place to stand and I will defeat whatever evil comes. Follow my lead.*

"You´re enjoying this," Draco said. "Aren´t you?"

Harry glanced up in surprise. "Of course not."

Draco looked at Harry harder. Harry blinked his wide eyes, his face expressionless. "You really are enjoying this," Draco repeated. "Damn. Could you be any weirder?"

Harry looked offended. "I´m enjoying what?"

"This." Draco made a sweeping gesture with his arm that encompassed the tower and the surrounding sky. "You like it when we have some external threat to deal with. Dragons, manticores, various of my insane relatives..."

"I am not enjoying this," Harry replied indignantly. "I´m very upset."

"Oh, yes," Draco said. "You look it. Thrive on disaster, you do. I suppose it´s something having to do with being a hero and all that. Few weeks go by, nothing happens, you start wondering, 'What´s it all about, really? No universes to save or evil to defeat, what´s the point of living any more? If only I had a nice demon horde to cope with, how much happier I´d be.' Well, you got your wish."

"No!" Harry said, rather too sharply. "I don´t want to deal with a demon horde. I don´t like demons. Anything else would be better. Zombies. At least they look like monsters. Even if they do eat people."

"Actually, they only eat people when instructed to do so by their zombie masters. A lot of people get that wrong."

Harry rolled his eyes.

Draco shrugged defensively. "Zombies are people too," he said.

"Yeah," Harry said flatly. "Dead people."

"You´re awfully picky for a Gryffindor."

"I´m not picky," Harry said. "If I was, I´d hardly hang about with you, would I?"

Draco blinked. "Um," he said. "I know we´re all about the pointed banter, but that was a little *too* pointy. What´ s eating you, Potter? And don´ t say 'zombies´ or I´ ll push you off the parapet."

"Nothing," Harry said sulkily. "Well, the obvious, in that once again, we´re at the mercy of a deranged maniac with a plan to take over the world, none of our friends can help us..."

"On top of that," Draco said, "I don´ t know about you, but that Whirlwind Charm really messed up my hair."

"Fuck you, Malfoy, it isn´ t funny." Harry looked away, down at the frozen cathedral of the forest, its masonry of ice white-silver in the twilight. "I was a lot happier with your dad when he was trying to kill me and not adopt me."

"He´ s not really trying to adopt you," Draco said. "As if he could. He´ s just trying to distract Sirius and the rest from whatever it is he´ s *actually* planning to do."

Harry´ s mouth tightened. "Why does he think that will work?"

Draco shrugged, and the old pain in his shoulder twinged. "Because if there´ s one thing my father is good at, it´ s identifying people´ s weaknesses. There isn´ t much that would make Sirius as crazy as the suggestion that he wasn´ t *your* adoptive father any more. It´ s all about protecting you, and his debt to your parents, and who he *is*, really. You´ re what he stayed alive in Azkaban for." Draco´ s voice trailed off. "You know all this, Potter."

"Maybe." Harry´ s voice was soft. The twilight was beginning to fade now, and the darkness etched his face with shadows. "I just can´ t think like that. Like your father does."

"Yes, well, luckily you have me for that."

"Yeah," Harry said. "Luckily, I have you."

The moment Hermione landed her Nimbus 3000 in Malfoy Park, she knew something had gone terribly wrong.

The town was utterly lightless. Every lamp and lantern was unlit, every torch extinguished, all the shop windows were darkened, and the doors were bolted shut. The streets were quite deserted, and a cold wind whistled between empty-looking buildings.

Hermione propped her borrowed broomstick against the wall of the Cold Christmas Inn, and gazed around in perplexity. Could she somehow have gotten the date wrong?

A quick check of the folded note in her pocket assured her that the date wasn't wrong. There should be carriages here, she thought, gazing around with deepening unease, there should be decorations, servants waiting to give directions, the Cold Christmas Inn should be open and bursting with light...

"Hermione!" An unexpected voice jolted her out of her reverie. "What are you doing here?"

Hermione spun around and stared. Standing on the steps of the Cold Christmas Inn was a familiar figure with a mop of bright hair. "George!" she exclaimed. "What are you doing here? Have you come from the party?"

"Have I what?" George stared at her. "You mean you don't know?"

Hermione's heart skipped a beat. "I don't know what?"

"Come here -" George caught her by the arm and steered her around to the side of the Inn. He dropped his voice and spoke in a near-whisper: "You weren't at the party, were you?"

She shook her head. "No. I'm late. I just arrived -"

George laughed hollowly. "Lucky you."

"George, you're scaring me. What happened?"

"What happened? Lucius Malfoy happened."

Hermione felt her jaw sag. "But he´s...he´s dead."

"Yeah," George said briefly. "Looks like he didn´t get that memo."

"Are you sure it was Lucius?"

George looked exasperated. "Maybe not. Maybe it was Draco´s other tall, blond, evil, cackling, Death Eater father."

Hermione´s hand flew to her mouth. "Did he hurt anyone?"

"No," George said slowly. "Not exactly. He put a Whirlwind Charm on the guests....everyone was flung out of the manor, scattered for miles. We´ve just started regrouping."

"And you landed here?"

"No, I landed in the middle of a group of carolers on Hampstead Heath. Gave them a right scare. Then I Apparated back home, and everyone was there, except Ron and Ginny of course. Poor little sods, can´t Apparate. It´ll take them forever to get back. Anyway, Dad sent me here to look out for latecomers, warn them off..."

"So everyone´s all right?" she asked. "Harry and Draco, too?"

George reached out a hand to her. "Come on, Hermione...let´s head back to the Burrow. Charlie´s there, he can explain better than I can."

Hermione remained motionless. "George, just tell me."

"Neither of them are dead." George´s voice was flat. "Now just come with me, will you please?"

He held out his hand again, and this time she took it.

"Checkmate," the Dark Lord said.

Ron kept his eyes fixed on the half-empty chess board. The board itself was made of onyx and travertine, the sides ornately carved with scenes of court life and battle. The pieces were hewn out of whole jewels: clear

rubies and dark emeralds. The knights had solid gold eyes. The board and its pieces were probably worth half the Burrow. Maybe more than half.

The Dark Lord sat back in his chair. Ron heard the scratching of his nails against the piece he was holding, and shuddered. He had not looked up at his opponent once during the entire game, but the brief flashes he'd caught of the bone-white hands with their long black nails had been more than sufficient to throw him into a panic that felt akin to nausea.

"You let me win," the Dark Lord said.

Ron wouldn't have thought that the fear could get worse; apparently, he'd been wrong. He'd been gripping the pin that held his cloak together tightly with his right hand; now his hand clenched around it so convulsively that it cut into the soft flesh of his palm.

"I said," the Dark Lord repeated, "that you let me win. Didn't you, boy?"

Ron's voice came out in a whisper. "I'm really just not all that good at chess," he said. Gathering together all his Gryffindor courage, he raised his chin and met the Dark Lord's gaze. Red eyes like coals stared back at him from a flat, snakelike face. The Dark Lord had no eyelids. Ron felt ill. "I mean, I'm all right. But I'm nothing special."

"Where chess is concerned, perhaps not," Voldemort said. "It may, perhaps, given your native skill and your lack of training, be impossible for you to beat me. What is important, however, is that you try."

Ron couldn't believe it. Was Voldemort giving him a pep talk? "I just don't see...how I could be much of a challenge for you."

Voldemort's lipless mouth curled into a smile. "Oh, but you are," he said. "If not, perhaps, in the way that you might think." He waved a hand at the chessboard; instantly the pieces rearranged themselves and the board was again ready for play. "Well shall play again now. And this time, if I am not fully satisfied of the sincerity of your attempts to defeat me, I shall remove all of the skin from your right hand. Slowly."

Ron swallowed hard.

"Shall we begin again?" the Dark Lord asked.

Going back in time had never hurt before, but this time it did. Ginny spun the Time Turner over; the world and Malfoy Manor rushed away from her. When it returned, in a burst of light and color, she fell forward onto her knees on the smooth flagstone floor and rested there several minutes, as waking-up pains raced through her nerves like little points of darting fire.

When they subsided, she got to her feet and looked around. Some things changed only a very little with the passage of time; Malfoy Manor was one of them. The difference between the present day and five years in the past was negligible. The same high, beamed ceiling, the same leaded windows paned in blue and green diamonds. The same heavy dark green velvet curtains that hung along the walls. There was no fire in the grate now, because it was spring. The books...Ginny stepped forward and looked at the books; they were what was different. Most of these books had been removed from the Manor before she had ever been inside it. Heavy, rich-looking old books, many obviously of great value and very rare - Oh, how Hermione would have been overjoyed to get her hands on them! *Wishful Ways for Wizards* and *Dreadful Deeds for Dragons* jostled against each other on a low shelf next to *The Unstrung Harp*, by C.F. Earbrass. A higher shelf held *The Book of Counted Sorrows*, the *Black Tome of Alsophocus*, *The Book of Eibon*, the *Necronomicon* (the ownership of which was said to merit a year's term in Azkaban - it held all the secrets of raising the dead) and a dozen others, all of which looked equally morally questionable. Other shelves held fiction and even plays: the six plays Shakespeare had written and never released in the Muggle world were there, even *The Weird Sisters' Bane*, which remained unfinished.

Ginny, while nowhere near the book lover that Hermione was, was appreciative nonetheless of the rarity of this collection. She let her hand trail over the spines of the books, the bracelet on her wrist clinking and chiming as the charms struck together. The window above the desk was open, letting in air that smelled of grass and the faint sound of wind tangling in leaves. Over the sound of the wind, the fainter sound of footsteps in the hallway was audible, and growing ever louder as they neared the library door...

Ginny felt her heartbeat pick up. She glanced around, hurriedly - the Time-Turner provided a handy enough escape route, but it hardly made her invisible, and she did not want to be seen. She ducked behind the nearest velvet curtain just as the door to the library opened.

The sense of claustrophobia pressing in on her was immediate and intense. The weave of the curtain was so thick as to be almost impenetrable: she tapped lightly against it with the wand she'd concealed up her sleeve, and murmured, "*Fenestrus*."

A tiny hole the size of a Sickle opened in the curtain. Ginny peered through it, holding her breath.

A house elf had entered the room, carrying a feather duster and muttering to itself. "Must have everything spotless for Master Lucius...the Master does hate dust... Noddy doesn't want to get in trouble like Dobby, bad silly naughty Dobby, doesn't want to have to shut his ears in the oven door --"

The house-elf broke off with a squeak as the sound of wheels on gravel wafted through the open window. Ginny tensed, hearing carriage doors slamming and voices calling out. *They're home*.

The next few minutes passed in a blur. Ginny held her breath behind the curtain, waiting until she heard footsteps in the hallway, waiting as they grew louder, waiting as the door opened. She shut her eyes tightly.

"Master!" the house-elf squeaked.

Ginny's eyes flew open, and she pressed her right eye to the hole in the curtain. Up close now, she could see how disheveled Lucius was - his shoes were half-polished, his hair tousled, his face white and masklike with fury. And in his left hand, he was clutching -

A book. A small, shabby black book with a tattered cover.

"Noddy, you stupid creature," Lucius snapped. "Did I not specifically state that I wanted a fire always lit in this room?"

"Y-yes. Noddy is very sorry, Master -"

"Don't be sorry. Just do it. And then go to the kitchen and get me a glass of brandy. The decanter here is deplorably empty." Lucius' expression was deeply sour. "And if you see either my wife or my son, do pass on the message that if either of them interrupts me in my study, they'll be spending the night in the dungeons."

"Yes, Master, Noddy will do so, Master, and it is very good to have Master home again -"

"Oh shut up, you repellent little earwig," snarled Lucius in a paroxysm of rage, turned away and stalked across the room towards the far door that Ginny knew led to the smaller study. As he passed the fireplace, Lucius paused, then hurled the tattered little diary into the empty hearth. Ginny's heart contracted.

The study door slammed behind Lucius, and Ginny heard the sound of the bolt sliding home in the lock. The tension running through her muscles was becoming unbearable. *Don't do it*, she thought at the house-elf, *hurry off to the kitchens and forget all about it* -

But the elf did not hurry off. Instead, it raised a finger and pointed it at the hearth; instantly a lively fire leaped up in the grate, obscuring the diary from view.

"Oh, no," she murmured under her breath. "Oh, no, no no -"

She clapped a hand over her mouth, but fortunately the elf appeared not to have heard her. Gathering up its duster, it hurried from the room.

As soon as the door shut behind it, Ginny threw the curtain aside and pointed her trembling wand at the fireplace: "*Accio!*" she whispered, and the burning book lifted out of the flames and flew across the room towards her like a miniature shooting star. She tried to catch it but it was too hot to touch; she dropped it and it fell at her feet. Seizing up a book from a small case nearby, she knelt and beat out the tiny flames. When they were all out, she gathered up the diary in a trembling hand. It was warm to the touch, as it had often been before, although she knew that now it was merely because of the fire. The cover was singed, as were the edges of several pages, but it was otherwise intact.

"Oh, thank goodness," she whispered. She brushed a finger over the torn cover: now that the fire's heat was fading, she could feel how dead it was under her fingers, no longer the live thing it had once been. She turned it over and read the words on the back: Vorpál's Variety Store, 15 Vauxhall Road, London.

"Excuse me," came a cold little voice from the doorway, "but who are you, and what are you doing in my house?"

Ginny bolted to her feet, hastily concealing the small diary inside the larger book she was holding, and stared. A little boy with a mop of silver-fair hair and an arrogant expression stood in the doorway, arms crossed over his chest. Although she knew perfectly well who he was - he was instantly recognizable - it took a moment for her mind accept what she was looking at:

Draco Malfoy, aged twelve.

"I'm bored," Harry said, conversationally.

"Mmm. Yes, I am too, rather. Isn't it odd how quickly stark terror turns to stark boredom? And hard to say which is preferable."

They sat atop the tower wall, side by side, two pairs of booted feet dangling over the edge. Harry looked sideways at Draco: his breath was puffing out in small white clouds. Lucius had Charmed both their cloaks before locking them out on the tower, and indeed the charms seemed to be protecting Harry from the chill weather - his hands were cold, but his gloves helped that, and the icy air nipped at his ears and cheekbones, but it wasn't too bad. Draco looked colder than he was, or perhaps it was just that his skin was so fair: his cheeks were scarlet, the lids of his eyes pale blue with cold.

"We could spit down on passersby," Draco suggested. "Although I don't think there are very many passers-by at the moment."

Harry nodded. "We could make shadow puppets."

"We could use our cloaks to make very small trampolines."

"We could talk about our feelings."

"There's a thought." Draco looked intrigued. "Want to tell me what's really been bothering you for the past couple of weeks?"

Harry thought about this. "No," he said.

"Well, that was a productive discussion," said Draco, with a broad and expansive wave of his arm. "I'm glad we talked. Harry - if I may call you Harry -"

"Well, what else would you call me?" said Harry, miffed at being wound up.

Draco paused mid-snark. "Don't I usually call you Potter?"

"I guess," Harry said neutrally. "But isn't that a little weird? I mean, you know, after everything, and..."

Draco blinked. "Isn't this one of those aspects of our relationship that we don't address?"

"I didn't know we had an official policy on that."

"The official policy is that we don't have a policy." Draco looked upset. "You're messing up the vibe, Potter."

Harry subsided with a smirk. "Sorry."

There was a moment of silence. Then Draco reached into the pocket of his robe and extracted a garishly decorated paperback book. Harry immediately recognized it as the novel which accompanied Ginny to breakfast, Quidditch practice, and homework. "Well," said Draco, a bit hesitantly, "I could read out loud."

"Malfoy," said Harry curiously. "Why do you have a copy of *Passionate Trousers* in your robe pocket?"

Draco cleared his throat. "It was meant to be a Christmas present for Ginny."

"Doesn't she already have a copy of *Passionate Trousers*?"

"She probably has the whole set. It's a trilogy. *Passionate Trousers*, *Trousers Aflame*, and *Trousers Revisited*. I filched this one out of her book bag before we left school."

"You were going to give her back a book you stole from her? What were you going to get me? A shirt I already own?"

Draco made a rude face. "It's a private joke," he said. "And anyway, I was going to get her copy autographed. The author was meant to be at the reception today, but I guess he -"

"He? You mean -" Harry squinted at the book cover. "Aurora Twilight is a man?"

Draco chuckled. "You don't know...?"

"Know what?"

The other boy looked hugely amused. "Well, I'm not going to tell you, then."

"Making shadow puppets is starting to look better and better," Harry muttered.

"Quit whinging, Potter." Draco propped the book open on his lap. "It's a fine evening, and we have mediocre literature to enjoy."

Harry sighed, then settled back against a crenellation as Draco began to read aloud:

Passionate Trousers, Chapter Thirty-Five

The chill air of the dank dungeon clung to Rhiannon's tormented limbs. Again she feebly struggled against the chains which restrained her manacled ankles. The moist orbs of her amply straining bosom heaved moistly beneath the tattered cloth of her -

"Moistly?" echoed Harry. "Is moistly even a word?"

"Shakespeare coined words all the time," Draco pointed out.

"And you think that the author of *Passionate Trousers* is on a par with Shakespeare?" Harry inquired.

Draco lowered the book. "Do you want me to keep reading or not?"

"Oh go on then," said Harry, and settled himself back against the stone wall.

A shaft of light pierced the dungeon gloom as the iron door creaked open and the sinister hooded wizard who had taken her prisoner appeared, cackling maniacally.

Who are you?" Rhiannon gasped, thrashing wildly in her chains. "Who are you and what have you done with Tristan?"

"Muhahaha," said the wizard, and threw back the heavy hood which had, until that moment, obscured the features of her captor from Rhiannon's view.

Rhiannon gasped. "Lady Stacia!"

"Indeed, it is I," announced the voluptuous witch. Her dusky bosom heaved above the laces of her red velvet corset, and black jackboots adorned her shapely feminine legs. "Welcome to Castle Plumeria, Rhiannon," she sneered, and cracked the riding whip she held in her bejeweled left hand towards her prisoner, who trembled in terror. "Undress yourself!" Lady Stacia ordered.

Rhiannon gasped. She was becoming slightly dizzy, probably from all the gasping. "Surely you must be joking..."

"Strip!" Lady Stacia cried, allowing the tip of her riding crop to graze the milky curves of Rhiannon's nearly naked torso. "Or I will do it for you...."

"You know," Draco said conversationally, glancing up at Harry, "this book is a *lot* better than I remembered."

Harry muttered something inaudible.

"You are not a woman!" Rhiannon cried as Stacia sashayed towards her,

intent upon performing myriad unnatural acts upon her body, which Rhiannon would later pretend she had not enjoyed at all. "You must be some kind of demon!" She then proceeded to...

"You not enjoying this at all, are you," Draco said, and closed the book. "What's eating you, then? Don't tell me you and Weasley never stayed up nights in your lonely tower dormitory, reading *Witches Without Britches* under the covers with a torch."

"How did you...well, of course we did. It's not that..."

"Then what? What? You have that look, that look you always get when you're not telling me something because you're afraid that if you do tell me, I'll either be angry or tell you you're a git, so instead you just sit there sulking like a pregnant hamster and don't say anything at all."

Harry made a weebing noise.

Draco looked exasperated. "Budge, Harry. Nobody likes a non-budger."

"I'm not worried you'll be angry," Harry said, eyes searching Draco's face - which was, as usual, expressionless. "I'm more worried you'll be shocked."

"You do something shocking? *You?* What, did you have a dream where all the house-elves were wearing spandex, and when you woke up you felt strangely..."

"I had sex," Harry said. "Last night."

Passionate Trousers hit the floor of the tower with a bang. Draco looked at him with huge gray eyes of liquid amazement, "You did *what?*"

Harry repeated his alarming news. There was a long silence. Draco slowly lowered his head and rested his chin on his hand; his eyes were full of curious lights. "You've proved me wrong for a change, Potter. I *am* shocked."

Harry said nothing.

Draco continued to stare. "Are you sure, Potter - are you quite sure it wasn't a dream? You were awfully drunk last night."

"I'm sure. She was there when I woke up this morning, too."

"Who was there?" Draco asked, looking as if he knew the answer to this question already.

"Erm," said Harry. "Rhysenn."

"Gah." Draco goggled at him. "And what on this earth, Harry, possessed you to think that this was somehow a good idea?"

"I've no idea - I don't even remember it properly."

"You don't remember? Then how do you know that -"

"Because, she told me! She was there in the bed when I woke up this morning and she told me!" Harry winced, remembering the look of cold amusement in her eyes, the images her words had conjured up... *Things happened to me last night that have never happened to me before...*

"And you *believed* her?" Draco's mouth twitched into a smile. "In that case, I've got some flying carpet stock I'd like to sell you."

Harry cleared his throat. He could feel himself blushing like a sunset. "We were both ... naked. Under the covers."

"Oh, well, that clinches it." Draco rolled his eyes. "I'm not sure there's any way of getting to the bottom of this without me asking you a whole bunch of questions I really don't want to ask you. Let's just take it as read that you had sex with her, if that's what you want to think."

Harry glared at him. "I can't tell if you're being sarcastic or not."

"It's me, Potter. I'm always sarcastic."

Harry's mouth crumpled. "Hermione will never forgive me," he said.

"And that's where you're not wrong," Draco agreed brightly.

"I don't see why you think this is so funny..."

"Not funny," Draco corrected. "Hilarious."

Harry glared at him.

"Come on, Potter. I mean, in the face of everything we have to deal with, this issue of whether you got sozzled and knocked boots with a sex demon seems a little frivolous."

"She might have done something weird and unnatural to me," Harry pointed out stiffly.

"I hope so," Draco said. "Not much else would justify this amount of carrying on."

"And here I thought you´d be upset," said Harry. "Silly me."

"I am upset," Draco said, not looking upset at all. "And I´d be more upset if I thought it was very likely that she´d told you the truth, which I don´t. For one thing, it stretches the bounds of credulity to suppose that you would have sex before I did. It was bad enough when Weasley did. But you - look at you, with that choirboy face. You can´t even say the *word* sex without hiccoughing."

Harry looked at Draco resentfully. It was quite unfair that Draco, while no more experienced than he himself had been yesterday, should have been born looking as if he knew everything there was to know about sex and was already bored with most of it. "I can too say the word sex," he snapped childishly. "Sex sex sex sex sex sex sex."

And he might have proceeded in this vein for quite some time, if a voice had not unexpectedly interrupted him. "Indeed," it said, and Harry spun around to see Lucius Malfoy standing by the open tower door. "I had always heard that adolescent boys talked about nothing but sex, but I had not expected quite so literal a demonstration."

"Pansy?" Hermione demanded, her voice rising ever higher. "Pansy PARKINSON?"

"Well," Charlie said. "Actually...yes."

"Are you sure? Are you totally sure she was that - that Slytherin cow?"

Fred and George simultaneously inched their chairs away from Hermione. Charlie, bravely, held his ground. "Judging by her reaction, yes. We´re sure."

"That *bitch!*" Hermione shrieked, banging her fist down on the table. The vase trembled. "I can´t believe I had the chance to wring her twisted little neck yesterday and I didn´t even *know!* That hateful, horrible - oh, when I get my hands on her, I´ll throttle her until she turns blue! And then I´ll tear her into pieces and I´ll jump on the pieces until - until she´s had enough!"

"You do that," said George.

"Indeed," agreed Fred. "And if there´s going to be hair-pulling, bring a camera, too."

"Oh, shut up, Fred," said Hermione irritably. "Just because you´re a pervert doesn´t mean all boys like to watch girls fighting."

There was a short silence.

"Anyone for tea?" Charlie inquired.

"I don´t *want* tea," said Hermione grumpily.

"I know," Charlie said amiably, "but we´re all out of bitter revenge, so it´s either tea or nothing."

"I´m hungry," George opined in a hopeful tone.

"Good." Charlie bounced up from the table. "I´ll make some food."

"That´s Charlie," observed Fred cheerily. "When in doubt, cook."

Hermione, refusing to be cheered, continued to stare moodily at the table. "I really wish you hadn´t told me about Pansy," she said through her teeth.

"Took your mind off Harry and Malfoy for a second, didn't it - ow!" George said, breaking off as Fred punched him, none too subtly, in the arm. "What? She was worrying!"

"And now she's worrying again!" Fred snapped, waving an arm towards Hermione as if she were a natural disaster for which George was ultimately responsible.

George was spared answering by the opening of the kitchen door. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley came in, heavily bundled up in winter cloaks, flakes of snow melting in their hair.

"Any word from Ron and Ginny?" Mrs. Weasley asked immediately, shedding her heavy cloak and dropping her gloves on the table.

"No, Mum, nothing," said Charlie quietly. "But..." He pointed the metal cooking spoon he was holding at the kitchen clock: both Ron and Ginny's hands stood firmly on *Travelling*. "They're obviously fine. I'm sure if either of them could Apparate, they'd have been back before Fred and George."

"I know, I know...oh, Hermione, love, I almost didn't see you!" Hermione felt a brief flash of guilt as Mrs. Weasley hugged and kissed her and Mr. Weasley proffered a fatherly handshake; she knew they'd rather she was Ginny or Ron, or even Harry - they both adored Harry as if he was their own son. She was sure they were ill with worry inside, although they both hid it well. "Are you all right, dear?"

Hermione nodded. "I'm fine," she said, and settled back quietly as the two elder Weasleys joined their offspring at the kitchen table. Soon enough everyone was picking at Charlie's signature macaroni and cheese, which he made with chunks of garlic bread cooked in. (Hermione had always found it rather odd, although not perhaps as peculiar as Mrs. Weasley's famous black-cherry toffee-espresso brownies, a stray crumb of which Hermione held secretly responsible for the death of Errol two years before.) No one was saying much.

The conversation was enlivened somewhat when there was another knock at the door: this time it was Lupin and Sirius, having spent the past hour installing a semi-hysterical Narcissa at the home of a family friend who had promised that his house was so well warded and so Unplottable that

Lucius would never find it. They were both glad to see Hermione alive and well, although neither seemed interested in the macaroni.

"How's everything at the Guild, Remus?" Mr. Weasley asked as Mrs. Weasley summoned chairs for the newcomers and they squeezed in at the table between George and Charlie.

Lupin shrugged. "Panicked. Moody's running around shredding files. He's convinced all his classified documents are about to be seized by minions of Voldemort. He seems crushed that his and Dumbledore's plan to stop Lucius didn't come to anything."

"Well, no one could have foreseen..." Mrs. Weasley said softly.

Sirius sighed. "I know, I know, but considering how foolish I feel, I can only imagine how foolish the head of the Guild must feel about now. How are things at the Ministry, Arthur?"

Mr. Weasley looked at his wife, then back at Sirius. "I wouldn't know," he said gruffly. "Apparently I'm no longer Minister. In fact, I'm not even allowed in the building."

"WHAT? Dad!" Charlie dropped his fork. "You didn't tell us that!"

Lupin spoke quietly, "Tell us what happened, Arthur."

Mr. Weasley sighed. "Apparently some sort of irregularity with the votes that elected me was discovered by a few of the Council members. So I'm out of office pending investigation. And I'm not allowed in the Ministry building, because my presence might compromise that investigation. They showed me out. It was humiliating."

Sirius glanced at Lupin. "I remember you telling me, Arthur, that you suspected some interference with the ballots during the election. I admit I thought you were being paranoid. I'm sorry."

Mr. Weasley waved a dismissive hand. "Water under the bridge," he said. "The question is, what do we do now?"

"I think Remus and I had better go by the Ministry while we still can," Sirius said. "Although I´m afraid that if I catch sight of Lucius Malfoy, I won´t be able to restrain myself from wringing his scrawny neck."

"All that stuff he said about him being Harry´s guardian - that wasn´t true, was it?" George interrupted unexpectedly. "I mean, he´s a convict, he was declared insane, how could he possibly be considered a fit guardian for anyone?"

"Well, the Manor and Malfoy Park are something of a special case where legality is concerned," Lupin said. "That area is, in essence, like a small kingdom or medieval fiefdom, in that Lucius exerts a near-total control over everything that happens within its environs. It´s a very old, familiar kind of magic, like house-elf magic, that has to do with blood ties to land and specific, localized kinds of charms. But yes, of course, those kind of ancient laws are an anachronism, not recognized by the Ministry."

"What Ministry?" Arthur said bitterly.

"Well, exactly," Lupin said. "Lucius has never bothered to attempt to implement most of the old laws of the Manor, at least not since Voldemort´s time, as the Ministry would have certainly stopped him. Generations of Malfoys have pretended those laws didn´t exist, and so they´ve remained technically on the books. And those laws, of course, don´t recognize the outside jurisdiction of the Ministry, so it hardly matters whether the Council ever declared Lucius to be insane. They could have declared him legally a rodent, it wouldn´t matter."

"I´m confused," said George. "Is he or isn´t he Harry´s guardian?"

Lupin looked at Sirius, who shrugged. "In essence, it doesn´t matter," Sirius said. "That big speech and everything, that was just to shock and unsettle us. The pretense of legality buys him a tiny bit of time - maybe a day or two. That´s all he wanted, obviously. The more time we wasted running around worrying about it, the better off he´d be. It´s a distraction game. Typical Lucius."

"So he hasn´t got a legal leg to stand on?" Charlie said, sounding relieved.

"That would depend," Hermione said suddenly. "On how corrupted the Ministry is. When He-Who-Must-Not-Be-named was in power, he didn´t

obey any laws. He didn't have to. It's quite possible the Ministry would back Lucius up on this, if they've all been corrupted."

Mr. Weasley looked at her with concern. "Hermione, love, I doubt things are quite that bad."

Hermione replied almost in a whisper, "I don't know. I don't trust anyone anymore." She glanced blindly at Mrs. Weasley. "Mrs. Weasley - would it be all right if I went upstairs and lay down for a bit? I feel a little dizzy."

The older witch was all sympathy. "Of course, of course! You can use Ginny's room."

"Thanks."

Hermione slipped away upstairs without glancing back; she knew perfectly well that everyone at the table was looking after her with concern. She was glad to get away. Ginny's room was on the second floor, across from Fred and George's. Hermione stopped on the second-floor landing for a moment, lost in thought. Then she continued up the stairs towards the attic where Ron slept, walking as quietly as she could.

Draco rose to his feet, all his laughter gone. "Father," he said, sounding surprised and a little awkward. "I hadn't thought you'd come..."

"Didn't you?" Lucius inquired lazily. He was dressed warmly against the chill of the night, in a heavy fur cloak, gloves, and even a fur hat. On someone else it would have looked ridiculous: Lucius managed to carry it off, but only just barely. "Did you think I was planning on leaving you up here forever?"

"No," Draco said. "I figured you'd send minions." He had put his composure back on like a cloak, after a moment of what had seemed like unguarded surprise. His gray eyes were half-lidded, his mouth curled into a narrow smile. "Not that I'm not glad to see you, Father."

Harry began to rise to his feet, but Draco stayed him with a silent whisper: *Don't. Stay where you are until I see what he wants.*

Harry slid back down the wall. The runic band at his waist touched his bare skin as his shirt slid up, caught on the stone wall, and he flinched - it burned with cold fire. Inside him, the lion on its chain growled softly.

Lucius took a step forward. The tower door behind him remained propped open slightly - a maddening glimpse of freedom. As he came towards them he nudged at something on the ground - the discarded *Passionate Trousers* - with the toe of his boot. "Up here reading romance novels to each other?" he inquired brightly, bending to pick it up. "Odd behavior for boys, I'd say. Something you want to tell me, Draco?"

"Yes," Draco said evenly. "In that hat, you look like a pimp."

Lucius smiled thinly and straightened up. "Get up," he said, and it took the sudden tensing of Draco's shoulders for Harry to realize that Lucius was, in fact, speaking to him. He got slowly to his feet, and as he did, Draco stood up as well, pushing Harry back as he did so - managing again, as he had done earlier, inside the Manor, to put himself between his father and Harry. Harry wished that he wouldn't - he almost welcomed a chance for Lucius to strike at him. He was more than slightly curious about what would happen if Lucius tried.

"Months ago," Lucius said, his eyes on his son again, "You told me I would have to kill you if I intended to harm Harry Potter - is that still true?"

Draco said nothing.

"Never mind," said Lucius with a graceful shrug of fur-covered shoulders. "I see that it is."

This time, Draco spoke, his voice toneless, "What do you want, Father?"

To Harry's great surprise, Lucius' answer to this question was clear and straightforward. It struck Harry as painfully as if Lucius had dropped a box of bricks on his chest. "That cup you took from the Stonehenge Museum," he said. "I want it. Give it to me or tell me where it is, and you walk free of this tower."

There was a silence. Draco swung around and stared at Harry, and in the other boy's anguished gaze, Harry saw one thing clearly - Draco had no more idea where the cup was than he did.

Never had the oddity of time travel been brought home to Ginny with quite such force before. This was the Draco she had known at age eleven, the one she had hated and been afraid of. She had remembered him as tall and gangly, towering over her, huge and terrifying. And here he was, but -

"You´re so *tiny*," she exclaimed, without thinking. "Look at you!"

A brick-red flush spread over the boy´s face. "I am *not* tiny!" he snapped, drawing himself up to his full height - which would have been about elbow level on Ginny. "I´m a whole inch taller than Harry Potter!"

He glared at her. She couldn´t believe it. She was torn between panicking and wanting to laugh. He really was tiny - a fragile little small-boned child, with rather too much fair hair and a thin face dominated by enormous gray eyes. The sort of little boy whose cheeks got pinched by old women in grocery stores. This was the monster who had humiliated her at age eleven? Ginny felt ashamed of herself.

"And you didn´t answer my question," he snapped. "Who are you? Tell me immediately, or I´ll go to my father!"

"I wouldn´t," she said immediately. "He´s in his study and he doesn´t want to be disturbed."

Draco narrowed his eyes at her, but fear of his father kept him in place. "Well, what are you doing here, then?"

"I´m the new, er, Arithmancy tutor," she said, realizing as she said it that this hardly explained her posh violet-colored dress and expensive jewelry. "For your summer studies."

"Governess? I don´t need a governess. I´m going to Quidditch camp this summer. I just came home to pick up my kit, in fact." Draco´s lip curled into a sneer. Ginny looked at him with fascination. She remembered having thought he was a very ugly boy; he hadn´t been, but the ugliness of his expressions had made him seem that way. "I don´t believe you at all, and anyway my father would never hire someone with so many freckles to work in this house. You practically look like a Weasley."

Ginny jumped. "I look like a *what?*"

"A member of the poorest and most repulsive family on the face of the earth," announced Draco, with a superior smirk.

"You are a horrible little boy," she snapped. "And when you go to camp this summer, I hope Seamus Finnegan puts dead spiders in your bed. In fact, I know he did. I mean, I know he will do. I mean..."

Draco screwed up his face into a disbelieving frown. "I don't like you," he said.

"And some things never change," replied Ginny sourly.

At that moment, the sound of the bolt being drawn back on the study door nearly startled her out of her wits; she clutched the books she was holding to her chest and gasped. Her eyes met Draco's across the room. He looked as terrified as she felt, and for a brief moment she almost saw the Draco she knew in the face of his younger self. Then he turned and fled, banging the library door shut behind him.

And not a moment too soon. Ginny reached for the Time-Turner around her neck and flipped it hastily; the world around her dissolved into grayness and from a great, great distance, she heard Lucius Malfoy's voice fading as he called out, *What was that noise? Who's there? Draco, was that you?*

"I can't believe you called your father a pimp," Harry said. He sat with his back to the parapet wall; Draco knelt next to him. It hurt a very little bit to talk, but the pain was receding. It was the one good thing about magically induced pain, he thought - it vanished almost instantly once the spell that caused it was lifted.

The tense look behind Draco's eyes eased slightly. "Well, he probably is one," he said. "I've always known he's into some nasty stuff...dragon's blood bars, unicorn smuggling, polyjuice brothels..." He broke off as Harry winced. "Are you sure you're all right? Look up at me -" His mouth tensed as Harry lifted his face. "Your pupils are still all dilated."

"Well, so 're yours," said Harry mulishly. "He just left it on me longer, is all."

"I know. I guess he really couldn't believe Hermione hadn't told you where the cup was."

"He must not read *Teen Witch Weekly*. If he did, he'd know she wasn't speaking to me."

"He probably let his subscription lapse while he was in the mental institution." Draco's grin was a white flash in the darkness. "Can you stand up?"

Harry tried and found that indeed, he could stand up. He still smarted slightly - he hadn't realized that the Veritas curse would be so painful. It had felt as if two enormous steel grappling hooks had been sunk into his chest and were ripping it open, exposing all his innermost secrets. 'You know,' Harry said slowly, turning to lean against the parapet, "that look on his face when he realized we really didn't know..."

"I know." Draco's smile faded: shock and anxiety had wiped his face clean of its usual guardedness. He looked defenseless, tired, and years younger. "I'd think it was funny, but I suspect it means he'll soon be back with something worse."

"Is that the famous Malfoy optimism?"

Draco did not reply. He was looking up at the sky as if he expected answers to appear there, written magically in the space between the stars.

"What are you thinking?" Harry asked.

"I was pondering the immortal words of Socrates, when he said, 'I drank *what?*'"

Harry laughed. Draco rested his elbow on top of the wall, his chin in his hand. He seemed to be staring out at the winter landscape, black and white as a chessboard now that the last sunlight was gone. The bare branches of the distant trees flung thin shadows along the snow, narrow as knife cuts. In between the trees, the moonlight struck sparks of fire from dangling icicles and nets of frost.

Harry felt an odd cold peace steal over him. Things were bad, it was true. They would probably only get worse. But he had faced worse in the past, they both had, and they had won out. At least this presented him with a target: something to fight against.

"I told you you were enjoying this," Draco said, so quietly that Harry had to bend his head to hear him. He was black and white in the moonlight too, a statuary angel with sad blank eyes.

"I´m not," Harry said, with partial truthfulness. "Well...maybe just a bit. It´s just that-"

He broke off as the tower door opened again. Harry turned slowly, his feeling of dread returning.

It was, of course, Lucius, once more alone. His heavy cloak was tightly fastened against the cold, and a brilliantly wicked look of inner glee illuminated his narrow features. "Hello, boys," he said. "Did you miss me?"

"Of course," Draco said flatly. "This tower just feels empty without a gibbering maniac on it." He turned slowly to face his father, keeping his back braced against the wall. He looked very tired. "What have you come for now? Just more taunting?"

Lucius shook his head, and his look of inner glee intensified. "I have not come with curses or taunting," he said. "Only news."

/What´s his game this time?/ Harry demanded silently of Draco.

Draco shrugged. */I don´t know./*

"You might, however," Lucius added, "want to sit down."

"This is ridiculous," Harry burst out angrily. "You can´t hurt us, not in any lasting way. The Ministry is watching - and even if you´ve got them in your pocket, which I don´t believe, there´s still Dumbledore and the rest, they´d never let you live if you hurt either one of us -"

"I have no intention of hurting either one of you."

"Then what's the point of coming up here and making empty threats?" Harry snapped, but Lucius wasn't looking at him. Instead, he was staring at his son and there was a look in his eyes that Harry found most unsettling - a dedicated predatory sort of appetite that made Harry want more than anything to distract Lucius' gaze onto himself. "You're just trying to frighten us, and it won't work. You just have a little bit of time until they come for us, and you can't hurt us, you can't kill us, and you know it. And you *can't touch me* --" Harry's voice came out on a hissing whisper. "I'd like to see you try it."

Lucius raised one silvery eyebrow, as if he found Harry's outburst tactless. "You I would not bother to kill," he said, still looking at Draco, and his gaze narrowed and narrowed until it seemed as sharp as a needle with which he jabbed at his son. Draco continued to stand very still against the parapet wall, his face in shadow. "You I would not bother to kill, Harry Potter, and Draco is dying already."

When Harry had been eight years old, he had been following Dudley to school one day - several paces behind him, as his cousin always insisted. They were late, as they often were, due to Dudley's habit of eating breakfast twice, and they'd been forced to sneak around the back of the school after the front gates had been closed. Ducking under some low-hanging tree branches, Dudley had held one back for him, and Harry, forgetting momentarily the instincts drilled into him by a lifetime of his cousin's abuse, had followed after. Dudley, of course, had immediately released the branch, which had whipped backward and slashed Harry across the face. Even Dudley had been surprised by the amount of blood it had produced, but more than the humiliation or the bleeding, what Harry always remembered was the sudden, vicious shock of it: the blinding pain out of nowhere.

He felt the same shock now, as if Lucius had walked up and hit him in the face. The words Lucius had spoken seemed in fact to make no real kind of sense, as if he had spoken them in another language.

"What?" Harry said. He heard his own voice, clear and stiff, as if it were a stranger's. "What did you say?"

"I should think I was quite clear," said Lucius, who seemed almost manic with the pleasure of his own malice. "Draco is dying."

Harry looked quickly to Draco, but the other boy was as unmoving as he had been before Lucius had spoken, a still black silhouette against the silvery parapet wall. His chest rose and fell rapidly but other than that he was motionless.

"Dying of *what?*" Harry demanded in a half-whisper; he wanted to speak more loudly, but he could not quite seem to get enough air.

"Poison," Lucius said, as if this should be obvious. "What else?"

Tell him, Harry thought, hard, in Draco's direction. *Tell him it isn't true.*

Draco did not reply, but he moved at last, very slightly; he raised his chin and looked at his father. The gesture lifted his face out of shadow. "It was the arrow," he said to Lucius. His voice was calm and factual. "It was the arrow, wasn't it? There was some kind of poison on the shaft."

"Aren't you clever," Lucius said dryly; he continued to speak after that but Harry didn't hear him. The sounds he made were drowned out by the roaring of the blood in Harry's ears; it sounded like thunder. As if to make up for this deafness, his vision leapt into a sudden painful clarity and he could see everything within his field of vision both perfectly and simultaneously. The shape of each irregular flagstone, the line of snowflakes melting along the parapet wall, the knifelike shadow Lucius cast on the ground.

He knew Lucius was not lying. Knew it from Lucius' dry gleefulness, from the dull knowledge in Draco's eyes, and even more than that he knew it from his own memories: Draco losing a Quidditch game he should not have lost, Draco stumbling over a practice fencing match, all his grace gone. Draco lounging against walls, leaning on bedposts while he talked, sprawling on the floor in front of fireplaces: Harry had put all this recent laziness down to half-insolent posturing, but it wasn't that, was it. It was that otherwise he would not have been able to stand up.

"How long," Draco was saying, when Harry's hearing returned, "How long have I got, then?"

"A month," Lucius said. "Two weeks, maybe, before you can't walk anymore."

A faint hard shudder passed over Draco: Harry saw his hands tighten at his sides and felt the shiver down in his own bones. Whatever had been blocking his throat dislodged itself and he spoke, "You poisoned him?" he whispered. "You -"

"I never said I was the one who poisoned him," Lucius said. "I am merely presenting the facts, and they are these: he has been poisoned. The poison is a rare and subtle one. It is nearly untraceable in the blood. It will not be a painful death. But neither will it be a particularly quick one."

"If he dies of this," Harry said in a flat icy tone, "I'll kill you myself."

"Be quiet, you spluttering child," snapped Lucius. "You will do no such thing. I will be Memory Charming you both shortly. You will not recollect anything I have told you. When Draco dies, it will be assumed to be a natural illness."

"Then why?" Draco asked. He was still leaning against the wall. The moonlight silvered his eyes and made them opaque. "Why tell us at all? It isn't like you to be sadistic with no larger purpose. If there's really no cure..."

"I did not say," Lucius remarked, "that there was no cure."

The air whistled in Harry's lungs as he sucked in a breath. "There's a cure? Then what -"

"Harry," Draco said in the same toneless voice. "Stop."

Harry subsided reluctantly. A cool smile ghosted across Lucius' narrow face as he looked from Draco's white face to Harry's, and back again. Slowly, he flexed his fingers inside his gloves. He appeared to be doing complicated mental arithmetic - arithmetic that amused him greatly. "I think," he said, "that I'd like to talk to Harry, now. Alone."

"I'll just step off this tower then, shall I?" Draco said with flat bitterness. "Won't matter much if I splatter myself all over the moat anyway. Just hastening the process."

"Your theatrics do not impress me," Lucius said. "I know you better than that. Malfoys do not tolerate suicides."

"No, but they seem to roll the red carpet out for murderers," said Harry in a savage sort of voice he barely recognized as his own. "Don't they?"

"I do what I must," said Lucius, unfazed, and gestured Harry towards the tower door. "Now, if you will come with me..."

"I most certainly won't," Harry snarled.

Lucius rolled his eyes. "If you'd rather I called upon my colleagues to drag you, be my guest," he said. "I can't promise they'll be too terribly gentle. You are not popular among my acquaintances, Harry Potter."

Harry opened his mouth to protest again, but Draco cut him off before he could speak. "Harry, he said. "Go."

Harry felt his mouth sag open. "But, I -"

Go! Draco said inside his head, so loudly that Harry nearly winced. He tried to reply in kind, but Draco had shut his mind down so completely that it was as if Harry were shouting into an empty and echoing cavern - there was no response at all.

"Really," Draco said out loud. "I'd rather you went."

Lucius' smile was positively incandescent. He swept an arm towards the tower doorway: "After you, Mister Potter."

And Harry went, his feet dragging, feeling as if some part of himself - the sane, logical part, which expected the world and everything in it to make some sort of sense - had been severed from him and might never be recovered.

At the door of the tower he turned and look past Lucius, back at Draco. Draco had finally moved away from the wall and was standing in the middle of the tower, in full moonlight, as bright as day. He seemed etched in light, as if all the angles and planes of him had been outlined in silver ink - cheekbones and chin, the lines of his narrow hands, the thin line of his mouth. Only his eyes, meeting Harry's across the space that separated them, looked black.

Later, when Harry, alone, tried to picture his friend, it was this image of Draco that would always come to his mind, even though he tried to replace it with happier ones: the cold white figure, straight and slender, outlined in moonlight against a frozen emptiness of stars.

The Ministry was, as Arthur had reported, in a shambles. Low-level officials scuttled here and there looking terrified, and the once-gracious looking marble entry hall was filled with frantic wizards and witches rushing about, registering complaints, reuniting with relatives scattered by Lucius' Whirlwind Charm, and exchanging hurried anecdotes. "Oh, I was dropped right down into the middle of some lot of mad Muggles having some sort of game, very boring, no flying at all. Where did *you* end up?"

Lupin looked wryly at Sirius. "The Memory Charm Squad must be out in full force today," he observed.

Sirius nodded. "Typical Lucius, wanting to cause as much disorganization as possible...look, there's young Percy Weasley over there."

Any hope they might have had that Percy would provide some assistance was dashed when they got within speaking distance of him, however. Looking harried to the point of torment, his red hair sticking out in all directions and his normally immaculate robes crumpled, Percy greeted them with a distracted air of panic. "Terrible things are going on," he hissed in a half-whisper, having consented to be dragged into a stairwell for a brief chat. "My office has been transfigured into a broom closet!"

"That is dreadful," Sirius agreed. Lupin fought the urge to kick him in the shin. "You must be distraught."

"I am distraught! It was a corner office! It had a view of the Thames!" Percy tugged at his hair with a woeful air. "Now it's full of mops and Parkinson's Perfect Parquet Polish!"

"Can't you register a complaint...?"

"Apparently it involves filling out several forms in triplicate, then sending them to the Department for the Investigation of Random Acts of Magic,

which I happen to know was closed down last year for lack of funds. Goddamn Malfoy," Percy seethed. "I'll get him for this."

"You think Lucius Malfoy had something to do with this?"

"Him and his cronies. I'm telling you, the only Ministry officials who haven't had their offices transfigured into something nasty are the ones who've always been a little bit shady, if you get my meaning." Percy gave Sirius a wide-eyed look. "You do get my meaning, don't you?"

"Percy, I *always* get your meaning," Sirius said. "You haven't a subtle bone in your body. None of you Weasleys do, except perhaps Bill. It's why you make such bad liars and, I'm rather beginning to think, why your father wound up in the position of Minister when he did."

Lupin spoke quietly. "Any word on who might be replacing him?"

Percy glanced quickly up and down the deserted marble hallway before replying. "The general procedure is that the head of the Advisory Council acts as temporary replacement if the Minister is no longer able to perform his duties. The position of head of the Council rotates monthly. Right now," Percy finished grimly, "it's Francis Parkinson."

"What a surprise." Sirius' tone was flat. "Francis Parkinson: runs a successful company that sells cosmetics and household charms. Keen on broomstick racing, pretending he wasn't a Death Eater twenty years ago, and yapping on about how the Muggles are ruining this fine country. I used to know him when I was an Auror."

"Apparently." Lupin was impressed. "So, in other words, he's a minion. How much of the Ministry would you say is now entirely under *their* control?"

"Let me put it this way," Percy said in a chilling tone. "Do whatever you have to do here and get out. Then, don't come back. This location is now hopelessly compromised. It won't be safe much longer..." Percy paused and for a moment the officious tone left his voice. "You've come from the Burrow, haven't you? Any word on Ginny and Ron?"

Sirius shook his dark head. "I'm sorry, they're not home yet. Still, both are hale and hearty, according to your mum's clock."

Percy sighed. "I'm sure they're fine. Still, if you wouldn't mind adding their names to the Missing Persons list in the main hall for me? In case they turn up without their memories or something." He drew his cloak more tightly about him, a woebegone expression creeping across his freckled face. "I'd better go," he said, and ducked out of the stairwell.

"I think young Percy has been reading too many comic books," Sirius remarked as the third Weasley child disappeared down the hall. "This location is now hopeless compromised indeed. Why didn't he just say it straight out: 'This building is full of miserable Death Eaters in training whose fondest dream would be to make festive if unconventional balloon animals out of your internal organs.'"

"Not everyone possesses your fabulous descriptive powers, Padfoot."

"Too true." They ducked out of the stairwell and made their way back to the Main Hall, still a hive of feverish action. Lupin watched Sirius a little uneasily as they made their way across the parquet floor. Sirius had that air about him of being ready to do something unexpected. That was never good.

They paused in front of a long roll of parchment tacked to the wall near two of the larger doors. Knots of wizards and witches stood about, muttering in low voices: nearby a pretty red-headed teenage girl was hugging an older witch and wizard - obviously her parents - and crying.

The parchment had a number of names on it, most of which had been checked off and a location noted where the Whirlwind Charm had dropped the subject: *Jessica Noll: Kensington High Street; Serena Verdant: blasted heath, Yorkshire; Darcy Claiborne: haystack, Suffolk*. Sirius picked up the quill that was floating nearby and began to scratch Ron's name onto the bottom.

"I wouldn't bother, if I were you," said a sour voice from behind them. "He's not considered missing. He's considered to have run off."

Lupin knew who it was even before he turned around. Snape. He stood behind them in his customary black, his greasy hair half-hiding his narrowed eyes, looking like a bat who had just swooped down from the high ceiling overhead. His long fingers were stained, as if he had come straight from his Potions laboratory.

"Snape," Sirius said. "What are you doing here?"

"Dumbledore sent me to find you," Snape said. "He had an urgent message he wanted me to deliver."

"All right," Sirius said, and folded his arms across his chest. "What is it?"

"Don't you think it would be better if we spoke outside?" Snape demanded in a hissing whisper.

"No," Sirius said. "I think it would be better if we spoke right here."

"Sirius..." Lupin began with a groan.

"What are you afraid of anyway, Snape?" Sirius snapped. "The idiot Death Eater minions in this building? They can't do anything to us. They don't want to show their hands too soon, so they'll leave us be - after all, we're not Muggles, and we're not breaking any rules."

"Oh, no?" Snape's eyes glittered. "I'm fairly sure there's a rule about no dogs on Ministry property."

Sirius affected an injured look. "And I invited you to my stag night, too."

"Although he did skip the reception," Lupin pointed out.

"Yes," Snape admitted. "But I had a good reason."

"Oh?" Sirius looked curious. "What was it?"

"I didn't want to go."

"Then why did you bother going to the stag night?" Sirius threw up his hands.

"I like the Cold Christmas Inn." Snape's voice was ruminative. "I enjoy their dartboard."

"You weird, antisocial, gerbil of a man," said Sirius. "I don't know why I bothered inviting you in the first place."

"I assumed Narcissa asked you to," Snape said. "She always liked me."

"Yes, well, nobody's perfect," Sirius muttered.

"I told her many times she was too good for you," Snape announced. "It would have made far more sense if you'd married *him*." He pointed at Lupin. "Nobody else can stand either one of you, and you could take each other for walks."

"I'm not sure any amount of urgent messages from Dumbledore are worth this," Lupin said, interrupting the glaring contest developing between Snape and Sirius. "Severus, if you've got something to say..."

Snape's eyes darted around the room. Then, with a sigh, he reached into his pocket and drew out a glass vial; he uncorked it and poured the potion inside onto the floor. A bright cloud of scarlet smoke flew up and enveloped the three of them inside a cloudy crimson bubble. Lupin could hear his own breathing and Sirius' in his ear; but other than that there was total silence. No noise from outside the bubble penetrated at all.

"Now we've broken a rule," said Snape, with some satisfaction.

"Always riding the ragged edge of rebellion, aren't you, Snape," said Sirius. His eyes were bright and amused. "I take it nobody can hear us when we're in here?"

"Exactly, but it's temporary, so listen closely." Snape spoke rapidly. "Professor Dumbledore has asked me to request that you once again assemble the old group. Headquarters will be the Burrow; it's already been re-warded. The great likelihood is that if the current Ministry is if not entirely under the control of Voldemort's supporters, it soon will be. It may be necessary to create an ancillary Ministry, and a secondary Council, recognized by the foreign Ministries -"

"That hasn't been done for hundreds of years," Sirius protested in an awed tone.

"Your grasp of history is as always, astounding. I recognize that this is an extreme procedure but these are extreme times. You are to be in charge of assembling our allies. Work quickly. We have very little time."

Barely had Snape finished speaking when the scarlet cloud disappeared, leaving Lupin feeling oddly exposed. He looked around, expecting that everyone would be staring at them, but nobody was.

"The cloud is invisible to all except those inside it," Snape said, seeing his confused expression. "Handy, isn't it? An invention of my own."

"Yes." Lupin was sincerely impressed. "Very nice."

"I call it the Cloud of Silence Potion," Snape added, warming to his topic.

"I would have called it Bernard," said Sirius. "But that's just me."

"You think you're very funny, don't you, Black," the Potions Master snapped.

"I am, as always, a slave to majority opinion," Sirius replied.

"I must get back to the school." Snape had apparently decided that ignoring Sirius was the best approach. "Dumbledore will owl you both later." He began to walk away, but paused after only a few steps, and turned. "Have you any message for him?" he asked, slightly reluctantly.

Sirius paused for a moment. Lupin knew that his dislike of Snape was battling it out with his desire for help from the man he admired most in the world. Finally, he said, "Tell him that his Head Girl is safely with us, in case he was worried. Ask him, if he hears anything from Lucius about our boys...anything at all...to please tell me immediately. Even," he added, more quietly, "even if it isn't good news."

Snape looked at him for a long moment. Then he nodded briskly, and walked off.

Sirius took a deep breath. "I need some air, Moony," he said, and his voice was suddenly tight. Without a moment's hesitation Lupin took his friend by the arm and steered him past a knot of wizards and witches, almost knocking over the teenage girl and her parents in his haste to get out the double doors.

Once outside, Lupin released Sirius, who leaned heavily against one of the impressive marble pillars adorning the front of the Ministry façade. He

looked down, his hands balled into fists at his sides. There were scars along his knuckles: scars he had gotten in Azkaban, Lupin knew, for they had not been there before. He had never asked Sirius how he had acquired them. Aside from the scars, he had neat, careful, artistic hands, the nails freshly manicured for the wedding that had never taken place.

"I´m so worried, Moony," Sirius said, looking away from Lupin, towards the empty Ministry gardens, their bare grounds covered with a light powdering of snow. "I´m so worried about both of them I can hardly breathe. The last thing I did was yell at them..."

"They´re fine." Lupin pushed his own worry down and spoke convincingly. "Look at your Vivicus charm."

Sirius glanced down at the silver band around his wrist. The red stone in it pulsed brightly as long as Harry was healthy and well. It was bright now. "I know," he said. "If it wasn´t for that, I´d have gone mad ages ago. I know Harry´s all right, and if he´s all right then Draco is too. Lucius would have to walk over Harry´s dead body if he wanted to hurt Draco. I know that. I *know* it, but I don´t feel it."

"You´d feel it if there was something wrong," Lupin assured him. He took a step forward and put his hand on his friend´s shoulder; it was tense as an iron bar. "Breathe, Sirius. You´ll feel better once we´re doing something."

Sirius nodded, and put his hand up to cover Lupin´s with his own. For a moment they stood there motionless; Sirius looking at his feet, Lupin looking out over the grounds. He´d spent his childhood comforting Sirius like this: Sirius, who had never had anyone else. James was too happy a person to really understand unhappiness in others, and Peter was not the consoling type. When Snape and his Slytherin cronies had dusted one of Lupin´s sandwiches with silver powder at supper, and Lupin had spent all night throwing up messes of silver and blood in the infirmary, Sirius had been the one who cried, and Lupin had consoled him then, as well. He remembered how startled and impressed he´d been by this odd prickly boy who always hurt more for other people than he did for himself.

His was startled out of his reverie by the sound of footsteps on snow: he turned and glanced behind him. The red-headed girl was following her parents down the steps towards a waiting carriage, and had glanced back

over her shoulder to look at him. He recognized her then, belatedly; he had not had her in a class since she was thirteen, but he had seen her often enough among the Slytherin students: Blaise Zabini, Draco's girlfriend.

It had begun to snow, lightly, like flour sifting from the sky. Draco, standing alone on the tower, spread his arms wide and leaned his head back and let the flakes fall into his open eyes and mouth. The moonlight stung his eyes like concentrated white fire: it held him where he stood as surely as a silver spike driven down through his body and into the stones at his feet.

It is no easy thing to be seventeen years old and dying: to be so young and to be in love and to be told that abruptly, all this will be ending. Draco had never been a particularly spiritual person: he had always been too attached to the material plane and what it could give him. If he could not touch a thing, it did not exist; if he could not see it, it did not matter. But then there was Harry, who believed in what could not be seen: in people who were better than they seemed to be, in the invisible world of good and evil and hope and redemption.

All your life, you lived in a windowless room. And now you can look up and see the stars. So Dumbledore had said to him, months ago, and Draco heard it again in his head as he looked up at the black winter sky fretted with icy fires. It was the sort of night that might have made him believe in angels; it was the sort of night that might have made him think that he could be one, himself.

Something was scratched into the mantel above the fireplace in Lucius's study; Harry squinted, but could not read the words.

It was warm in the room, despite the fact that the fire had died down in the grate. It was also very silent; the Death Eaters had led Harry into the room and departed noiselessly as cats. Harry wondered absently if they wore roller skates under their robes or if Voldemort had simply trained them rigorously to glide instead of walking. They moved like Dementors, which was probably on purpose.

Harry moved away from the fire. He would have appreciated the warmth under other circumstances, but it felt wrong, somehow, when there was no fire up on the tower. He felt Draco's cold down in his own bones, and shivered.

Are you all right? he asked, sending out a tendril of thought.

The reply came immediately. Draco's inner voice sounded light, unconcerned, and quite flat. He might have been commenting on the weather at a garden party: *I'm fine. Is my father there yet?*

No, Harry said. *I'm alone in the study. What should I do?*

You could steal stuff, Draco suggested. *There's some valuable antiques in there. Check out the grandfather clock.*

Harry hesitated a moment before replying. *I have a feeling your dad would notice if I tried to walk out of here with a grandfather clock shoved down my trousers.*

Draco's mental laughter sounded like the faint rustle of leaves. Harry was amazed he could laugh at all. *That's a such a setup for so many jokes at your expense, I don't even know which one to pick.*

Well, don't strain yourself. So, what else is in here?

Nothing important. Look at the desk - he always empties his things out on the desk when he comes home. Anything there that looks -- like anything?

Harry edged over to the desk and looked it over. If he'd hoped to find some kind of evidence of Lucius' recent evildoing, like a bloodied knife or a handy-dandy parchment with "Muggles To Be Killed" written across the top, he was disappointed. *There's not much here. Some blank papers, a pipe, some coins and things. It looks as if he was travelling fairly light.*

Hmm. Draco sounded thoughtful. *What kind of coins?*

Harry blinked at the gold on the desk. They looked like ordinary Galleons to him, but then what did he know? He picked one up, feeling its cool heaviness against his fingers, then closed his hand around it spasmodically as the door to the study opened, and several more robed

and hooded figure entered. Harry spun around, dropping the coin into the sleeve of his cloak.

The tallest of the Death Eaters drew his hood back; it was Lucius. "Harry," he said. "How kind of you to agree to talk with me."

Harry said nothing.

With a wave of his hand, Lucius dismissed his entourage. They left quietly, and Lucius and Harry were alone. Lucius drew off the cloak he had been wearing and held it up; the mahogany coat rack in the corner bent itself sideways and plucked the cloak out of Lucius' hand. Underneath it, he wore an expensive gray suit and a dark tie. He looked, to Harry, like a Muggle businessman. He squashed the urge to ask Lucius if the suit was Armani.

Harry felt quite cold now, despite the fire. He watched as Lucius sauntered across the room and sat himself neatly in the chair behind the desk. He did not offer a seat to Harry, and Harry made no move to take one. They stared at each other for a long moment in silence, the tall blond man and the slight boy with his torn cloak and cuffed right hand.

"Would you," said Lucius finally, "like a drink?"

He raised his hand again, and the decanter on the sideboard rose into the air and came to hover by his side. Harry shook his head. Lucius, seeming indifferent, allowed the decanter to pour him a glass of port, then took a long and thoughtful sip.

Harry, near screaming point with impatience, dug his nails into his palms and spoke evenly. "If he's really ill," he said, "you shouldn't leave him up there like that. It's too cold. He might die too soon, and then where would you be?"

"Doubtless you're right," Lucius replied, with an affected sigh. "Very shortsighted of me. One of my many faults."

Harry again said nothing. One of the useful things he had learned from Draco was how effective silence could be when utilized as a weapon. If he waited, Lucius would get impatient and speak.

He did. "It is very interesting," Lucius said, "how much you have changed, Harry Potter. How much of you has bled away through this connection you share with my son - and yes, I know all about it - how much has bled away, and how much has been replaced. Do you even know who you are any more?"

"I know exactly who I am," Harry said coolly. "I´m sorry if it´s confusing for you. Wait, actually, no I´m not sorry at all. You know why? Because I hate you."

"How sad for me," Lucius said, taking a slender enameled pipe out of the wooden drawer on his left, and tapping it against the side of the desk. "And here I had so hoped we would become close."

"Do you always want to become close with people you´re planning to kill?" Harry asked.

Lucius laughed and reached for a small gilded box that Harry had thought was a paperweight. He opened it, and withdrew a pinch of tobacco. "I´m not going to kill you," he said. "I have thought a great deal about what the best way to get my son to cooperate with me might be, and have concluded that killing you at this juncture would be relatively ineffective toward that end."

"I´m touched."

"You would not be the first thing he has loved that I have destroyed," Lucius said. "It might teach him a lesson. Of course," and he shrugged, Draco´s own, elegant, shrug, "that lesson is not today´s lesson."

"You can´t kill me," Harry said. "The Ministry would have your head. Whether Draco cares about me or not, that´s not the issue - and anyway, you´re wrong. You taught him not to love anyone, don´t you remember? He hasn´t forgotten, even if you have. He feels responsibility, loyalty....obligation to me -"

Lucius chuckled. "Maybe he can´t love," he said. "Or he couldn´t. But what of you? You can, and he has become what you are. I see how it has changed him. You feel, and he feels through you. Through you he can know what it is to love and to grieve, to dream and to sacrifice. You can

be his expectation of happiness; you can be his broken heart. Think of all that world of feeling he would lose, if he lost you."

"But," Harry said, "it is not my death you are planning."

"Planning?" Lucius echoed. "I am not planning his death. It has already begun. And perhaps, now that I have told you what my son would lose if you died, it is time for you to think of what would happen to you should the reverse occur. I appeal," he added, raising a small gold wand from the desktop, "to your sense of self-preservation."

Think of what would happen to you, if he died, Lucius had said. And Harry tried. He stood where he was and he tried to imagine it, but it was like trying to imagine what it would be like to be paralyzed. As surely as his legs and arms moved when he told them to, as surely as his lungs filled with air when he breathed, Draco existed as part of him. Lucius might as well have said, *Imagine you never were a wizard, or Imagine you had never heard of magic, or Imagine your parents had never died.*

"Why do you hate him so much?" Harry whispered finally. He heard his own voice as if from a great distance; wondered, vaguely, if Draco could hear or experience anything of this through him. He hoped not. "I understand why you hate me. But Draco, he's your son. He loves you - he loved you, anyway, and he would still if you hadn't burned all that out of him. What did he ever do to you?"

There was a long silence. The fire crackled harshly in the grate; the afternoon shadows lengthened across the floor. A nervous pain twisted behind Harry's ribs, as if his body comprehended what his mind could not, and was wincing in the anticipation of some terrible physical loss.

"I told Draco this once, a long time ago," Lucius said. His voice was curiously flat. Harry had not heard him speak like this before. "When a man pledges himself to the Dark Lord, when he receives the Mark, he must, in exchange for this honor and to prove his loyalty, give to the Dark Lord one thing. One...gift. It must be something of precious personal value. I have seen men give up a great talent for music or art, a treasured memory, a grand passion. Draco asked me once what I gave up, and I said that what I had given was him. That is not strictly true, for each man can give only what is his own to give; even my son, in the end, belongs to himself alone. What I gave was my own capacity to care about him."

"You gave up....your ability to love?" Harry asked. It felt bizarre, asking such a personal question of Lucius Malfoy. But his curiosity was stronger than his anxiety.

"No," Lucius said. "Just my feelings of paternal love. I had no children at the time, of course. Had I never had any, as I planned, I suppose it would have been an empty gift in the end. But then, the Dark Lord has no use for empty gifts. Only a year after I pledged myself in his service, he requested that I have a son. So I had a son." Lucius' eyes went to the window, and for a moment he seemed to gaze into nothingness. "The Dark Lord is nothing if not thorough. In me, he knew he had a servant who would produce a child he would not mind giving up when necessary - because, of course, I had given him up a long time ago."

"Couldn't..." Harry began falteringly, "couldn't it be reversed, somehow, I mean, all spells are reversible -"

"Reversed?" Lucius' voice was suddenly icy again. "Why would I want it reversed? I am very satisfied with the bargain I made. To gain much, one must sacrifice much, and I have gained vastly. I have gained the world."

And lost your soul. Harry thought of Draco, up on the tower. He reached out with his mind for him, but felt only a resistant uncommunicative silence. Anxiety gnawed at his stomach again, worse than before. "What do you want from me?" he asked abruptly. "You didn't bring me down here just to tell me stories about the past."

"No." Lucius' voice had a razor edge now; Harry suspected that the older man now very much regretted having said anything at all about his gift to Voldemort. "I brought you down here to offer you a bargain."

"What kind of bargain?"

"It is simple. You have that cup. I want it."

"I told you already, I don't have it and I don't know where it is."

"I understand that. But your girlfriend does. And therefore, I am willing to make a trade."

The world turned dark around the edges. "A *trade?*" Harry whispered. "You mean - you don't mean trading one of them for the other?"

I'd rather die myself, he thought, and meant it, but did not say it. Lucius did not want or need his death at the moment. Offering it would mean nothing.

Lucius chuckled. "Amusing as it would be for me to watch you make that choice....no, that isn't what I mean. I mean, that I will trade you what you want, if you will write a letter to Miss Granger, and ask her to share the location of the cup with me. Tell her why, as well. She'll understand."

"You'll trade me what?" Harry said, his head spinning.

"This," Lucius said, and from an inner pocket of his robe, he drew an object and set it down on the desk in front of him.

Harry stared. It was a clear glass vial the size, perhaps, of a rolled parchment. The top and bottom of the vial were thickly encrusted with wine-colored jewels. Inside was perhaps two inches of pale greenish liquid.

"More poison?" Harry said, weary bitterness creeping into his voice.

"No," Lucius replied. "Antidote."

Hermione lay awake in Ginny's bed, staring up at the ceiling. Restlessness hummed in her blood; she could not sleep. When she shut her eyes she saw Harry's face, pale and worried when he turned away from her back at school. Not having seen him since, she fretted: what if he died, and the last thing she had ever said to him was that she didn't want to be with him anymore?

Giving up on sleep, she sat up slowly, and rested her chin on her knees. Thinking about what would happen to her if Harry died had always filled her with shuddering nausea; she remembered Draco telling her that she couldn't imagine a world without Harry in it. *Oh, but I can*, she thought grimly. *I just don't want to live in it.*

She got up and padded quietly into the bathroom in search of water. After lighting the torch with a whispered Lumos, she stared disconsolately at herself in the mirror over the sink. So this was what love looked like: dark shadows under the eyes, pinched pallor, unhappy mouth. Draco would have laughed at her, wouldn't he. Gazing at her own face, she spared a flash of ironic pity for Pansy: so this was Pansy's idea of a devastating femme fatale, was it? Anyone who had to wear her face to feel pretty and loveable....she paused, the glass of water halfway to her mouth. What on earth HAD put this diabolical scheme into Pansy's head? Why Ron? It wasn't that he had been nursing a secret passion for her all these years, Hermione was quite sure of that. Oh, there was something there, there always was with two people who were so close and who had once been romantically involved, however briefly. There was always that lingering possessiveness, in Ron no doubt complicated by his intermittent jealousy of Harry that had never quite gone away. Still, Pansy must have caught onto something: a look, a phrase, a gesture, something about Ron...

Something about Ron. Hermione put the glass down on the sink, slowly and carefully. Her earlier, cursory search of Ron's room had yielded nothing and she had felt ashamed for looking, especially when she had no idea what she was looking for. But something tickled the back of her mind now; something she could not push down or ignore...

As quietly as she could, she doused the light and left the bathroom, creeping down the hall past Charlie's room, and crossing the landing to the stairs. A quick anti-creaking spell took care of noise; she padded upstairs in near-silence, and slipped into Ron's room.

She lit the lamp and glanced around. It looked exactly as it had that afternoon. Neat and tidy, covered with posters, the same frayed orange bedspread. The same stack of photographs was sitting on the desk, where Ron must have placed them after pulling them down off the walls. The same pile of comics by the bed. She'd been through the desk drawers and found nothing much of interest - so she had thought. She knelt down now and reopened the largest drawer, sliding it out completely and placing it on the floor.

There was a box inside it, which she had seen before. It was a blue box, simple painted wood, with a gold embossed seal on the top: *Mahoney's Divination Supplies, 14 Diagon Alley*. She knew the box: she had given it

to Ron herself, at the end of the summer. What he had said, or so nearly said, to her when they'd been imprisoned in Slytherin's castle had always stayed with her although he had never mentioned it again: she had always wondered if it had something to do with his never-used Divination talent. This box had been the result of those musings.

She pried the lid off, and sat back, gazing at the box contents thoughtfully. There was a scrying bowl: small and made of copper. There was a pack of tea leaves with a small instructional booklet on how to use them. There was a sphere of dark crystal on a bronze stand, on which was etched the words: I hold the secrets.

Hermione lifted the sphere thoughtfully in her hand. Then she brought her hand down, hard, smashing the crystal ball against the metal edge of Ron's bedside table. She braced herself for the noise of it shattering: to her surprise, it broke apart quietly and neatly, in two perfect halves.

A small, carefully rolled bundle of handwritten parchments tumbled out. They had been folded over and over and wound around with a thin silver chain. A feeling of inexpressible sadness took hold of Hermione as she picked them up: she knew what they were. Even knowing what he knew, even knowing the truth, Ron would not have been able to bring himself to throw them out. Underneath everything, she sometimes thought, he was the most sentimental of them all - the most easily amused and the most easily hurt. With a sigh, she picked up the small packet of love letters and dropped it into her robe pocket, where it sat heavily, just over her heart.

"So that's the deal," Harry said. He'd been pacing up and down the top of the tower since the guards had brought him back, now he stopped, and put his hands behind his back, and looked at Draco. The wind had picked up: it kept blowing strands of Draco's hair into his face, and when he reached to push it back, the adamantine cuff seared a cold line across his skin. "The cup in exchange for the antidote. Well, not to cup, so to speak - just a letter to Hermione asking her to send it to the Manor. Which she would, once she realized what's at stake. It's pretty simple, really."

"I wonder," Draco said. He found himself possessed of a curious calm. "If he's been planning this for a long time."

"I don't think so," said Harry. His hair blew across his face. "Not this specifically. Anyway, it doesn't matter."

"Right," Draco said. "We have to think. What do we do now?"

There was a short silence. Then Harry spoke, his tone very careful: "What do you mean, what do we do now?"

Draco hesitated and looked harder at Harry. But Harry's face was strangely set and unreadable; his green eyes were serious and dark. "About my father," Draco said. "What do we do?"

Harry shook his head - not so much a gesture of negation than as if he were coming up out of deep water and for a moment, could not hear properly. "We give him whatever he wants," he said. "We haven't got a choice, have we? He's got your antidote."

A strange, uncompromising weariness had settled on Draco. It was as if he looked at Harry from a great distance, through clouds of muffling fog. "We've got a choice," Draco said. "We don't have to do what he says."

"But then we don't get the antidote," Harry said, speaking very slowly, as if he were explaining the situation to a small child.

"I know," Draco said. "Then we don't get the antidote."

Realization flooded into Harry's face; he went very red, then very white. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying there's no point," Draco said. "If my father says it's the antidote, then it's probably the antidote. But there'll be some loophole, some clever excuse not to give it to us - he'll keep holding it over our heads, make us dance like puppets on strings, and we'll still lose in the end."

"He said it would save your life," said Harry.

"And it will - now," Draco said. "But there'll be something else, and something else after that. You see how he is. He thinks he owns me. And as long as I exist under his power, then he'll make me a stick to beat you with. If you give in now, he'll just know that it works."

Harry shook his head again. "It doesn't matter. None of that matters right now. What matters is what we can do, right now, this minute, and right now you're dying and we have to stop it."

Draco heard himself laugh out loud. Not a very pleasant laugh, either. "This is why you're such a bad planner, Harry," he said. "As if the world doesn't exist past the next five seconds."

Harry closed his eyes and balled his hands into fists. Draco could tell that he was trying to get a hold of himself. He watched him with a detached feeling of sickness in his stomach. He did not like hurting Harry, and wondered in a desultory sort of way why he always seemed to be forced into circumstances where there was no other choice.

"What did my father say to you?" Draco demanded, finally. "To make you react like this - do I have to remind you that he lies?"

Harry opened his eyes. "Oh, I know he lies," he said. "But he's like you. He won't lie if the truth is at hand, and more powerful than any lie might be. He didn't tell me anything I didn't already know. Not really. It was the way he said it."

Draco didn't really hear him. His mind had stopped on the second sentence Harry had spoken, *But he's like you.*

"I won't let my father turn you into some kind of pawn for him to play with," he said harshly. "I won't. Any trade he offers isn't a real trade, *can't you see that?*" He pushed back the damp hair that was falling in his eyes - despite the freezing cold, he was sweating. "I know you can't think like that, Harry. When it comes right down to it, you just never seem to grasp how evil people can be. My father *hates* you. Any deal he's willing to make will not have your best interests at heart. Or mine. You'd have to be blind or stupid or both not to see that."

"Maybe I'm both. But I'm not going to let the fact that you hate your father dictate whether you live or die -"

"He's expecting you to give in, Harry! His whole plan is built on it."

"Fuck his plan and everything else," Harry said tightly. "I've lost everything - all my friends. I won't lose you as well."

"You face everything alone in the end, anyway - you said so yourself -"

"God *damn* it!" Harry's voice snapped in half like a bone breaking. "What would you do if it was the other way around? *What would you do if it was me dying?*"

"That would be different," said Draco, unfazed.

"How? *How* is that different?"

"Because you're Harry Potter." Draco's voice was clear and toneless. He was stating facts - simple facts. "The Boy Who Lived. The one who'll save everyone. You're needed. I'm not."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard," Harry said bitterly. "I can't believe you'd take who I am and throw it in my face like that - what's *wrong* with you? You think I could live with myself knowing that I let you die because I'm famous and you're not?"

"It's not about being famous. And anyway, you wouldn't have to live with yourself - you wouldn't remember it. My father said he'd Memory Charm us both. You wouldn't have to know," Draco said, and instantly regretted it.

Harry stared at him. The pupils of his eyes had dilated so far that they looked black, rimmed with faint bands of green. "I have never," he said, "ever, in my life, wanted to hit someone as much as I want to hit you right now."

"Hit me if you want," Draco said quietly. "But know this: if you let my father win, then Voldemort wins. And if he gets the cup, he can destroy the world with it. It sounds ridiculous, but there it is. You're a hero, aren't you? And this is a hero's choice. Your friends - or everything else."

Harry's hands, at his sides, flexed, and Draco wondered for an odd detached moment if Harry really was going to hit him. Then Harry said, in a clear factual voice, "I should hope that you would know what I'd choose."

Draco looked at him. And realized, with an odd sort of shock at his heart, that he didn't know. He would have assumed Harry would have chosen,

as he'd phrased it, everything else. He opened his mouth to ask, couldn't think of a way to formulate the question, and then lost the opportunity forever, for at that moment the tower door opened again and Lucius stepped through.

He was not smiling, but he had an expectant look about him. Something gold winked at his right breast pocket, underneath his open cloak. In his right hand he carried a rolled parchment and a quill. "So, boys," he said, looking from one of them to the other. "Have you made up your minds?"

Hermione had spread the parchments out on the desk and was going through them with a shaking hand. She had managed to push her horror at being impersonated to the back of her mind: now it leaped out afresh. Someone had copied her handwriting, copied it so well that even her best friend had been duped by it. And they had not just copied her writing, but her expressions, her turns of phrase....Pansy must hate her so, so much, Hermione thought, her skin crawling, she must have planned this for so long, watched her so closely. The hair prickled along Hermione's spine and she shivered.

Dearest,

I missed you today. I thought about you so much during Potions that I forgot to take notes - pretty soon I'll be facing my greatest fear, what was it you said? A homework paper that only got nine out of ten?

I can't wait to see you tonight. I wish I didn't have so much work to do for my final project. I know it's because I've been spending so much time with you that it isn't ready. We can work on the project together if you don't mind if I bring some homework with me. Imagine me creeping along the corridors to you, my pockets full of burdock, mugwort and rue...if you wouldn't mind bringing the yarrow root as well, that would be a help...now, don't forget!

All I want is just to spend time with you, of course, except that will have to wait until after New Year's, won't it? Thank you darling for your obedience and ability to understand...I know it's been hard keeping this a dark secret. Won't it be a relief when we can finally be together without any hiding.

Oh lord, someone's coming. I must run. I love you.

Hermione.

A frown crinkled the side of Hermione's mouth. Burdock, mugwort and rue - what was that about? Something Ron had said to her before he left school leaped suddenly into her mind - "It wasn't just sex, you know. We talked, we ate together, we did our Potions homework..."

She looked again, hard, at the letter. The transition from the first paragraph into the second was fairly subtle; the entreaty to bring ingredients for a potion was buried under endearments, but Hermione had a feeling it was the real gist of the letter. None of the letters, upon more careful perusal, were all that passionate: they were carefully if affectionately worded. Which, indeed, would have been Hermione's style had she actually written them. She was not much of a love letter writer: she had never even written a love letter to Harry, and could not imagine doing so. She loved him, but the idea of sitting down and writing a paean to his green eyes and adorable nose struck her as faintly ridiculous. Perhaps she had no poetry in her soul, but there it was.

She slowly lifted her wand and touched the end of it to the paper. There was a simple rhyming charm...

"Ink and parchment, quill and bone

Let this letter's truth be shown.

Quill and inkpot, seal and feather

Reveal the writer of this letter."

The parchment trembled. Then the words on the paper rearranged themselves to form a name: PANSY PARKINSON.

Hermione shrugged to herself as the name on the parchment melted away and the original content returned. Well, she'd expected it to be Pansy. No surprise there. She bit her lip. There was one more thing she could do; she hadn't done it because she was afraid of the answer. They'd learned in DaDA that certain kinds of Confundus Charms could be woven into written material: the famous "book you could never stop reading,"

according to Lupin, contained in fact one of the strongest Obedience Charms ever created woven into the text.

"Revelatus confundus," she murmured.

The parchment trembled again. This time the words did not melt away, only some of them darkened and stood out against the rest of the text.

Dearest,

I missed you today. I thought about you so much during Potions that I forgot to take notes - pretty soon I'll be facing my greatest fear, what was it you said? A homework paper that only got nine out of ten?

*I can't wait to see you tonight. I wish I didn't have so much work to do for my **final project**. I know it's because I've been spending so much time with you that it isn't **ready**. We can work on the project together if you don't mind if I **bring** some homework with me. Imagine me creeping along the corridors to you, my pockets full of **burdock, mugwort and rue**...if you wouldn't mind bringing the **yarrow root** as well, that would be a help...**now, don't forget!***

*All I want is just to spend time with you, of course, **except** that will have to wait until after New Year's, won't it? Thank you darling for **your obedience** and ability to understand...I know it's been hard keeping this a **dark** secret. Won't it be a relief when we can finally be together without any hiding.*

*Oh **lord**, someone's coming. I must run **and I love** you-- I hope that you will **always love me**.*

Hermione read the highlighted words out with an audible exclamation of dismay: "*Final project is ready. Bring burdock, mugwort and yarrow root. Now forget all except your obedience to the dark lord and always love me.*"

She sat back on her heels, and shook her head, a heavy foreboding settling over her. "Oh, Ron," she said aloud. "What have you gotten yourself into?"

Harry held out his hand to Lucius. "Give me the quill," he said.

"No," Draco said sharply, and stepped forward, but Lucius had put himself between the two boys, and he held his son off with one arm.

"Harry -"

Harry bit his lip and averted his eyes from Draco. "Give me the quill -" he said again, quickly. "And some parchment."

"A very wise decision," Lucius said. His smile was sharp enough to cut glass. "I am glad to see at least one of you has some sense." He continued to hold Draco off with one arm; with the other, he held out parchment and quill to Harry. "Write," he said.

Harry took the quill and paper and stepped back. The quill was one Draco recognized: Lucius' favorite raven feather, self-inking; the plume was dipped in gold. *Harry*, Draco thought furiously. *Harry, this is stupid, listen to me. Tear up the parchment...*

But Harry had blocked him out; his words struck against the walls Harry had thrown up against him like soap bubbles breaking against rocks. Draco wanted to rush forward and push his father out of the way, but it would have been pointless - in the state he was in, he couldn't have wrestled a Cornish pixie, and Lucius had always been very strong.

As if he sensed his son's thoughts, Lucius turned his glass-bright smile on Draco. Draco could sense his father's delight: this was what Lucius liked best. Winning, dominating, controlling a situation. Controlling the people in it. His smile widening, Lucius reached into his pocket and took out a clear vial which Draco recognized immediately from Harry's description. The antidote inside it was pale green. He set it down on the stones at his feet and looked at Harry. It was evident from his posture that he was making it clear that should Harry make a move towards him, he would crush the vial under his boot.

"What was it my old Potions professor used to say?" Lucius mused, his head tilted thoughtfully. "Why don't I hear the sound of quills scratching against parchment? Although, I suppose in this case, it would be only one quill."

Harry said nothing, but his fingers tightened on the quill until they were a bloodless white. And Draco remembered, without being able to help it, what Hermione had said to him at the Hogsmeade station, about Harry.
/They used me to get to him, Draco. They used me -they know how to hurt him the worst, and I can't be part of that. I won't be./

Abruptly, Harry's grip on the quill loosened, and he began to write, holding the parchment awkwardly against his forearm. The sound of the nib scratching against the parchment was loud in the still night. Lucius looked down at the antidote at his feet, and then over at Draco. "Calm yourself, boy," he said, as gently as Draco had ever heard him speak. "Let your friend save you, if that is what he wants. Should he preserve you, perhaps you can do the same for him, later."

The gentle tone in Lucius' voice was too much to bear; Draco looked away from his father and at Harry. His friend's head was bent; he was writing; he did not look up. A queer dreamlike state had come over Draco: he could see everything very clearly, and yet at the same time it was as if the whole world was locked away on one side of a sheet of glass and he was on the other. This was, perhaps, the first thing that had happened to him in a year that he felt Harry could not possibly understand, and that he did not want him to understand. He was not Dumbledore, to regard death as the next great adventure, but he was a Malfoy. He would stare death down and never show that he was afraid. One day...

One day you will understand, he thought at Harry, not knowing whether Harry could hear him or not. I always thought I would follow you up to the gates of Hell if I had to. And that, once arriving there, I would beg the gatekeeper to take me instead of you. And if he must take you, I would ask to come with you. And if he would not let me come with you, I would wait for you on the shores of the river. I promised to watch over you and follow you always. I promised never to leave you. I never thought that death might prevent me. Not your death, but mine.

Harry did not look up.

So, he was not listening - but it did not matter. Draco's own mind was made up. He closed his eyes. If he could see, he couldn't do what he had to do. He judged the distance to his father, and took a step forward, and another. He heard Lucius begin to speak. Then Draco lashed out with his foot, a hard swift kick. The toe of his boot connected with the vial; he

opened his eyes and saw it fly into the air and shatter against the low parapet wall. Green fluid and glass splashed over the flagstones.

He saw Harry raise his head, his eyes uncomprehending at first: then he went white, and the quill fell out of his hand. The parchment followed, fluttering like a white feather, landing at Harry's feet. Draco saw that Harry had written no more on it than *Dear Hermione*; he was surprised, it had seemed as if so much time had passed...He glanced up at his friend, but Harry's expression had changed and then Draco couldn't look at him anymore; he looked at his father instead, and saw something he had rarely seen before: Lucius looking shocked beyond reason. He had raised his hand as if he could hold Draco back; now he dropped it to his side, and looked at his son with a disbelieving bitterness...and something else underneath that, something that looked almost to Draco like a furious respect, although he knew that was impossible.

"You realize what you've done," Lucius said to his son, his voice a fierce whisper. "That's all there was - there is no more."

"I know," Draco said. "I realize what I've done."

Lucius' mouth thinned into a razored line. "You're a fool," he said, turned on his heel, and stalked though the door, slamming it hard behind him.

The exhaustion was so bad now that it was like pain, without quite being pain. Ron could not calculate how long he had gone now without sleep or food: probably no more than a day, but the hours and hours and hours of chess had taken such a toll on his concentration that it seemed like much more.

He had always enjoyed playing chess; now it was beginning to sicken him. Every time a game ended, he hoped against hope it would be the last one. Every time, the Dark Lord waved his hand and the board was magically renewed, and the deadly voice said, "Again."

He could no longer tell pawns from knights from bishops. The pieces were heavy as rocks in his numb fingers. He willed his mind to concentration, willed himself to formulate some kind of strategy. Nothing came to mind.

He had won several games and lost several games. It had not seemed to matter either way. Each time Voldemort had raised his hand; each time the voice came again with the single word: "Again." Ron had begun to think that this was not chess at all but merely some refined form of torture.

Slowly, Ron picked up his knight, and looked down. His exhausted mind struggled to make sense of the chess board, to decipher its patterns. It seemed to waver in front of him, rippling as if a cloud of heat were passing over it. His right hand spasmed, and the knight fell out of his limp fingers, striking the travertine board with a harsh, echoing click.

It was as if the click were the sound of a switch being flipped inside Ron's mind. Without warning the world ripped down the center like a fruit being peeled in half. His ears roared, and agonizing pain shot through his knees and elbows. A moment later he realized this was because he had tumbled out of his chair, hit the floor and crumpled. He rolled over and stared up at a world of shifting shadows.

"What's happening?" he whispered. "It hurts. It *hurts*."

"What do you see?" said the knifelike voice of the Dark Lord. "Boy, tell me what you see."

The shapes moved and coalesced. Now they were racing by him like scenery viewed from a train window. Images fluttered rapidly by, visible but inaudible, more real than dreams. It had never been like this before. Nothing had ever been like this before.

"I see," he said, and shut his eyes, but it made no difference. The future rushed towards him and swallowed him up; he was inside it now, staring out. He was the still center of the turning world: he could see everything at once and the power of it was too much to contain. Words spilled out of his mouth; he could not stop them. "I see the Dark Mark over Hogwarts," he said in a single rasping breath. "I see the sky black with smoke - and the Mark again and again and again. I see all the wizarding houses in England and the sky over them is full of death. I see the dead. Some of them are children -"

"Very good," said Voldemort. "Tell me more. Do you see Harry Potter?"

"Harry - I see Harry. He has blood all over his hands. He's crying. And now I see his bracelet. It's in broken pieces. I see Harry leaving. He's going over the water. He puts his hand to his throat but it's gone - that chain he wears. The Charm."

"The Epicyclical Charm," Voldemort said. "The one Lucius so carelessly made for his son. And Lucius's son - do you see him?"

"No - no. I don't see him. I can't see him..."

A whispered laugh. Rhysenn? "Perhaps, Master, that one has no future."

"Look again," the Dark Lord said to Ron. "Look harder."

But Ron barely heard him. He was adrift in a world of images that no longer made any sense: he saw the sky lit by dazzling fire, saw a crumpled body inside a pentagram, saw flames leap from the windows of the Ministry, saw two people embrace and kiss inside a cage made of gold, and knew that what they were doing was terribly wrong somehow. He saw Hermione, who turned and looked at him with awful sadness, and Seamus, surrounded by green light as if he stood underwater. He saw a glass heart snapped in half and then he saw the runic band that Harry wore shattered into fragments, and he cried out, although he never knew until later what name he had called. All he knew was the darkness as it overwhelmed him and drew him down into a merciful oblivion.



The door shut behind Lucius.

Draco turned around and looked at Harry.

He had steeled himself to face Harry's furious anger; he had expected rage and resentment, even disdain or contempt. He had expected to be shouted at. But Harry was not shouting. He did not even seem angry. He had gotten down on his knees, and was carefully gathering up all the bits of broken vial scattered over the stones. He held the shards he had picked up in his cupped left hand; his other hand shook as he ran it over the stones, looking for the half-invisible slivers of clear glass.

Draco's mouth went dry. "Harry - what are you doing?"

Harry looked up slowly. The moonlight struck his glasses; Draco couldn't see his eyes, just the set of his chin and the twist to his mouth. The blood on his hands where the glass had cut him was black in the moonlight. "Maybe it's not all gone," Harry said. "Maybe there might be some left..."

Draco didn't say anything about the sheer impossibility of this, just stood where he was, looking at Harry and thinking that having Harry be furious with him would have been better than this.

"I just thought it might help," Harry said, and looked down at his hands, where the blood mingled with the last bits of antidote and the silvers of glass. His hair fell down and hid his face. Draco wondered exactly what it was Harry was talking about. He remembered Harry in his dream, kneeling in the sand, telling Draco he had come too late to be of any help.



"Don't," Draco said. "Harry...."

"If we could get the bits to a lab...run tests..."

/Harry./ Draco knelt down next to Harry. He took the other boy by the wrists, and held them tightly. */There isn't any point./*

Harry raised his chin. His eyes were abnormally clear; a tearless, lucent green. */Why didn't he Memory charm us right away, your father? As soon as you smashed the vial?/*

/Now he's being sadistic/, Draco said wearily. */Now we made him angry - there's no telling what else he'll do./*

/Or has done./ Even Harry's inner voice was inexpressibly weary and flat.
/All this time I thought you hated him. But you hate yourself more. Or maybe you hate me./

/Hate you?/ Draco's grip on Harry's wrists tightened, and Harry winced.

"My hands," he said out loud.

Draco looked down. "Hell, they're full of glass. You're a fool sometimes - why didn't you put your gloves on?" He let go of Harry's wrists. "Hold your hands out flat. I'll get the glass out."

Draco drew his gloves off. Harry didn't say anything as Draco used his bitten fingernails to pull the silvers of glass out of the skin of Harry's palms. Blood welled up where the glass had been and ran down Harry's wrists like scarlet threads unraveling.

"Tear a piece off my cloak," Harry said. "To save the glass in."

Draco knew what he meant, and did it, folding the glass slivers into the bit of cloth. He knew it was a waste of time, but did it anyway, not looking at Harry. The odd kneeling position was making him sweat; he handed the folded cloth to Harry and rubbed his damp hands on his cloak. They left bloody fingerprints behind. "What a mess," he whispered under his breath. "Can you close your fingers?"

"I can make a fist," Harry said. His voice sounded oddly constricted.

Draco sat back on his heels. "Look, if you think that I..."

He didn't finish his sentence. The tower door opened for the fourth time that night; Harry, who was facing the door, sucked in a gasp - of astonishment or horror, Draco couldn't tell. He twisted around and stared.

The person standing in the doorway was not Lucius Malfoy. It was not a Death Eater either. It was a slender figure in a yellow cloak like a torch in the darkness; between the bright cloak and her bright hair her face was very white.

Draco got to his feet, still staring in disbelief. "Ginny? What the hell are you doing here?"

"Oh, my God," Ginny said, staring past Draco at Harry. She had thought for a moment that he was wearing black gloves, but as Draco moved towards her and the moonlight fell on Harry, she saw that it was blood. "What did he do to your hands?" she whispered. "What happened? Why are you two up here?"

Draco simply stood and stared at her. The expression on his face was so complex as to be utterly unreadable. It was Harry who moved. He got to his feet and strode over to her. "Ginny," he said, taking hold of her shoulders. "Did anyone see you come up here?"

She shook her head. "No. I followed Lucius to the door and then I hid and waited for him to leave. He didn't see me. He looked really angry, so I figured it had to be something to do with Draco." She smiled weakly. "Only Draco can piss somebody off like that."

Harry didn't smile back.

She went on quickly: "The door wasn't locked, so I just waited for Lucius to go downstairs and I came up here. There weren't any guards."

"No," Draco said. "There wouldn't be - but Ginny, what are you doing here? How did you get back into the Manor?"

Her heart skipped a beat. The Time-Turner, nestled under the collar of her cloak, suddenly seemed a heavy weight. "I never left," she began, but Harry interrupted her.

"It doesn't matter," he said flatly. "You're here and the door's open. That's all that matters. We have to get out of here, and quickly, before Lucius comes back." He twisted around to look at Draco, his hands still on Ginny's shoulders. "Can you get us out of the Manor?"

Draco's eyes narrowed to silver crescents. "I can bloody well try," he said.

Harry slowly lowered his hands. Later Ginny would find two bloody handprints on her cloak, one on each shoulder. Very lightly, he touched her cheek with the back of his hand: it was a gesture Ron might have made, or Charlie, reassuring themselves that she was all right. For the first time, she saw that there was a terrible sadness in his eyes that went beyond the normal anxiety of their situation. "Malfoy," he said, without looking at Draco. "You lead us."

Draco said nothing - although whether he replied to Harry silently or not, she did not know and didn't want to venture a guess - but he slipped past Ginny like a shadow, silent and lightfooted. She followed him, and Harry came behind.

Going back down the narrow stairs that led into the Manor felt wrong - like heading into a prison. Ginny gave a little gasp as Harry closed the tower door behind them and the stars vanished; now they were in a dim and confined space of leaping torchlight. She followed Draco's straight and slender shadow as he made his way down the stairs. At the foot he turned sharply right and ducked down a corridor; he pushed a tapestry aside and there was a door behind it.

"Secret staircase," he said quietly, and put his hand to the doorknob. It opened smoothly under his touch. He exhaled a breath of relief and held the door open so that Ginny and Harry could pass through.

This second staircase was even narrower, and there was no torchlight at all. A dim phosphorescent glow came from the walls. There was a dank smell, as if they were standing at the bottom of the sea.

"I have my wand," Ginny said quietly, "I could *Lumos*.."

"No." Draco caught at her hand. Something hard banged against her fingers; she looked down, and saw a clear adamantite cuff around his wrist. "No magic here."

She nodded. Harry led the way, turning sideways to get around the first narrow turn of the spiral staircase. Ginny twisted around and looked up at Draco; he looked distant and distracted. Not sad the same way Harry did, but in a more contained manner. He was thinner these days and it had given him a harder edge: there was something metallic about his

beauty now, as if the potential for cruelty there had evolved nearer the surface. "Tell me you're all right," she said, in a very soft voice.

"I'm all right," he said. His voice was cool and affectless.

"I seem to recall having rescued you from a tower before once," she said, as lightly as she could, hoping to make him smile.

The half-lidded eyes opened wide for a moment; he looked directly at her. "And I seem to recall telling you once that I didn't want to be saved," he said. "Especially not by you."

"Are you two coming?" Harry hissed from around the corner. Without looking back at Ginny, Draco turned and went after him. Biting back a furious response, Ginny followed him. Half-blinded by the darkness and the sting of tears, she stumbled after squeezing through the narrow turn and reaching the top of the stairs. A hand gripped her shoulder and righted her; it was Draco.

"Steady on," he said.

She yanked her arm away angrily. "Don't touch me," she snapped.

Harry, waiting on the landing below, looked weary. "I am not even going to ask," he said.

"Better not to," Draco said. It seemed to Ginny that behind his closed expression, a faint grave amusement had quickened.

"Don't you laugh at me either," she said, knowing she sounded unreasonable.

"Wouldn't dream of it," Draco replied, and took the stairs two at a time, landing lightly next to Harry.

"Ungrateful bastard," Ginny muttered under her breath, and went down the stairs carefully. The boys, waiting for her on the landing, were already deep in discussion when she reached them.

"Where does this passage go?" Harry was asking.

"Under the moat," Draco said. "It lets out in the rose garden. It should, anyway."

"All right, assuming we can get outside," Harry asked, "what then? If we walk to Malfoy Park, where can we go from there? Keeping in mind that it's night, it's freezing, and only Ginny can do any magic."

Draco shook his head. "We can't go anywhere from there," he said. "We're in the middle of nowhere, and the Park isn't safe. The Bailiff and the Mayor are in charge there, and they're both washouts as far as we're concerned. They're in my father's pocket. Everyone in town is."

"Where are your broomsticks?" Ginny asked, slightly sulkily.

"At school," Harry said, pushing his tangled dark hair out of his eyes. "But there must be plenty of broomsticks here at the Manor..."

Draco shook his head. "Not my father's broomsticks," he said. "It wouldn't be a good idea to take them. The valuable artifacts here tend to be charmed. Trust me on that."

Harry bit his lip. "Can we take one of the carriages, then?"

Draco shook his head. "No, they're equally my father's property and..." His head snapped up, his gray eyes lighting. "I've got it."

Harry looked at him in surprise. "What?"

"Am I the only one that remembers that there are two perfectly good broomsticks stuck up a tree outside the Cold Christmas Inn?"

This piece of information seemed to catch Harry so off guard that it startled a smile out of him. "Bloody hell," he said. "Good thinking."

Draco smiled back modestly. "I'm a genius, basically," he admitted.

Harry's cheerful expression wavered into a frown. "But they're uncalibrated," he pointed out.

This did not faze Draco. "As to that," he said, and drew something out of his pocket. He waved it triumphantly in front of Ginny and Harry. "Finally, a piece of good luck," he crowed.

Ginny looked at Harry. "Are you seeing what I´m seeing?" she asked.

"You mean a paper aeroplane?" he replied.

"Yes," she said.

He nodded.

"There is no need to talk about me as if I´m not here," Draco said, sounding injured.

"Yes there is, if you´re planning on us all boarding that paper aeroplane and flying it back to Hogwarts, there´s a great deal of reason to talk about you as if you weren´t here," Harry said.

Draco threw the paper aeroplane at him. It hit Harry on the forehead. "They´re the calibration instructions, pillock," Draco said. "Sirius gave them to me this morning."

Harry caught the aeroplane and tucked it into his robe pocket. "Well, now you tell me," he said, and actually smiled at Draco - it was almost a real smile, and Ginny´s heart lifted just a little.

"Besides I know perfectly well that you can´t fly an aeroplane without whatchamacallit," Draco said. "Batteries."

"That´s right, I forgot," Harry said. "You´re a genius, basically."

Draco made a face. "Well, at least I´m not a -"

"AHEM," Ginny interrupted. "Aren´t we supposed to be in some kind of *hurry* here?"

Both boys assumed identical guilty expressions. "Right," Harry said. "Draco - you lead again."

Draco nodded. Ginny hung back a little as they began to descend the stairs once more, watching the two of them walk ahead of her. In the dullness of the faint phosphorescent light they were only shadows, neither dark nor fair: it was next to impossible to tell which was which.

"Sirius, if you don't eat something, I'm going to empty the remainder of the spaghetti in this pot onto your head."

Sirius looked up and gave Lupin a faint smile. "Sorry. Mind wandering again." He shrugged at the concerned look on his friend's face. They were facing each other across the rough plank table in Lupin's kitchen: this small house was the one he repaired to when not teaching at Hogwarts. It was, like Lupin himself, simple, plain, elegant, and slightly gray around the edges. It needed a new coat of paint. One might have said the same about Lupin, as well.

They'd Apparated back to the house after their sojourn at the Ministry in order to pick up some wolfsbane potion for Lupin (the moon would be full in five short days) and to retrieve some of his other possessions: old books and papers from their more active days as spies. Lupin seemed to have sensed without needing to be told that Sirius did not want to go back to the Burrow and face the anxiety of the Weasleys, so, recollecting aloud the old wives' tale about Apparating on an empty stomach, he had pushed Sirius down into a kitchen chair and proceeded to concoct a surprisingly satisfying supper of spaghetti and black coffee for both of them. The coffee was bitter and strong and the spaghetti tasted of tarragon: Sirius felt very guilty about not being able to ingest much of either.

"Still thinking about what you were thinking about before?" Lupin asked, tearing a piece of bread off the loaf on the table.

Sirius, who had made multiple bread pills out of his half of the loaf, nodded. "Afraid so. I keep seeing Draco's face when I was shouting at them both outside the Inn. Harry was too drunk to be upset, I guess, but God knows how he felt the next day. And who was I kidding? Like I've never stolen a broomstick in my life."

Lupin chortled. "That may be true, but that won't affect how you feel when you see them in danger, or what you think is danger. You're their father ... after all."

"I wonder if I am," Sirius said reflectively. "Sometimes I feel like I'm more a friend to both of them than a father. A friend that cares a great deal for them, but still a friend. I'm terrified of somehow seeming to try to take James' place with Harry, and as for Draco, he hates his father so much..."

"Hates him?" Lupin shook his head. "He doesn't hate him."

Sirius looked at his friend in surprise. "Of course he does."

"No." The candlelight turned Lupin's eyes to low-burning lampshine gold; wolf eyes. "You don't see it."

"See what?"

Lupin sighed. "You didn't have parents, Sirius, not really. Not that you grew up with. And you didn't know Draco when he was younger. *My father says this...my father does that.* Every other word out of his mouth was about Lucius. He's defined himself by his father. Lucius used to be what he wanted to be; now he's what Draco is afraid he already is. But that doesn't mean he isn't still his father."

"He's grateful to Lucius, you mean? Because without him he wouldn't exist?"

"No. That's not it." Lupin's voice was emphatic. "I remember when we covered the section in Advanced DADA on vampires. How they sire other vampires, how they pass along their traits, how they form into tight-knit clans. I talked about that vampire clan I routed out of those old mines in Romania and how the head vampire ran at me in the sunlight - sacrificed himself so the nestlings could get away. Everyone else was riveted by the story, but when I looked at Draco...I could see what he was thinking. *Even demons love their children. How can my father hate me so much?*"

Sirius looked fixedly at his plate. He had never, to his recollection, seen the faces of his own parents. But he remembered - he remembered James' parents, who told him he was wonderful and brilliant and talented and loved, and so he had been. And Peter's parents, who had told him he was a coward, and so he had been. And Lupin's parents, who had told him he was a monster whose sole responsibility in life was to make sure he never infected others with his own monstrosity, and the years and years of work it had taken to convince Remus, even in the smallest way, that this was untrue.

"All parents have a hold over their children," Lupin said quietly. "And in the end, all children believe they are what their parents tell them they are."

Sirius glanced up at his friend. "I spent all those years in Azkaban for murder, but I've never killed anyone. But if I get my hands on Lucius Malfoy, I will kill him. If I have to go back to Azkaban, I'll kill him."

"No you won't," Lupin said matter-of-factly. "Because I'll do it for you."

Draco had been right: the passage did open out into the rose garden. By the time they reached the end of it, Ginny was nearly fainting: it was so rank and close inside the narrow passageway underneath the moat that her dormant claustrophobia had awakened. She had to lean against the dripping stone walls while Draco fiddled with the heavy catch on the trapdoor above; finally it popped open and clean night air flooded in.

She exhaled a breath of relief. Draco looked at her. "Eager to get outside?" he remarked.

Ginny said nothing. It was Harry who spoke, "Let me go first," he said.

He went, clambering up the rough wall and through the open trapdoor, as agile as a lizard. His booted feet dangled at Ginny's eye level as he pulled himself up; she could see the cracked laces and the heavy, muddy soles. Then they were gone, replaced by Harry's hand as he reached down to her.

"Come on," he said. "I'll pull you up."

Ginny glanced at the hand - he had hands like Draco's, slender and articulately made, and with the same white scar along one palm - and took hold of it; she let Harry haul her up, wincing herself at the pain this must be causing his cut hands. In a moment, she was sprawled beside him on the snow and he was helping Draco up. Draco landed on his knees and hands beside her, then spun around to slam the trap door shut behind them.

"Let's go," he said, matter-of-factly, and got to his feet. "We have to get off the grounds."

Harry looked at him and then said something that Ginny found peculiar, "Can you run if we have to?"

Draco didn't say anything back; his face shut, and he nodded silently. Ginny looked from one of them to the other - Harry's white face, Draco's set one - and decided not to ask. She wondered what Lucius had done to them, up on that tower: they seemed physically unharmed, aside from the shallow cuts on Harry's hands. But there were ways and ways of hurting a person.

"Come on," Draco said, and gestured for them to follow him.

They had emerged at a point about a hundred meters from the house proper: it loomed behind them like the bulwark of an enormous ship. All the windows of the lower floors were darkened, Ginny saw as they made their way away from it: tawny torchlight flared from the upper stories like a line of flame along the ridge of a distant mountain.

The moon had gone behind the clouds, and the only illumination was starlight. It lend a ghostly dimness to the frozen beauty of the gardens. They stretched away in every direction: long white rows of trees like orderly bones laid out for the moon to bleach. Slender threads of ice wove between the branches. Iced-over snow was piled everywhere like heaps of sugar pressed under glass: Ginny's feet crunched loudly as she walked, making her wince.

"It doesn't feel that cold," she whispered, gathering her cloak to her and glancing around, "but there's so much ice..."

"My father's playing around," Draco said shortly. Then he stopped dead - Harry stopped beside him, and then Ginny stopped as well.

They were standing in front of a mausoleum built of black marble; it was taller than any mausoleum Ginny had ever seen and the marble of it was so black that it looked less like a man-made structure than a hole ripped through the center of the night. On the door was the crest she would always remember: the sword crossed with a wand under the name MALFOY. Beside that were smaller letters: *Arte perire sua*.

"My father's grave," Draco said, with a sharp, unamused laugh. "This was what he asked for in his will...this bloody huge ugly thing. Although the Latin inscription was my mum's idea."

"What does it mean?" Ginny asked, looking at him worriedly - the distance had come back into his expression again.

"To perish by one's own creation," Draco said flatly. "Which, I suppose, she thought he had. No such luck, though."

With no idea what to say to this, Ginny glanced over at Harry. He was standing, booted feet apart, looking at Draco - and she saw a look flash across his face that she could not have described. It seemed a sort of terrible, fearful concern, an almost-pain that hurt her even to look at. Finally, he reached out a hand and touched Draco on the shoulder.

"We'd better go," he said.

If Draco said anything back, it was silent. A moment later they were moving again, skirting the mausoleum widely. They cut along the side of a low hill, and came around it to see the walls that surrounded the Manor. High, unbreachable stone, with a pattern of intertwined "M"s along the top. Farther down, there was a gap in the wall where the enormous wrought iron gate stood, frosted all over with ice. Ginny saw Draco straighten his shoulders.

"Almost there," he said.

They continued on in silence, the only sound the crackle of ice snapping underfoot as they walked. Harry was in front now, and Ginny watched him covertly through her hair. The look on his face back at the mausoleum had frightened her. He seemed lost in thought, but not so much so that he was no longer tense - his shoulders were rigid and his hands clenched and unclenched at his sides.

He paused at the gate and glanced back at Draco. The gate loomed over them with its intertwined, wrought serpents throwing black shadows against the snow. The bronze bolt that held it shut was as thick as one of Harry's arms.

Draco stepped forward. "Let me do it," he said. "It's best if only I touch things around here," and he reached out and drew back the bolt. The gate creaked open without a sound and they slipped through it: Harry first, then Ginny, and Draco last. He closed the gate behind them and Ginny heard the sound of the bolt drawing itself shut on the other side.

Draco exhaled a breath of relief. "Now -" he began.

He never finished his sentence. An unearthly wailing voice suddenly split the night: it sounded like a thousand angry pixies screaming all at once - and it was coming directly from the pocket of Ginny's robes.

"I belong to Malfoy Manor!" the wailing voice announced, increasing in pitch and volume with every word. "*I belong to Malfoy Manor! I BELONG TO MALFOY MANOR!*"

Draco clapped his hands over his ears and mouthed something at her furiously. Half-fainting with shock, Ginny dug into her pocket - which was dancing and vibrating against her leg as if it had a live cat in it - and pulled out the second book she had taken from the library, the one she had used to hide the diary in. Freed from the confines of her robes, it shrieked even louder: "I BELONG TO MALFOY MANOR! BRING ME BACK TO MALFOY MANOR!"

Not knowing what else to do, she threw the book at Draco. White-faced with shock, he caught it and threw it on the ground, bringing his booted foot down on it again and again until the spine splintered in half and the voice broke off abruptly, leaving Ginny's ears still ringing in the sudden silence.

For a moment, Draco stood staring down at the book and panting, his thin shoulders heaving under his cloak as if he had been running full tilt. Then he bent down and picked it up, and glanced at the cover.

"I don't suppose," he said flatly, "you want to tell us why you decided to steal a copy of something called the *Liber-Damnatis* from my father's study?"

"I - I'm sorry," Ginny said in a whisper. "I didn't realize it was important enough to be charmed -"

"Well, apparently it is." Draco thrust the book at her suddenly; she took it, terrified at his expression - it was set, blank and furious. His skin seemed to be pressing back against the bones of his face. "Take it," he hissed. "You unbelievable, blithering little idiot - you stole it, so take it, if you wanted it so badly -"

"She didn't know." Harry's cool voice cut across Draco's tirade.

"I didn't want it," Ginny whispered. "I just picked it up to - to have something to carry - in case I needed a, a weapon - and I forgot I had it. I'm sorry..."

"It's all right, Gin." Harry looked acutely uncomfortable. "You rescued us - no need to -"

"And how did she manage that, exactly?" Draco said loudly. His eyes were narrowed; his soft mouth twisted into a hard line. "Eh, Ginny? How did you manage to stay behind in the Manor when everyone else was flung out? You never did tell us that."

Ginny set her chin. "Are you accusing me of something?"

"Malfoy," Harry said sharply, "Don't you think we should..." Harry broke off then, a perplexed look on his face. "What was that?"

Ginny paused and listened. At first she heard nothing but the faint rustle of leafless branches. She was about to say so when a sound so faint she might have mistaken it for the sigh of the wind caught the edge of her hearing: a low ululating cry, rising in pitch. It was not a human noise at all; it was the sound of a baying dog. No sooner had she thought that than it was joined by other, similar cries: not a dog but a pack of them...or a pack of wolves?

She turned quickly and looked at Harry and Draco. Harry looked confused, but Draco did not: he looked merely horrified, and so pale that the thin scar high on his smooth cheekbone looked like a livid thread of silver.

"Oh, God," he said. "They've let loose the hellhounds."

In the dream, she was at the seaside. It was a curious dream, because she knew she was dreaming, and at the same time it also seemed more real than any other dream she had ever had.

Hermione had been to the beach enough times to know that she was not standing on any beach that actually existed. The sand was too white and fine, the sea too blue and unmoving. There were no clouds and the sun was high in the sky yet the view seemed shaded with a peculiar twilight feeling. She shivered as she walked along the perimeter of the water towards two figures she could see in the distance.

As she approached them they became suddenly clear, as if she were focusing the lens of a camera. One was a small dark-haired child, sitting among the ruins of a half-built sandcastle; the other was an older boy, blond, kneeling beside him and watching him intently. As she drew closer they raised their heads and looked at her. She realized without any sense of surprise that she knew them both.

The child's face was thin and haunted, his eyes a vivid piercing green. The scar that slashed across his forehead was a livid scarlet. He could not have been more than eight years old and in his small hands he clutched a red plastic bucket. Around the rim of the bucket were a number of peculiar symbols that looked as if they had been scratched into the plastic with a knife.

Harry, she thought. Oh, Harry.

The older boy had glanced at her once and then away. He looked to be the age he really was: if her dream-Draco was any different than Draco in life, it was simply that his face was more transparently readable, more like Harry's. He wore pajamas, and his arms were crossed in front of him as if he were cold.

The boy who was Harry spoke first. "Have you come to help me?" he asked her, raising his small face to hers. "My mother built me a castle but I knocked it down. Will you help me build it back up?"

She looked down the beach, then back at Harry. "Even if we build it up, the tide will wash it away," she said.

"No." Harry's tone was positive. "The tides here run backwards. Everything does."

She looked at the blond boy who was Draco, and wasn't. "Is he telling the truth?" she asked.

He frowned at the question. "Don't you believe him?" he said. "Love is faith, I always thought."

"Then maybe you should help him," she said.

He uncrossed his arms slowly and held them out to her, palms-up: she saw that across his wrists two jagged incisions gaped, deep and empty. "I gave all I had already," he said. "I haven't got any more."

She could not stop staring at the cuts: she thought they must go down to his very bones, and yet they were clean and bloodless. "Doesn't it hurt?"

"Everything hurts," said Harry, and tipped his bucket towards her. Silver fluid spilled out of it and soaked into the sand at her feet. And then she realized what it was: it was blood. It spilled and spilled and she stepped away from the widening pool; surely such a small container could not hold much more blood. Surely no person could hold that much blood. But it continued to spread, moving towards her in a slow tide, and the gray-eyed boy with the cut wrists watched her, unmoved and unmoving, as she backed away and backed away and -

She tripped and went down, tumbling backward. She was awake before she even struck the ground.

...

Hermione opened her eyes. Something was fluttering insistently against her face in the darkness. She sat up, brushing it away: then realized it was one of Pigwidgeon's wings. He was hovering above her, holding a letter in one small claw.

She sat up and reached out a hand for it, "Thanks, Pig." It was an ordinary piece of rolled parchment, tied with a bit of string. She held it for a moment before opening, letting the strangeness of her dream fade. It had seemed so real: the beach, the sand and the blood. Her intellectual curiosity had been piqued by the odd symbols around the rim of Harry's red pail. Were they the same symbols that chased the edges of his runic band in reality? She would have to check her notebooks. If they were, she would be impressed at the recollective powers of her own subconscious.

Pig had settled on her right shoulder. She suspected he missed Ron, and let him remain there as she opened the letter. It was extremely short.

Hermione,

I must speak with you. I am waiting for you downstairs at the front door. I sent up the little owl so you wouldn't be frightened. I can't let anyone else see me. Please come downstairs. It's about Draco.

She stared at the signature for several long moments in disbelief. Perhaps this was some kind of joke? How could she possibly think...? Hermione jumped back with an exclamation as the letter in her hand disintegrated into ashes. *Damn paranoid Slytherins*, she thought furiously, and swung her legs over the edge of the bed.

She had gone to sleep in her own pajama bottoms and one of Harry's old souvenir T-shirts from the 1996 Chudley Cannons/Holyhead Harpies game. She drew a flowered robe of Ginny's out of the closet, shrugged it on, and headed downstairs. Righteous indignation gave her feet wings, and within a moment she was standing in the entryway, pulling the bolts on the front door back and drawing it wide.

The slender figure on the front steps jumped and turned around. She was wrapped in a thick green cloak with a gold-bordered hood: only a bit of her pointed chin was visible. Her breath puffed out in white clouds of frozen air.

"So," Hermione said frostily. "You wanted to talk to me about something? Talk."

The hood trembled for a moment; then it was pushed decisively back and a cascade of red-gold curls tumbled out. Dark green eyes stared into Hermione's with a mute, resentful appeal.

"Let me come in," Blaise said. "We can talk inside."

Later Draco would remember their mad dash from the gates of the Manor to the edge of Malfoy Park as a nightmare of crazily tilting shadows. Ice had hardened over the road, making it smooth as glass and treacherous to

run on: he had never been so glad for his heavy-soled dragonhide boots. Ginny seemed to be having more trouble: twice he caught her as she slipped; twice she righted herself quickly and kept running. Harry, of course, being Harry, was having no trouble: he was built to run, light and lean and wiry. He ran like the snow fell, like he flew: as if it was his one purpose.

At the foot of a small hill the road forked; they went left, towards what should have been the lights of the Park. The town was dark: the inhabitants had battened down like a ship in a storm. Everything would be locked tight. They ran towards the Cold Christmas Inn and past it, the sound of baying growing closer and closer behind them.

Draco knew the hellhounds of Malfoy Manor well enough, from his childhood. Twice the size of ordinary dogs, with long slavering jaws and pupilless eyes the size of oranges, they had given him nightmares for years. It had amused his father to purchase rare monsters and turn the hellhounds loose to hunt them across the grounds; Draco had seen the hounds pull down a full-sized gryphon and rip it apart with their teeth and claws.

Hellhounds were also fast. Very fast. Draco knew the three of them had a head start of almost the full length of the gardens; he also knew it would not be enough. By the time they reached the clearing where the broomsticks were, the sound of yelps and barking behind them was so loud it sounded like the crackle of a bonfire.

Harry spilled into the clearing first, then Ginny, and Draco last. The clearing was just as Draco remembered it: the Inn up on the hill in the distance, the broomsticks stuck fast in the tree overhead, the steep incline that fell away to the iced-over river.

Harry stopped under the tree and spun around, his red cloak flying out. "Ginny - get your wand out - quickly -"

Ginny fumbled for her wand, but terror had made her fingers clumsy: she dropped it. Stricken, she bent to retrieve it, picked it up and pointed a shaking hand at the Cloudbursts, lodged in the tree trunk as if they had been locked there. "Acci-" she began and gasped, a strangled wail escaping her throat. Draco spun to look behind him: coming through the

darkness between the trees were at least seven vast and slinking forms, ornamented with fierce jewelry eyes.

Beside Draco, Harry swore, once and fiercely. A moment later Draco felt something grasp his arm: it was Harry, his grip as hard as iron. */I´m sorry/* he said in Draco´s head, and then he seized hold of Draco´s other arm and pushed him, hard, into Ginny. Caught completely off guard, Draco staggered; Ginny clutched at him, and the two of them tumbled precipitately down the steep incline that led down to the river, rolling over and over in the snow.

From a distance it might have looked like a gentle roll down a snowy hill, but it wasn´t: there was a great deal of ice, and jutting broken branches that tore at them. Draco heard fabric rip, and a stinging pain shot up his arm. They fetched up against a rock with enough force to knock them apart. Draco heard Ginny cry out, then rolled and came up, coughing and spitting snow. When the coughing subsided enough for him to breathe, he rubbed his sleeve across his wet face and it came away silver: not with snow, either. Blood. He was coughing blood.

But there was no time to think about that. He struggled into a kneeling position, pushing his soaking hair out of his eyes. Beside him Ginny had already fought free of the snowbank and seemed to be trying to struggle to her feet. He looked up but could not see anything but the incline above them, marked with a ragged path where they had tumbled down it.

He seized her by the shoulders and shook her hard. Later she would show him the place on her upper arms where his fingertips had pressed dark, coin-sized bruises into her skin. "Don´t move," he hissed at her. They were kneeling inches apart; he could see himself in her dilated pupils. "Do you understand me? -Stay down here and don´t *move*."

She nodded at him with wide, frightened eyes. "Is Harry -"

He didn´t answer her, just released her and stood up. Then he ran.

It was not easy getting up the side of the hill: the snow was so thickly frosted over with ice that when he stumbled and his hands went through it, the ice broke and slashed at him like glass. Also, he was weak - his breath came short and the blood pounded in his ears, deafening him. He could not even hear the hellhounds, which panicked him more than any

noise would have. Damn Harry for knocking him down the hill; stupid grandstanding heroics. He held on to the fact that if something had happened to Harry, he would *know*. Perhaps Harry had managed to get one of the broomsticks down, somehow; perhaps he'd run into the Inn, perhaps someone had opened their door to him, hearing the furious barking...

Finally Draco reached the top of the hill and was in the clearing; he ran forward a few steps - then stopped. And stared.

Harry stood where he had, in the same spot in the center of the clearing. In his red cloak, he was as clearly marked against the white snow as a splash of blood or paint. He was very still, standing with his hands at his sides. Snow from the disturbed tree branches overhead had sifted down on him, starring his black hair with white flakes, covering his shoulders. He could have been standing where he was for hours; for all the expression on his face, he could have been admiring the view.

Around him in a semicircle, leaning on their haunches, sat the hellhounds, their razored paws dug deep into the snow. Their eyes were fixed on Harry: an unblinking row of fourteen red-gold orbs, licks of flame in the darkness. Their mouths were open, dripping black saliva and the sound of low growling came from their throats. They stared at Harry, and Harry stared back. His expression was set. He did not look frightened.

The choking taste of blood filled Draco's mouth again and he wondered for a moment if he were going to be sick. */Harry...?/*

Harry didn't move or turn to look at him; he was still staring at the hounds, and a small smile came to curl the corner of his mouth. He raised his right hand, palm up, and as he did his cloak fell away and Draco saw that at his belt, the runic band was blazing as brightly as a bed of red hot coals. "Go," Harry said to the seven fierce, wolf-like creatures, who snarled and pawed at the ground. "Get out of here!"

And they went.

As Draco stood at the incline's edge, shaking with cold and reaction, the seven nightmare creatures turned tail and walked stiffly out of the clearing. They looked indignant, like dowagers who had been invited round for tea only to discover there were no biscuits left. They went in an

orderly line, one after the other, and only when the last one had disappeared between the trees did Harry slowly lower his hand and turn to look at Draco.

He was quite pale, but composed. Bright spots of color burned on his cheekbones as if he had a fever. "I´m sorry I pushed you," he said mildly. "I hoped, if they thought I was the only one..."

"What did you do?" Draco whispered. "I´ve never seen them obey anyone - not even my father. And your cloak - they hate red - my father used to have a gameskeeper he paid to dress up in Gryffindor colors and torture them through the bars of their cages - "

"Your *father*," Harry said in disgust. "Why do you even bother calling him that?"

"What did you do?" Draco said again, dizzily, hearing his own voice sounding very small in the winter air. He found he was holding his left arm with his right, the cut along his forearm having opened up again during his fall down the incline. "What did you -"

The world tilted forward and he staggered; Harry reached to catch him, but Draco twisted away from Harry´s hand and righted himself by seizing at a nearby tree branch.

"Don´t touch me," he said.

Harry looked horrified. "Don´t be angry, I -"

"It´s not that. I´m bleeding, and your hands are all sliced up." Draco held his left arm up; the cuff of his shirt was soaked through with silvery blood. "I don´t know if it´s safe to touch me or not." He leaned back against the trunk of the tree, exhaustion threading through his veins like its own cold venom, and let his eyes slip shut. "You should have just let the hellhounds eat me - probably they´d have choked to death on the poison before they ever got round to you."

"Look at me." Harry´s voice was quiet. "You´re not going to die."

Draco was so tired that even opening his eyes seemed an effort, but he did it. "You´re going to tell them all everything, aren´t you," he said. "Sirius, and Dumbledore and the rest."

Harry nodded. "Yes," he said. "That´s exactly what I´m going to do. And they´ll know how to help you. What to do."

"And what if they don´t?" Draco asked. "What if they can´t fix it?"

Harry opened his mouth to reply, but before he could say anything, a soft voice spoke from behind them.

"Fix what?" Ginny said.

Harry´s mouth remained open. Draco twisted around and looked at her: she was standing at the edge of the incline, her soaking yellow cloak wrapped around her, her red hair streaked damply across her forehead like indiscriminate swipes of paint.

"I thought I told you to stay down there and not to move," Draco said, exhaustion making his voice harsh.

"You did," she said. "But I was worried. It was so quiet." Her eyes went past him and fixed on Harry; there was a mute appeal in them. "I don´t understand," she went on. "What´s all this about poison and dying? What´s happening? Where are those...dog things?"

"The hellhounds ran off," Harry said. "As for the rest of it..."

He looked at Draco, and Draco sighed a weary inner sigh. He imagined the long road of telling people stretching out before him: telling Ginny, telling Hermione, telling Sirius, telling Dumbledore, telling the bloody Weasleys. He imagined all their reactions: shock and pity and horror and perhaps a creeping fear of what was happening to him. Every day the poison killed him a little more: already it had burned his blood silver, and who knew what subsequent form of destruction it might take?

/Don´t look like that./ Harry´s inner voice was quiet. */I´ll tell her on the way to the Burrow. You don´t have to./*

Draco looked at him in surprise. And realized that he *didn't* have to - he didn't have to tell anyone; Harry would do it. And it would be better having Harry explain: he could explain properly, and with the correct righteous fervor - he could remember the details that Draco was now too exhausted to recall. Draco could crawl into bed and fall asleep and Harry would take care of it all and he didn't have to worry that Harry would screw it up, either, because Harry knew what he wanted better than he did himself. For the first time ever he was consciously glad for the connection between them: it was a blessing not to have to explain, and to be understood. The knowledge of it gave him a certain amount of strength, and he straightened up and held his hand out to Ginny.

"Let's get the broomsticks down and get going," he said, "I'll explain everything to you on the way."

The door to the bedroom closed behind the two girls with an audible click. Hermione walked across the room to the armchair by the bed, turned, and sat down in it as gracefully as she could, smoothing her wrinkled skirt over her knees. She raised her chin and looked at Blaise. "So," she said. "What do you want?"

A smile touched the corner of Blaise's perfect mouth. Again, that faint sense of familiarity assailed Hermione, and again she knew that it was because Blaise so much resembled Draco - not physically of course, they were nothing alike save that they were both beautiful. But her mannerisms, from her posture down to the haughty tilt of her small chin, were a copy of Draco's own. "I wanted to talk to you about Draco Malfoy," Blaise said.

"Oh dear," Hermione said coolly. "Is this one of those 'stay away from my boyfriend's visits? Because if so, you've got the wrong girl. If Draco's been cheating on you, it hasn't been with me."

"Oh, I know that," Blaise said easily. "He'd never touch you. Even if he did want you, he'd never touch you."

Hermione gritted her teeth. "Glad we've established that," she said. "In which case, what do you want?"

"I was in the Ministry with my parents this afternoon," Blaise said, glancing casually around the room. She walked over to a row of photographs tacked above Ron's bed and began to examine them. "I saw Professor Lupin there with that convict godfather of Potter's."

Hermione did not bother offering the correction that Sirius was no longer a convict. She sat without moving while Blaise shrugged off her embroidered cloak; underneath it she was plainly dressed in jeans and a green cowl-necked jumper. She still looked dazzling. It was very irritating.

"I heard Draco's father kept him and Potter back at the Manor," Blaise said. "That's true, isn't it?"

"As far as I know," admitted Hermione.

"Then they're in terrible danger," Blaise said, turning with a swift theatrical gesture to gaze at Hermione. Her eyes were wide and misty green; she was so very pretty that Hermione wanted to smack her.

"You know," Hermione said, "I'd kind of figured that was a possibility, thanks."

"All of you are," Blaise said. "This is much bigger than it looks - much bigger than you could possibly imagine. They don't tell us very much - we're too young. But I've heard - things." Blaise took a deep breath, and Hermione realized that she was, actually, genuinely, frightened. "A lot of people are going to die."

Hermione's heart skipped a beat. "Why are you telling me this, Blaise?"

Blaise's eyes widened. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, give me one reason to believe your visit here wasn't motivated entirely by malice. So far you've told me that my friends are in danger - which I knew - and made vague and upsetting statements about people dying. You don't like me, you don't like Harry, you're a Slytherin through and through and I can't imagine they'd be happy with you if they knew you were here. So why risk it for my benefit?"

"You won't tell them." Blaise's tone was confident. Hermione wondered what on earth she was finding in those photographs to rivet her attention:

they were mostly photographs of the Weasleys, some of Harry and herself, some of Ginny's schoolfriends at Beauxbatons. "You're a Gryffindor just as much as I'm a Slytherin. You wouldn't turn me in like that. Even though you hate me, too."

"I don't hate you, Blaise." Hermione felt very tired. "I just don't have one good reason to trust you."

"Yes, you do," Blaise said. "Draco."

"Draco? What about him?"

"Think about him getting hurt. Think about it -"

"I have been. All the time." The words were out of Hermione's mouth before she could hold them back; she regretted them instantly. Blaise would put the worst possible spin on it and mock her and throw her words back in her face and -

"So have I," Blaise said.

Hermione raised her chin. "Draco said you hated him now."

"I should hate him." Blaise shrugged. "I *should* hate him, and I sort of hate him, but I've known him since we were children and I can't just... I mean, I know he's impossible. He's...arrogant, and..."

"And self-centered," Hermione said.

"Oooh, yes," Blaise agreed enthusiastically. "And pigheaded, and he can be so mean. He never listens, and..."

"And he always think he's right."

"Especially when he isn't. And he smirks."

"Oh, I know. And he's vain."

"He takes hours getting dressed."

"He's *obsessed* with his hair."

"He's terribly selfish in bed as well."

"Gah!" Hermione nearly fell out of the armchair. "I did NOT need to know that."

Blaise chuckled. "I was joking."

"Ah yes," said Hermione sourly. "That rich Slytherin humour we're all so fond of."

Blaise smiled in a placating manner. "He is obsessed with his hair, though. Oh, he think he's so pretty. It would be less annoying if he *wasn't*, of course."

"I know," Hermione said. "He's all those things - and selfish - and he can be cruel - and if you aren't someone he loves you might as well not exist at all," she added softly.

Blaise, for a moment, sounded bitter. "How would you know? He loves *you*."

"I'm sure he..."

"Loves me too?" Blaise scoffed. "No. He was just using me. To draw attention away from the people he really does care about. I know that because...because he told me, when he came and asked me to pose as his girlfriend in the first place."

"To *pose* as his girlfriend?"

"I suppose he was always honest," Blaise said. "He told me that he wanted me to be his girlfriend, that he wouldn't tell me why, that it had to do with people he wanted to protect, and that it might be dangerous, and did I understand that."

"And did you," Hermione asked, "understand that?"

"A little. Maybe. He offered me money..." Blaise took in Hermione's horrified stare, and her lips twisted. "I know what you're thinking. That I sold myself for pocket change to buy dresses with. I didn't. My father...he lost all our money. Invested it badly, gambled it away on bad firecrab

futures, I don't really know. You don't know what it's like, though. My parents, they don't know how to live without money. They've always had it. They couldn't adjust. It was horrible. Then Draco came. He knew, of course. Everyone in my parents' little circle knew. My mother and Narcissa were best friends once. He came and he offered me enough money...he has so much, he would hardly even notice what he gave us, he said...and I just had to be his girlfriend. Just for a year."

Hermione was speechless. She had no idea what to think. She wasn't sure who she was more disgusted with: Blaise, for accepting such an offer, or Draco, for offering in the first place. Of course, neither of them would probably ever even understand what was so horribly wrong with this arrangement. However much Draco had changed, he would never be anything but a Slytherin at heart.

Blaise continued to speak, as if she had quite forgotten that Hermione was there. "He did what he said he would. He gave us money, and he opened accounts for me in Hogsmeade so that I could buy whatever I wanted - dresses, shoes. And I suppose I pretended that we really were dating. All the girls in my House always loved him, a little... and it was pleasant, being envied. And I thought maybe he did care for me, and he'd constructed this elaborate ruse so he could have me - he could have had me anyway, but I never told him that. Then, after a while, I began to see it wasn't me he was in love with..." Her voice flattened. "I suppose you know the rest."

"I don't know what to say," Hermione replied honestly. "Or to think. I won't say it doesn't sound like something Draco would do. It does." *If he thought he was protecting one of us...yes, he'd do something like that.* "He can be really...sort of singleminded, I guess, would be the nice way to say it."

"You don't have to bother looking for nice ways to say it." Blaise shrugged lightly. "I know what he is."

"Why me?" Hermione asked. "Why come to me with this?"

"Because you love him more than you don't like me," Blaise said evenly. "I see the way you are together - your little group, and him. He's never said anything to me, but I always noticed."

"If you noticed," Hermione said, "then you love him as well."

"A little, maybe." Blaise's face had shut like a fan; her eyes were remote. "Maybe we all do, to some degree or other. He's always been able to make people love him when he tried or needed to. In his life, I think there's only ever been one person who didn't love him enough."

And Hermione felt a strange little shock inside her - she understood what Blaise meant, and above that, she agreed with her. In that moment, she made the unconscious decision to trust the Slytherin girl. The words tumbled out of her unanticipated:

"All right then," she said. "All right. I believe you."

Blaise exhaled a breath of relief. "Good." Then she did something peculiar: she raised her hands, and unpinned the glittering barrettes that held her hair back. It swung forward in a heavy tumble of dark red-gold, the color of dragon scales. She looked at the barrettes in her hand for a moment - there were three of them, a matched set of slender green wands. She held them out to Hermione, who stared. "Give these to Draco when you see him," she instructed.

Hermione balked. "No offense, but I doubt they'd suit him."

"He doesn't have to wear them in his hair," Blaise said, as if this were obvious. "He can pin them on his cloak, or turn them into buttons. I don't care. I just want him to wear them."

And I want him to dress up in tight trousers and a football jersey that says SCORING OPPORTUNITY across the front in big red letters, but we don't always get what we want, do we? Hermione nearly replied, but stopped herself. If there was one thing she had noticed about Blaise, it was that she had remarkably little sense of humor. That alone would have prevented Draco from ever having any real feelings for her, Hermione thought with some satisfaction - then squashed the thought and the satisfaction as well.

"All right," she said, with great misgiving, taking the barrettes from Blaise. "I'll give them to him - but it's up to him if he wants to wear them."

"I wish I had more, but these are all I've got. They're not easy to come by, you know...Pansy told me she had to make her own. I'm sure she took care of Weasley as well, so you don't have to worry about him."

"Uh-huh," Hermione said, wondering if Blaise was, perhaps, a little off her head. She looked down at the barrettes, but there seemed nothing terribly special about them - they were not jeweled after all, up close, but made of some shimmering hard green material, somewhat like titanium.

"Don't let him give them all to Potter, either," Blaise added, as an afterthought.

"If his desire to see Harry in hair barrettes becomes uncontrollable, I'll be sure to step in," Hermione replied dryly. She narrowed her eyes at Blaise. "If these turn out to be something dangerous, or some kind of tracking spell..."

"They're *not*," Blaise snapped, exasperated. "Look, when you can, just get both of them to a safe place, all right? Not here. The whole Ministry will be looking for them..." Her voice trailed off at the look on Hermione's face. "What?"

"What makes you think I'll even see them again to *get* them to a safe place?" Hermione said in a small voice, hating herself for being vulnerable in front of Blaise, but too unhappy to stop it.

Blaise looked at her, surprise making her face transparent, and for a moment Hermione thought she could look *through* the other girl's shut expression to the real Blaise underneath - and in that moment, she did believe that Blaise loved Draco. It might have been a love made up in equal parts of childhood attachment, sinned pride, and clannish loyalty, but it was still love of a sort. "They'll come back to you," Blaise said. "They always do."

"Oh." For a moment, Hermione could think of nothing to say. She cleared her throat. "And Ron - you said Pansy'd given him something already, so when he gets back here, do I have to get him to a safe place too?"

The transparency vanished from Blaise's expression; now she looked merely surprised. "You think Weasley's coming back here?" she

demanded. "You mean you don't -" She broke off and spun around, green eyes widening. "What was that noise?"

Hermione leaped to her feet. "The kitchen door -"

Blaise went white. "Oh, *no*." There was a world of dread in those two words. She began to fumble in her pockets.

"Oh, for goodness sake. It could be Ron, or Ginny or even Bill -"

"Think what you want. I'm leaving," Blaise said, and drew a small silver Portkey box out of her robes.

"But what about your broom? It's downstairs-"

"Owl it to me," Blaise replied, snapping the box open. With a toss of her red head, she vanished into thin air.

Hermione shook her head. "Typical bloody Slytherin," she muttered, with more bravado than she felt. Blaise's evident panic had communicated itself to her despite herself. Drawing her wand out of her pocket, she stepped cautiously out into the hall and began making her way towards the stairs as quietly as she could.

It was quite dark; the hallway torches were unlit. It was very quiet. As she neared the staircase, she thought she heard the sound of the kitchen door closing - no one dangerous should be able to get past the wards, but wards could be subverted of course. There were ways and ways. Gripping her wand tightly, she began to make her way down the stairs.

The Dark Lord reclined in the tall chair behind the chess table and regarded the air in front of him. It was full of dust motes; they hovered in the faint light of the narrow windows. The red-headed boy lay at his feet. He had not moved in nearly a half an hour now; it seemed likely that he would not again be useful this evening. What had been like a light inside him had spilled out like blood, and he lay, unconscious and still, on the hard stones with his face buried on his arms. One hand was extended, palm up; the intricate serpent scarring across the palm was clearly visible.

"Marked with my sign before I ever saw him," the Dark Lord said aloud, and the girl inside her gold cage looked up as if he had spoken to her. "Marked now twice, he is doubly mine."

"Will he die, Lord?" she asked.

"Not yet. I have not even begun to get use out of him. The gift of Foretelling is like divine clockwork. I have wound him up; now, as a clock tells time, he will tell me of the future."

"And why do you want to know the future, Lord?"

The Dark Lord raised his inhuman eyes to hers and laughed. "You are a curious little demon," he said. "What can it matter to you? Your kind goes on and on without end; whatever the future brings, you will survive it."

"As would you - you also cannot die."

"Life is not to be lived for life's sake alone," said the Dark Lord cryptically. "There is also power, and the seeking of it. And vengeance. You should know all about vengeance, little demon. Six hundred years bound in servitude to one family...you must want for your freedom very badly."

"Are you trying to incite my servants against me, my Lord?" came a light voice from the doorway.

The girl turned first; the Dark Lord second. He did not get up from his chair. "Lucius," he said. "I hope, for your sake, that you bring me good news."

"The best news, Lord," said the pale man, drawing off his gloves and laying them on the table by the door. "All has gone exactly according to plan. We have Harry Potter in our temporary custody; Arthur Weasley is out of power, and the transition at the Ministry is going smoothly." He paused, and glanced at the red-headed boy on the floor. "I see we have had a casualty," he added, sounding amused.

The Dark Lord chuckled. "He is not dead. He utilized too much of his power, untrained; it drained him. He will recover. Speaking of

casualties..." He glanced up at Lucius. "What of my servants, my loyal Death Eaters? Have they all been alerted to my return?"

At that, Lucius looked slightly uncomfortable. "I have not alerted them all, my Lord. I thought we would wait until the transition of power was complete -"

"I thought you said it had gone smoothly."

"I said it was going smoothly." Lucius sounded harried. In the gold cage, Rhysenn stirred and moaned as if in pain. "It has only been a day, Lord."

There was a silence. The Dark Lord rose slowly to his feet, and turned to look at Lucius Malfoy; Lucius was neither his most trusted nor his most beloved servant, but he was what he was: indispensable.

"Quintilius Varus," the Dark Lord said finally, softly. "Give me back my legions."

Lucius flushed red. "Our great defeats are now in the past, my Lord," he said. "We have only victory to come to now, and we *will* have legions to fight for it."

"I wished to return at the head of an army, Lucius. Not to have to ferret that army out and press them into service."

"My Lord, they are loyal to you! They simply wait for instruction. There are a few minor...dissidents we need ridding of first, before our way is clear."

The Dark Lord's narrow hands clenched and unclenched at his sides: they were ashen, the nails a heavy black. Once he had had long slender fingers, articulately boned: beautiful hands fashioned equally for poetry or for prayer. Of course, they had been put to neither use. "I dream of such things, my Lucius. When I am victorious, I shall have a chess board made from the snapped wands of my enemies. I shall carve the white pieces from the bones of Severus Snape, who betrayed me, and the red pieces shall be made of clear glass and filled with Harry Potter's blood. I shall treasure it always."

In the gilded cage, Rhysenn laughed softly. Lucius had turned very white. "You shall have all those things, Master," he said in a constricted voice. "All those things, and more."

"And yet you tell me I must wait."

"Yes." Lucius's face was like stone. "You must wait."

Hermione was halfway down the stairs when she saw them.

Ginny stepped out of the kitchen first and Hermione assumed without thinking that of course she had come home alone. Ginny looked disheveled and exhausted, there was dirt on her soaked and draggled yellow cloak and her damp hair was a wild tangle. None of this surprised Hermione; what did surprise her was the expression on Ginny's face when she raised it - beyond her look of numb shock, she had very obviously been crying.

"Ginny?" Hermione said, pausing on the stairs. "Ginny, are you all right?"

Ginny looked up. "Oh! Hermione." Her voice was heavy with exhaustion. "Yes. I'm all right."

"Then what..."

Hermione broke off as the kitchen door opened again, and Harry came through, followed by Draco. Harry was carrying two broomsticks in his right hand; Draco was fumbling with the clasp that fastened his soaked and draggled cloak. Both were walking in the slow manner of those who are weary to the bone. She opened her mouth to call out to them, but only a gasp of surprise escaped her lips.

They were safe, they were home...And yet. She wanted to be overjoyed, but the joy didn't come. There was something terribly wrong: she could see it, it was in the way Draco walked, the set of Harry's shoulders. Harry was the one who noticed her first; she thought later that perhaps he had heard her sharp intake of breath. He raised his head and looked up; Draco followed his gaze, and they both stared blankly at her, as if they could not quite believe that she was there.

She would always remember that moment later. It was not a long moment, and yet it seemed to go on and on. She stood and stared at them and wondered that although he should by all right be out of her mind with relief, instead a small cold fear was growing in her heart.

They were filthier than Ginny was, both of them. Harry's robes were torn and shredded, his gloves stained black, his face pinched with exhaustion and something else. Draco's cloak was ripped, thick with twigs; there was a ragged bandage around his arm and his face was cut and bloodied.

But it was not that which made her pause. It was the looks on their faces. She remembered Harry's expression from their fourth year, after the Third Task - that half-drugged, dazed and stunned look of overwhelming shock. She had not seen him look like that since then. And now he did.

And Draco. She would not have thought someone so young could look so old. It was not on his face, this look of age, but behind it, at the backs of his glacial eyes. It was knowledge and acceptance and other things that were worse than that. She remembered his telling her that he was fine, that he would see a mediwizard soon, and knew he had been lying, and that this was what he had been lying to cover up. It all made sense suddenly: Harry's expression, Draco's weary resignation, and she remembered her dream and the silvery blood all over the sand at her feet and she sat down suddenly on the stairs, realization and sudden despair weakening her knees.

"I knew it," she said, "I knew it, I knew it, I knew it all this time..."

An indefinite period of time passed for Hermione while she sat on the stairs with her hands over her face, struggling to not cry. In reality, of course, it was less than a minute before Harry came up the stairs and sat down next to her, Draco and Ginny having prudently disappeared into the living room.

"I'd give you a handkerchief," he said. "But I haven't got one. And I ripped the bottom of my cloak off to make a bandage for Draco's arm. But, If you wanted..."

She looked up. "I'm not crying," she said.

"Oh," Harry said. There was a momentary silence. "If you wanted to have a cry, I could go away," he offered.

"Harry..." She looked more closely at him: under the dirt and bruises, he was slightly wan-looking with tiredness, but he seemed healthy enough. The same reserve was in his eyes that she remembered, the same distance. In fact, he looked more closed off than ever. But his expression was not unsympathetic. She realized with a start that this was the first time she had been alone with him since they had ended their relationship. It seemed a thousand years ago. "I don't want to have a cry. I want to go wake Charlie up and Portkey ourselves back to Hogwarts before anything terrible happens."

"If she had expected any resistance, she didn't get it. "Good," said Harry decidedly. "I've been wanting to talk to Dumbledore. Although I ought to talk to Sirius first, is he here?"

Hermione shook her head. "Back at Lupin's house. They're both fine, though. Everyone is, except..."

Harry looked at her narrowly. "Except who?"

"Ron," Hermione said finally. She tensed, not sure how Harry would react. But he looked merely surprised.

"He's not back yet?"

"No. And Harry - I know about Pansy. Charlie told me."

"Better him than me," said Harry, his tone almost flippant. Then, at the look on her face, his voice softened. "I'm sorry," he said. "But I'm also glad you weren't there at the reception, when Draco let everyone know what happened. It was pretty horrible."

"Oh, poor Ron," Hermione said softly. "He must have felt miserable. I mean, Pansy. He never even liked her. And to find out she was just trying to get at him for whatever reason, it must have been ..."

"Awful," Harry said shortly. "I thought I wanted to hurt him a lot, but I guess I really didn't after all."

"Why did Draco do that?"

"Because." Harry's tone was clipped. "I asked him to."

"Oh," she said. Then, unable to help herself, she added, "Harry, be careful what you ask him to do. He'd do anything for you. It wouldn't be fair."

"Fair?" Harry's voice was bitter; she looked at him in surprise. "What's not *fair* is that the more I try to protect the people I care about, the worse it gets for them. I tried to keep Ron away from the dangerous parts of my life, and he decided I didn't care about him anymore and turned his back on me. What's not *fair* is Lucius Malfoy alive and walking the earth while my parents are dead and buried..."

"The Ministry will deal with Lucius -"

"He doesn't seem like someone who's afraid of the Ministry." Harry's tone was cold. "He stood there and told Draco that he had a month to live and maybe two weeks before the pain got too bad for him to walk anymore - and he laughed while he was saying it."

Nausea rose up in the back of Hermione's throat. "Oh my God, Harry."

Harry seemed to recollect himself. Some of the fierceness went out of his expression. "It's okay," he said. "He won't die. We got away, so...he'll be fine. He said Snape's figuring out what the poison is, and Dumbledore will help us, and ... he'll be fine."

Hermione was dubious, but then she had always been more of an alarmist than Harry, and he seemed so sure it was hard to doubt him. She glanced down, and started - "What happened to your hands?"

"Oh. I cut them on some glass." He held them out to her, and she took out her wand and ran the tip over the broken skin. The cuts vanished. Harry nodded appreciatively and drew his hands back. As he did so, his sleeve rode up and a spark of whitish light lit around his wrist. He frowned. "I don't suppose you can do anything about this handcuffy thing?" he asked.

"An adamantite bracelet, very clever," she said, touching it lightly. "No, Dumbledore will have to get it off for you. Lucius must have been pretty

keen to stop you doing magic - then again, you are the big, scary Harry Potter," she teased.

He smiled wanly, to her relief. "I guess I am," he said.

For a moment, he looked very young to her - disheveled as if he'd just come off the Quidditch field, his clothes torn and stained, his glasses hanging crooked again. "I missed you," she said suddenly.

"I know," he said. "I missed you, too."

With a little sigh she leaned forward, and rested her head against his shoulder as she had done so many times in the past. For a moment he laid his hand gently on her back, holding her to him, and they sat together without moving. She inhaled the scent of him: sweat, blood, faint traces of soap and wet wool. "Thank you," she whispered.

His voice was muffled. "For what?"

"Coming back to me," she said.

Apparently it was the wrong thing to say. He went rigid all over as if his muscles had turned to iron, and pulled back from her.

"Harry. I didn't mean -"

"You were right." He got to his feet, keeping his face averted so she could not see his expression. "We'd better get back to Hogwarts quickly. It's not safe here."

As she looked up at him in astonishment, he turned around and headed up the unlit stairs towards Charlie's room. After a moment, not knowing what else to do, she rose to her feet and followed him up into the darkness.

"You must be cold," Ginny said nervously. Harry and Hermione had disappeared up the stairs and she was alone with Draco in the living room. She had left for a moment to change out of her soaking wet cloak and dress, and upon returning had discovered him sprawled across the

couch as though he belonged there, his head on one of her mother's crocheted white doily pillows. "Do you want me to make some tea before we go?"

A faint mumble was her only answer. She turned and saw that he was asleep, or seemed to be. His cheek rested on the palm of his hand; the lashes of his shut eyes lay along his cheekbones like a fringe of tasseled black silk. In his face she could see the child he had been, the child who had faced her in the Manor library and told her how poor and repulsive he thought she was. There were hollows in his face now he had not had when he was twelve, of course; he had had a heart-shaped child's face then. Now it was more the shape of an expensive cat's: wide across the cheekbones, narrowing out towards the jaw. He turned slightly as she watched him, his exhaled breath stirring his hair. "Draco," she said softly. "Are you asleep?"

He opened his eyes and looked at her through his lashes. "I was getting there."

"Oh. Sorry."

"No, it's all right." He propped himself on his elbow and looked at her. "I wanted to ask you something anyway."

"All right. What?"

"Come over here and sit down, will you? You're making me nervous hovering over there." She looked at him, surprised, and he smiled. "And no, that wasn't what I wanted to ask you."

"All right," she said again, and not without misgiving went to sit on the couch. He slid his feet off to make room for her and half-sat up, propping himself against the cushions.

"I wanted to ask you," he said, "when you got your Time-Turner back?"

Ginny's heart banged hard against her ribs, and almost without her volition her hand flew up to protectively clutch at the chain around her neck. Draco's eyes widened.

"You really do have it," he said. "I was guessing."

Ginny drew away from him, pressing her back into the couch. "I will not give it back," she said fiercely. "I'm perfectly capable of being responsible with it -"

"I didn't say you weren't," Draco said quietly. He was watching her narrowly, and a hot flush spread over her face as she remembered the book shrieking outside the gates of the Manor: *I belong to Malfoy Manor!* She seemed doomed to look like a fool in front of him, she thought with a small corrupting bitterness that made her even more sure that she had made the right decision. She would not tell any of them what she planned until her plan was successful and it was too late for them to try to stop her. Watch them try to tell her then that she was irresponsible, too young, not brave enough, not part of the group.

"Look," he said, a bit more gently now, "Whatever you're thinking, you didn't do anything to give yourself away. But I know the Manor. I know there's no way whatsoever of resisting that kind of Whirlwind Charm. If you're in the Manor and you're trespassing, you're gone. Unless, of course, you're in the Manor....but in another time. Time tricks being your specialty."

"If you know," she said with a sinking heart, "then Dumbledore will know, and your mother, too..."

"My mum's off somewhere safe, apparently. As for Dumbledore, that's trickier. I'll have to think up a good lie that he won't see through."

Ginny's hand tightened around the hourglass at her throat. "You'd lie for me about this?"

He sat up straighter and looked at her intently. "That depends. Does Finnigan know you stole that hourglass?"

"No," she said, surprised at the question. "I'd never - I mean, he wouldn't want to know. Seamus wouldn't approve of lying and stealing things. He's one of the most moral and good people I know."

"Oh, he's a treasure, all right," said Draco with heavy irony. "I'm sure they'd build a monument to his wonderfulness, if they could find a grade of marble boring enough."

"Hmph," said Ginny, unable to think of a retort to this.

"So he doesn't know anything about any of this?"

Ginny shook her head. "I haven't told anyone," she said softly. "Honestly, Draco...the Time-Turner...I would never do anything dangerous. I was just playing..."

"I know what you were doing." A faintly superior look stole into his eyes. "You went back to get that book."

"The...book?" Ginny nearly fainted with horror. Not the diary, he couldn't have guessed *that*, he couldn't possibly...

"The *Liber-Damnatis*," he said.

Ginny was speechless.

"Trust you to nick one of the most valuable books out of my father's collection," he said, sounding very amused. "He complained for years that it was missing, but since the charms never went off, he just assumed the house-elves had misplaced it somewhere. 'Picked it up to use as a weapon' -" he snorted. "You're not a very good liar."

That's what you think, Draco Malfoy, Ginny thought grimly. "I bet you can't guess why I wanted it," she said, hoping against hope that he would enlighten her.

He obliged, looking amusingly exasperated. "Hermione was only going on and on about it being one of the best resources for information about the Four Worthy Objects that ever existed for *weeks*," he said. "She kept complaining that she couldn't find any existing copies in any libraries anywhere: I told her we'd had one once but it had gone missing when I was twelve and anyway, the Aurors would have confiscated it last summer if it'd turned up. She made me check the manifests..." He made a face at her. "You must think I don't pay any attention at all."

Ginny's mind was whirling. Nothing seemed to quite be making sense: how, out of all the books in the library, had she managed to pick up the one book that Hermione had apparently been wanting - the one book that might tell them about the Worthy Objects? There were coincidences, she

thought. And then there were *Coincidences*. This was obviously one of the latter. "So that's how you guessed," she said, only half aware she was speaking out loud. "The book..."

"Partly." Draco's voice was unusually gentle, although it might have been exhaustion. "I think I knew when I saw you in this..." He reached out his left hand, wincing as the bandage rode up on his wrist, and gently touched the edge of her ruined yellow cloak. "I remembered the girl in the library that day. I mentioned her to my father later and he told me I must have been daydreaming. But I knew even before he told me that that she had been lying about why she was there. He never would have hired a girl like that to be my governess."

"Oh, I know, you told me," Ginny said sourly. "Too many freckles."

"No," he said. "Too pretty."

His fingertips were still touching her cloak, lightly; she gingerly took hold of his wrist and bent to brush her cheek against the back of his hand.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I'm so sorry you're ill."

"I'll be fine." He was looking down at her; their faces were very close. She could feel his breath against her cheek, stirring her eyelashes. An agonizing anticipatory tingle ran over her skin. "Ginny, I wanted to tell you that -"

He broke off. For a moment she didn't know why: then she heard what had interrupted him. Someone was knocking at the door. His hand tightened on her cloak. "Aren't there wards up around this house?"

"Yes." She looked towards the door. "They don't let anyone with hostile intentions through. Oh! But it could be Ron- maybe something happened to him, he's been gone for so many hours -" Pulling away from Draco, she leaped to her feet and ran to the kitchen door. He called after her to be careful, but she ignored him. She drew the chain back and threw the door wide open.

The blond young man on the front steps blinked in the sudden light.

"Ginny?"

For a moment, she simply froze in dumbfounded shock. He had so much been the last person she expected to see that for a moment it was as if a stranger stood there. It took a moment for recognition to come flooding in. "Seamus?" she said. "Seamus, what are you doing here?"

"I was worried," he replied, his face breaking into a relieved smile at the sound of her voice. "I heard what happened and I was so worried about you. I flew all night to get here -" and without even finishing the sentence, he covered the space between them with a few swift steps and threw his arms around her. Too shocked to move, she returned his embrace weakly. "Ginny," he whispered into her hair. "Oh Ginny, I´m so glad to see you..."

The narrow corridor leading down to the Potions Dungeon was so poorly lit as to be a danger. Dumbledore waved a hand as he made his way down it and red and gold sparks followed him, lighting the way. A small smile curled the corner of his mouth. He found the habitual darkness in which Severus Snape liked to work amusing. He found most things about Snape amusing; Severus knew this and bore it grimly. Part of his penance, perhaps. Dumbledore was not sure. In the complex wall of guilt, penance, and intransigence which Snape had built about himself, there were few chinks through which an onlooker might gaze and understand.

Dumbledore had reached the entrance to the laboratory now; he ducked as he passed through the low doorway. It was extremely dim inside, lit only by the light of a few faintly flaring overhead torches. The walls were lined with jars, flasks and vials or many-colored liquids, as were the surfaces of the multiple worktables. Fires burned, cauldrons bubbled, and enormous tomes of magic lay scattered everywhere. Dumbledore resisted the urge to move *The Book of Gramarye* to a place where it would not get essence of hemlock spilled on it.

He paused in the middle of the room. "Hello, Severus," he said quietly to the man behind the largest worktable. The Potions master, dressed in his black work robes, was busy adding several drops of oil of thornwood to a simmering cauldron, and for a moment did not reply. At last he glanced up and nodded. "Headmaster," he said, by way of greeting. "What brings you down here so late?" He looked around, seeming to notice the darkness in the room for the first time. "Is it late, isn´t it?"

"It is almost three in the morning, Severus."

"Ah. I seem to have lost track of the time. I have been working."

"I know." Dumbledore rested a hand on the wooden worktable nearest him. He was very tired but had resisted Madam Pomfrey's offer of a Pepperup Potion. "And how goes the work? Have you had any luck identifying the substance in young Malfoy's blood?"

Snape set the instrument he had been holding down on the worktable before him and regarded it grimly. "No great luck, no," he said. "There were only trace evidences of any substance whatsoever to be found. I have identified certain components - traces of asphodel, belladonna and monkshood. I suspect it might be unicorn blood or powdered horn which gives the affected blood such a unique color. But none of that explains the side effects. Nor can I be sure what other elements might have broken down in the blood since the poison was administered. It is most frustrating."

"You said 'poison,' " Dumbledore replied. "So you think it is a poison, then?"

"I cannot be sure entirely," said Snape. "I certainly know of no bane which takes so long to take effect, and which produces such peculiar effects. But I cannot imagine what else it might be."

"You may or may not be happy to know that Lucius Malfoy agrees with you on that score."

Snape squinted. "What do you mean?"

"Young Malfoy arrived here this evening in the company of Harry Potter," Dumbledore said. "They claim to have eluded a trap set by Lucius at the Manor, and have come here seeking sanctuary. Which, of course, I am happy to provide."

"Of course." Snape took up a beaker of purplish liquid and poured it into the cauldron. The substance within turned an unexpected gold color. "Anything for Harry Potter," he muttered under his breath. "I suppose they had the usual entourage with them?"

"If you mean Miss Granger and Miss Weasley, yes. Rather unexpectedly, they also brought young Mister Finnegan. I shall have to owl his parents in the morning."

"Isn't there one missing?" Snape had begun searching among his flasks and vials for something. Seen through the tinted liquids inside, his face took on an odd particolored appearance: a blue cheekbone, hooked green nose, and orange chin. "What of our erstwhile Head Boy?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "Ronald Weasley is not with them."

"Unsurprising. If I were him I wouldn't want to show my face around here either." Snape selected a vial of pink liquid and held it up to the faint overhead light. He poured some into a stone mortar filled with powder, picked up a pestle, and began to mix whatever was inside into a reddish paste. "He's probably cowering somewhere, licking his wounds and feeling foolish."

Dumbledore made a noncommittal noise.

Snape looked at him sharply. "You don't think so?"

"Not particularly, no, but that is not the issue at hand. We were speaking of the poison..."

"Yes. Lucius Malfoy knows of it?"

"Apparently he claims to have administered it," Dumbledore said quietly.

There was a short silence. Snape raised an eyebrow. "Poisoning his own son," he remarked finally. "Voldemort will be pleased with Lucius. Making the supreme sacrifice for the Dark Lord."

"Given what Lucius gave up to serve Voldemort, is it really all that much of a sacrifice?"

"For Lucius, yes. Draco is still his. Minted out of the same metal. Malfoy bones and Malfoy blood. And he is an exceptional child. Subsequent children might not be so...exceptional. I don't suppose," Snape added, "that there is the slightest chance that Draco's escape from the Manor will prove detrimental to Lucius' public standing?"

"Unlikely." Dumbledore's tone was flat and heavy. "Sirius and Remus have already begun contacting all the old crowd and the reports are coming in. It appears that the corruption at the Ministry is more deep-rooted than we had ever imagined. We have been blind and complacent indeed and we will pay a heavy price for it. I imagine that soon enough Lucius will be able to walk down any wizarding street performing Unforgivable Curses right and left with no fear of punishment."

"You paint a bleak picture," Snape said, some irony in his tone. "I thought that was my job."

Dumbledore sighed. "You are right, Severus. The hour is late and my mood is subsequently dark. I originally came down here to give you something, not to wallow in grim predictions."

"Oh, yes? What is it?"

"You said that you were surprised that Lucius would consent to the destruction of his son," said Dumbledore. "I am not entirely sure that he did. He may have been hoping to use the poison as a bargaining chip."

Snape, being Snape, twigged immediately. "There is an antidote, then," he said, setting down the pestle.

"There *was* an antidote." Dumbledore reached into his pocket and drew out a roll of scarlet cloth. He laid it down on the worktable in front of the Potions master. "Harry Potter gave me this. These are the broken fragments of a vial that supposedly held the anti-toxin to this poison."

With a long index finger, Snape flicked at the cloth, which unrolled itself along the table. All upon and down the cloth bright slivers of glass clung like tiny glittering stars. "There is blood on these fragments," Snape remarked.

"Yes," Dumbledore said. "That is Harry's blood."

Snape looked up, his dark eyes hooded. "Such tiny slivers..."

"I know, Severus. But I recollect that during the Lestrangle case you were able to detect the Stunning potion that was used on the Longbottoms from

a fragment of a broken wineglass, and I have hope. I know that you will do everything that you can."

"Of course I will." Snape's tone was flat. "Headmaster...how much time do I have?"

"Lucius apparently told Draco that he had a month. From the look of him, however, I would guess it to be a little less."

"Less than a month..." Inside the sleeve of his robe, Snape had balled his hand into a fist. "Should I go up and talk to him, then? He might want to see me. Draco, I mean."

"I know what you mean." Dumbledore spoke thoughtfully. "He is already asleep. They all are. I thought it best that he not sleep in the Slytherin dungeon tonight..."

"Headmaster, I object!" A muscle twitched in Snape's cheek. "I know perfectly well that he has inexplicably befriended not just Potter but his entire crew of miscreants. I know that it would be impossible to pry him away from Potter with an Unbinding Hex. But no Slytherin student should sleep in Gryffindor Tower. It is more than just unseemly and against the rules, it is...it is traitorous!" Snape's voice trembled with agitation. "Whatever alliances he might have chosen, however ill he might be, Draco Malfoy remains a Slytherin!"

"Severus." Dumbledore's tone was gentle. "I put him in the infirmary."

"Oh." Snape deflated immediately. "Oh, of course. Yes. Madam Pomfrey should look after him."

"Indeed." Dumbledore almost succeeded in keeping the amusement out of his voice. "Is there anything I can get for you, Severus, anything you require for your work?"

"Tea," said Snape, slightly plaintively. "I find myself in need of a stimulant."

"I shall have the house elves bring you some Lapsang Souchong," Dumbledore named the foul-smelling brew of which Snape was enamoured. "And Severus...thank you for your hard work."

Even after the dungeon door closed behind the Headmaster of Hogwarts, Snape stood for a long time lost in thought, staring down at the roll of cloth before him, starred all over with its silvers of bright greenish glass. The scarlet of Gryffindor, the green of Slytherin. Potter blood and Malfoy poison. That Harry Potter had carried these fragments all the way to Hogwarts on the slim chance that they might prove useful surprised him. He knew from observation that Draco adored the Potter boy, painfully and intently, but had not assumed that Harry felt much of anything but toleration in return. That there might be friendship on both sides was curious to him. Had it been James, of course, there would have been no question...

For the first time, Severus Snape began to consider the possibility that Harry Potter might not be just like his father.

As he considered, he very carefully began to brush the glass fragments into a small metal cauldron. The first identifiable substance on the glass turned out to be human blood, which did not surprise him: the second was tears. It would be a long time before he found out whose tears they were.

References:

The Knight, Death and the Devil: The Knight, Death and the Devil is a woodcut engraving by Albrecht Durer. It shows a Knight making his progress through the world, frightened by Death, tempted by the Devil. The knight is meant to symbolize the faith within us all and ties in with Draco's statement in Hermione's dream that love is faith. Alternatively, I think of the Knight as being Harry, Death as Draco (because he is dying) and the Devil as Lucius, offering temptation to Our Hero.

The bit about Draco's metallic beauty showing his cruelty was actually something Anthony Minghella said about why he cast Jude Law in The Talented Mister Ripley.

"The black winter sky fretted with icy fire": "This majestic roof fretted

with golden fire" is from Hamlet; the soliloquy that begins "I have of late, though wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth."

"Quintilius Varus, give me back my legions" : what Augustus Caesar said when he learned that his most important general had lost a tenth of Rome's army in an ignominious defeat. "Quintili Vare, legiones redde" is the Latin.

"I belong to Malfoy Manor": from Diana Wynne Jones' Charmed Life, where the stolen books shout "I belong to Chrestomanci!"

Liber-Damnatis: HP Lovecraft invented this tome of evil.

"I was pondering the immortal words of Socrates when he said 'I drank what? - Socrates died after being forced to swallow poison by the Athenian government. The quote comes from the movie Real Genius.

"Nobody likes a non-budger" -obligatory Buffy quote.

Draco Veritas Chapter Ten: The Descent Beckons

For what we cannot accomplish,

For what is denied to love,

What we have lost in the anticipation,

A descent beckons, endless and indestructible.

-william carlos williams

Although it was winter, the light that came through the infirmary window was deceptively clear and transparent gold: summer light. Dumbledore sat and looked at the fair-haired boy in the bed by the window, and sighed inwardly.

"Master Malfoy," he said. "I hope you know I am trying to help you. You are making it very difficult for me."

The boy raised his eyes to Dumbledore's. Unusual eyes they were, the eyes that ran in the Malfoy family. His father had had the same eyes. Clear gray, untouched by hints of blue or green or hazel. "I told you," the boy said. "I don't need help."

Dumbledore sighed again, this time aloud. "Lucius," he said. "Show me your arms, please."

There was a short silence. Then, unwillingly, the boy stretched his arms out towards his Transfigurations professor. His chin was set, as if he were proud of his injuries, and perhaps he was. They were certainly dramatic: from wrist to elbow, on both arms, six parallel cuts were slashed into his skin. They were deep cuts, long and clean-edged, as if they had been made with a particularly sharp knife. Headmaster Dippet had nearly fallen out of his chair when he'd seen them. They looked bad, and Dippet was terrified of Lucius' family already.

"How did you get these, Lucius?" Dumbledore asked, knowing already what the response would be.

"I already explained this." Lucius' voice was toneless. "They're from a Slashing Hex. I got them in a duel. I don't have to tell you with whom. It's my business. My father told me -"

"I have no interest in what your father might have to say on this topic." Dumbledore's voice was sharp as razor wire. "The interest of the school is in you and your well-being. These are the aftereffects of necromantic magic. The physical signs of the toll it takes."

"Are you accusing me of practicing dark magic at school?" Lucius' gray eyes blazed. "My father -"

"I am not accusing *you*."

"Then what?"

"Tom Riddle." Dumbledore's voice was edged with softness, but unyielding nevertheless. "He is a friend of yours, isn't he?"

Lucius paled markedly. "He is not."

"But you know him."

"Everyone knows him. He's Head Boy."

"I would venture to say you know him better than most."

Lucius' expression was unreadable. "If you have something to say about Tom Riddle, Professor, perhaps you should say it to him."

"And what makes you think I have not?" Dumbledore asked. "I am not a fool, and I know what Tom Riddle is. I have tried to talk to him. Merlin knows, I have tried. But there are some tasks that are impossible, and that is one of them. He is set in what he is, unchangeable. But Lucius, you are not. You are thirteen years old, and that is young to hear what I have to tell you, but it is the truth: the decisions you make now will affect the rest of your life."

Lucius sat still; Dumbledore could see the thin chest rising and falling quickly under the flannel pajama top. When he spoke at last, there was scorn in his voice. "You know nothing about Tom," he said. "And nothing

about me. You think if you tell me he's not my friend, you can get me on your side. Well, you can't. You've never seen anyone like Tom before and it scares you, because you know that no matter what happens, he'll win in the end. He's more powerful than any other wizard at this school --"

"Tom is very clever," Dumbledore said. "But he is also very young. Has it occurred to you that he may be overestimating his power?"

"Has it occurred to you that you might be underestimating it?"

Dumbledore looked at him with weary surprise. He wished he could be more amazed at this small child with the deadly-looking injuries, his soft little boy's voice, not yet broken, saying these ugly and distasteful things. But he was not amazed. He had known Malfoys before Lucius. Preternatural unpleasantness simply ran in their blood.

Lucius went on. "Tom has the right ideas. He wants to change the world, and he will. And there will be a place for me in his world -- he's promised me that."

"And you believe his promises?" Dumbledore's voice was grave. "He will abide by them only so long as he has use for you, Lucius. He feels nothing for you, or for anyone. There is no friendship in him. Only hate and resentment, the marks of which you bear for him. When crisis comes, he will sacrifice you along with all the rest."

Lucius' expression was flat. "That is my lookout, then," he said. "Not yours."

A rattling noise interrupted Dumbledore's next remark. It was the sound of the curtains around the bed being drawn back, the silver rings clinking together. Dumbledore turned around to see Madam Pomfrey standing behind him, a tall, dark-haired boy at her side. The Head Boy badge gleamed at his chest.

Tom Riddle.

"Pardon me for interrupting, Professor Dumbledore," said Tom, his voice as smooth as oil. "But Professor Coulter has requested Lucius' return to the Slytherin dormitories."

Dumbledore glanced at Madam Pomfrey. "Poppy?"

She looked unhappy, but nodded. "He's well enough to leave, if he keeps his bandages on. Those cuts will take weeks to heal, though. There's absolutely no spell that can hurry the process. Not with cuts like those."

Tom's voice was soothing. "We'll take care of Lucius while he's recovering," he said. "Don't trouble yourself."

"We?" Dumbledore echoed.

Tom smiled. So Lucifer must have smiled, Dumbledore thought, upon waking after the Fall to find himself the master of an unpopulated Hell. Only Tom still looked like an angel, and Lucifer had not. "His friends, of course."

"Of course," Dumbledore said, and, raising his eyes to Tom's, gave him a measuring look. For a moment they locked eyes, Tom returning Dumbledore's searching gaze with an affectedly innocent stare. Tom had very unusual eyes, often the topic of discussion among the Hogwarts girls: so dark a blue they were nearly black, the iris seemed to meld with the pupil, giving his eyes a peculiar, almost blind look. They appeared shrewd sometimes, blank others, knowing always. But they could not quite manage innocence.

It was Tom who looked away first. "Lucius," he said, and held out a long-fingered hand towards the younger boy, index finger crooked in an imperious gesture. "Are you coming?"

Lucius, in the process of hurling his robes on over his infirmary pajamas and quickly buckling his boots, looked up and nodded breathlessly. "Almost ready, Tom -- wait for me?"

"Yes," said Tom, and lowered his hand. His blue-black eyes were suddenly full of some secret amusement. "I'll wait for you."

"You know, Draco," Hermione said, looking wearily at the fair-haired boy in the infirmary bed, "sometimes you make it awfully difficult."

"To resist my manly charms? Yes, I know," said Draco, currently engaged in resolutely pulling all the feathers out of an overstuffed pillow Ginny had lent him. Tiny white feathers tangled in his fine fair hair, stuck to his eyelashes, sifted down onto the shoulders of his blue silk pajamas. "You must be strong, Hermione, for all our sakes. I've been told that breathing exercises can help."

"To feel sympathetic towards you, is what I was going to say," Hermione corrected him primly. "And now you have proved my point. Plus, you are ruining that pillow."

"It was tubby," Draco said, yanking out another handful of feathers and tossing them into the air. "I can't sleep on tubby pillows."

Hermione snorted. "Spoiled," she said, succinctly.

Draco grinned at her through an obscuring rain of feathers. Hermione hugged her book to her and tried not to smile back, not wanting to encourage him. Draco had been in the infirmary now for almost three days, ever since they had arrived back at Hogwarts. They took it in shifts to sit with him, all except Seamus. (Seamus had offered to sit with Draco one day, but upon his arrival in the infirmary, Draco had nonchalantly hurled an entire box of bandages at his head.)

Hermione had assumed Draco was being forced to stay in the infirmary by Madam Pomfrey, but now she was beginning to wonder. He really seemed to be --well, *enjoying himself* wasn't it exactly, but he wasn't moping around, either. She got the impression that he had been, somehow, running himself ragged for weeks and weeks and now, he was resting from it. His old playfulness had come back, and he unmercifully teased or flirted with everyone who came near him -- odd behavior for someone under a tentative death sentence, but there it was. She had never thought she'd actually see anyone tease Snape before, but Draco managed it. He flirted with Madam Pomfrey, who had given him nearly every pillow and extra blanket in the empty infirmary, and who allowed him to wear his own silk pajamas instead of the infirmary's standard-issue flannel stripes. Ginny and Harry, meanwhile, were constantly bringing him books, food, magazines and anything and everything they thought might be either diverting or helpful. Hermione was convinced that one day she would arrive in the infirmary to discover them fighting over who had earned the

privilege of staging a sock puppet revival of *Death of a Salesman* at the foot of the bed for Draco's amusement.

Meanwhile, Draco presided over it all like an ailing prince of the realm, accepting the attention as if it was his due, all rumpled hair and sprawled gracefulness and wide silvery eyes with foot-long lashes that seemed to get batted at everyone. Only Hermione felt herself immune to the ridiculousness. She suspected that somewhere, inside him, Draco was as well -- that the ailing-prince performance was just that, a performance, and in its own way, an attempt to distract everyone. He was behaving like someone recovering from a terrible illness, when after all, the opposite was true. The terrible part was only just beginning.

"You know, I talked to Madam Pomfrey," Hermione said, unsuccessfully attempting to take the no-longer-overstuffed pillow away from Draco. "She said there isn't any reason that you have to stay in bed; if you're careful, and don't exert yourself, you can get up and go back to your dormitory."

"My pillow is flat," Draco said sadly, examining the wreckage he had created.

"Of course it is." Hermione took the empty pillowcase from him, and put it on the nightstand. "Do you understand me, Draco?"

"Seldom if ever," he replied. "But therein lies your charm."

"Oh, honestly," Hermione wailed. "Wouldn't you rather go back to your own bed?"

"No," Draco said in a decided manner. "There's no one there and it's really *boring*."

This was true. There were very few students still at school for these holidays, but the complete lack of Slytherins was notable. Not one had stayed behind.

"All right, fine," Hermione said. "But I, for one, am not going to be peeling you big piles of grapes, or fanning you with a handkerchief. I'm sorry you're ill, but you *will* get better. Snape's found every ingredient but two in the antidote, did I tell you? And he said he'll find the other two today

or tomorrow at the latest. And I do wish you'd at least come and open Christmas presents with us tomorrow morning --"

"Oh, bugger," said Draco, with feeling. "Christmas. I forgot."

"You forgot Christmas?" asked a light voice and a hand drew the curtain back. It was Ginny. She smiled at Draco, a smile that immediately vanished as she surveyed the wreckage of her pillow. "Draco!" she snapped. "What have you done with my pillow?"

"I'm not sure," said Draco, removing a feather from his hair. "I think I went mad with fever."

"That was my pillow I've had since I was eight! I've slept with it every night for years!"

Draco looked unrepentant.

Ginny made a hmph-ing sound, yanked the curtains shut, and flung herself down into the chair next to Hermione's. Ostentatiously removing a book from her bag -- she was now halfway through *Trousers Revisited*, which she had begun upon giving up on ever finding her copy of *Passionate Trousers* again -- and began reading, ignoring Draco and Hermione both. Draco glanced at Hermione with dancing eyes.

"I told you you were spoiled," Hermione snapped, determined not to be moved by his contagious mirth. "You just enjoy lolling about, having everyone wait on you hand and foot and bring you sandwiches. I swear, Harry's worn a hole in the portrait pear, he's been in and out of the kitchen so much."

Draco flushed a delicate and indignant shade of mauve. "I do not make people bring me sandwiches."

As if on cue, the curtains around the bed were drawn back again. This time Draco lit up like a Filibuster Firework. Hermione twisted around to see Harry standing at the bed's foot, a covered plate in his hand. "I brought you a sandwich," he said, and handed the plate to Draco.

Hermione shot Draco a glare, which he studiously ignored. Ginny made a faint noise and glanced briefly over the spine of *Trousers Revisited*.

Draco ignored this, too. Instead, he bestowed upon Harry a smile that somehow managed to communicate that his gratitude for this gift of a sandwich had briefly -- ever so briefly -- drawn him back from the brink of complete dissolution. If not for this sandwich, Draco's smile seemed to say, the pain of merely going on might have become too great to bear. As it was, he would probably manage to hang on a bit longer.

Hermione resisted the urge to smack Draco soundly.

"It's peanut butter," said Harry.

Draco paused and the dazzling smile faded slightly. "Oh."

Harry looked stricken. "You don't like peanut butter?"

"I like it fine," Draco said. "It's just, well, it's a bit..."

"Plebeian?" asked Ginny, from behind her book, a sharp edge to her tone.

"Sticky," said Draco woefully. "It sticks to my teeth."

"Oh, for goodness sake," said Hermione.

"It's all right," Harry said, and reached to take the plate back. "I'll get you something else."

"No, don't bother. I'll eat it."

"No, you won't. There's no reason for you to eat something you don't like. Give me the plate."

"No, it's all right, really. Perhaps the peanut butter will give me strength."

"Hand me the plate, Malfoy."

A sudden obstinacy seemed to strike Draco. He clung to the plate as if it were a departing loved one. "No," he said.

Harry hissed an exasperated breath through his teeth. "I don't *mind*," he said.

Draco allowed his eyes to grow huge and woeful. "Well, I mind. It's not your fault I don't like peanut butter. Anyway, I said I'd eat it."

"I don't want you to eat it because you feel like you have to."

"Maybe I want to."

"But you don't want to."

"I might have changed my mind."

"You haven't, you're just being ridiculous." Harry's eyes flashed. "Give me the plate, Malfoy."

"No," Draco said.

"AAARGH," said Ginny, stood up (dropping *Trousers Revisited* as she did so), reached forward, grabbed the plate out of Draco's hand, yanked open the nearest window, and flung out the plate. There was a moment of silence as all three of them stared at her, frozen with astonishment -- then the loud sound of shattering china interrupted the silence as the plate struck the stone courtyard below the window.

Hermione, unable to help herself, winced. "Oh, the poor house-elves," she said. "They do hate broken crockery."

Harry raised both eyebrows, but remained silent.

Draco slowly lowered his hands to the coverlet, wide-eyed. "I *would* have eaten it," he said.

Ginny, her cheeks flushing suddenly scarlet, looked at him furiously. "You're so *selfish*," she said, her eyes sliding from him, to Harry, to Hermione. Hermione winced again, under Ginny's gaze, feeling suddenly and inexplicably guilty -- but what for? "You're all so *selfish*," Ginny said again, her voice fierce. She scrabbled blindly for her book, seized it, and ran past Harry and out of the room before any of them had a chance to move or react.

Harry was the first to speak. "What was *that* about?"

Down the hall, a door banged shut as Ginny slammed her way out of the infirmary.

"Maybe she doesn't like peanut butter either," Draco suggested helpfully.

"Seems a bit of a violent reaction," Harry observed.

"So it does." Draco didn't seem very exercised about this; in fact, laughter was dancing behind his gray eyes. Harry seemed to notice this, and looked pleased.

"You look better," he said. "Do you feel better?"

Draco looked slightly sheepish. "I do, a bit."

"Having plates thrown out the window makes you feel better?" Hermione asked, hiding a smile.

"I can't help it," said Draco. "I may be ill, but I'm still callous and strange."

"I'd throw plates out the window all day if it would get you better," said Harry absently, as if his mind were on something else.

Draco looked surprised; his eyes widened and his lips parted as if he were about to say something. Hermione interrupted him.

"Harry, could you go see if Ginny's all right?"

Harry, snapping back to the present, agreed with a slightly mournful air: Hermione had a feeling that if he didn't find Ginny, he'd be back in the kitchens shortly. He left, taking his abstracted mood with him.

"Don't say it," Draco said, as soon as the infirmary door had closed behind Harry.

"Say what?" Hermione's voice was severe. "That Harry might not show you how upset he is, but that doesn't mean he isn't? He's only making you sandwiches because he doesn't know what else to do."

"I know that," Draco said quietly. The affected air of haughty weariness had left him, replaced by a grave seriousness Hermione found infinitely more sympathetic. "And I'd rather he had something to do, honestly."

Otherwise he just feels like he ought to be doing something else, something *bigger*. And there's nothing to do. This isn't the kind of enemy he can fight. He can't crawl inside my veins and kill the poison before it kills me."

"You're *not* going to die," Hermione corrected him sharply.

"I am," he said. "You know I am --"

Thwack! Draco broke off as the *Liber-Damnatis* hit him square in the chest.

"Don't you ever," Hermione said, her voice trembling, "ever, ever, say that in front of Harry. Don't you *ever*."

He stared at her. In his white face, his eyes were the color of rain: luminous but leaden. All his previous playacting had hardly moved Hermione's heart, but this Draco, eyes dark with haunted apprehension, made her ache inside. She hated the poison that, as it killed him, seemed to burn away all impurities from skin and hair and eyes, turning his eyes to flaring crystal, lighting the roses of fever in his pale cheeks, paring away all excess flesh from the lovely arcing bones of cheek and chin and jaw. He had never been as eerily beautiful before and it bothered and upset her.

"I wouldn't," he said. "Of course I wouldn't."

"Oh, Draco," she said. A sudden weariness came over her, and she hugged her arms about herself, feeling chilled. "What am I going to *do* with you? You make everyone you meet either love you or hate you and sometimes I wonder which is worse."

A faint smile touched the edge of Draco's mouth. "A keenly felt observation," he said. "Thank you."

"And you treat people appallingly." Hermione's tone was glum. "Blaise, for instance. Paying her to date you. That's just ewy."

"Please clarify for me the exact dictionary definition of 'ewy,'" said Draco, sounding unforgivably amused.

"Unethical," Hermione said darkly.

Draco cocked his silvery head to one side. "Nope, I don't think I know that one either," he observed. "Is that like having three equal sides?"

"That's *equilateral*," Hermione snapped. "And you're really despicable sometimes, you know that?"

"Now there's a word I know," Draco said with a beatific smile.

"I mean, how do you justify an arrangement like that? It would be one thing if it was just for show entirely, but you actually *did things* with her. Didn't you?"

"Define 'things'," said Draco. "You mean like did we spend time together knitting booties for underprivileged infants? Because if so, no. If you mean did we occasionally take off our clothes and --"

"*That's* what I meant," Hermione interrupted hastily. "And please, spare me the details."

Draco crossed his arms behind his head and arched his back like a cat in the sunshine. "Well, what did you expect me to do, anyway? Realistically speaking. I'm seventeen years old, you know. I ought to be having sex with everything that has legs and isn't a table. So I messed about with Blaise a bit. I didn't sleep with her."

Hermione felt relieved despite herself. "You didn't?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but no. I could have. On occasion, I wanted to..."

Hermione chuckled to herself. "So using sex to get what you want didn't work out, then?"

Draco shrugged and pushed his fair hair out of his eyes. "I'm a boy. I can't use sex to get what I want. Sex *is* what I want."

"Just not with Blaise."

"No," he said, a little more quietly. "Not with Blaise."

"It wouldn't have been fair to her," Hermione said. "So I'm glad that you didn't, for what it's worth."

Draco looked merely confused. Hermione knew he didn't understand, and probably never would understand, that what he had done to Blaise was wrong. With an inward sense of *here goes nothing*, she reached into the pocket of her robes and drew out the small box she'd been carrying for the past three days, opened it, and took out Blaise's three barrettes. She handed Draco one.

Draco's expression changed to one of complete confusion. "Blaise's barrettes? What the bloody...?"

"She gave me these to give to you," Hermione said shortly.

"She what? When? How?" Draco looked flabbergasted.

Hermione smirked. "Look, she just did, okay? She said they had protective magic of some sort. I don't know why. They look like perfectly ordinary barrettes to me."

"They're basilisk scales, actually," Draco said absently, looking down at the one in his hand. "Tiny baby basilisk scales, overlapping -- there was a custom among pureblood families generations ago to wear ornaments containing bits of Dark creatures: Hellhound teeth, dragon blood pendants, werewolf bones. My signet ring --" he held up his hand -- "has gryphon blood in the stone. It's a traditional thing."

"Well, she seemed sincere about wanting you to have one," Hermione said. "I worried about giving it to you..."

"You shouldn't," said Draco, with a supreme and obnoxious confidence. "She loves me."

"Everyone does," said Hermione wearily. "Pin it on your shirt, then, will you?"

"Suddenly I feel pretty," said Draco, doing as instructed. "Is there one for Harry?"

"Yes, and I'll give the other to Ginny," said Hermione.

"Is there another one for you?"

"Yes, she gave me four," she lied. "Stop fretting."

Draco narrowed his eyes at her, but before he could speak, the door opened and Harry came back into the room. He was carrying another plate, and this time he was surrounded by at least nine house-elves, all carrying plates, bowls, and platters. He looked very proud of himself.

"I didn't know what you might want," he said to Draco, "so I got a little bit of everything."

Draco burst out laughing.

"Oh, *honestly*," said Hermione, and threw up her hands in despair.

"What department do we want again?" Lupin asked, studying the embossed Ministry Directory with some confusion.

Sirius, leaning against the wall nearby and fiddling with the lid on his coffee cup, glanced over with a slight yawn. It was still early morning, and neither of them had gotten much sleep lately. "Department for the Regulation of Underage Wizards," he said. "It's usually on the third floor on Tuesdays."

"I don't see it," said Lupin, and turned back to the directory. Privately, he thought they were wasting their time and knew that Sirius did as well. But Ron had now been gone for three days, and Molly and Arthur were panicked. The clock on the wall still showed him to be traveling, and the goldenrod in the window box, planted the day of Ron's birth and linked magically to his health and well-being, was blooming and upright. But Ron was nowhere to be found. Owls had been sent to all relatives, the old crowd dispatched, Dumbledore notified. It now remained to make it an official matter of a missing underage wizard. That Arthur still trusted the Ministry surprised Lupin. But then, he had never trusted the Ministry himself.

There was, however, something very peculiar going on with the Ministry directory. Lupin scanned the list of departments with a raised eyebrow.

The Department of Redundancy Department

The Department for Putting Things On Top of Other Things

The Department of Retroactive Continuity

The Department of Two Guys Named Vinnie

The Department for the Misuse of Muggles

Lupin blinked. "Shouldn't that be Misuse of Muggle *Artifacts*?"

Sirius tossed the coffee cup over his shoulder. "What's wrong with the directory?" He came to stand beside Lupin, smelling strongly of coffee and flowers. Lupin's nose twitched. The full moon would be on shortly, and his sense of smell was always stronger just before he changed.

"Must you use gardenia soap?" he demanded, unable to help himself.

"I asked you a question first." Sirius scanned the directory with curious dark eyes, then laughed without amusement. "Well, everything's arsed up properly, isn't it. Come along then. We'll just keep opening doors until we find someone who knows where we need to go."

"That seems like it would take a long time."

"Bollocks," said Sirius succinctly, and took off for the nearest staircase. He raced up it quickly. He still ran like he had when he was a boy: as if he were being pulled onward and upward by celestial cords. Having spent his early years not having gone much of anywhere, Sirius had always been the one who wanted to go *faster*, fly *higher*, run *farther*. Lupin, who could run faster than any of them, had been too frightened of his own speed to do so, and James has always been happy enough where he was. As for Peter...

Sirius paused impatiently on the landing. "Remus, are you coming, or not?"

Lupin followed Sirius up the stairs. At the top was a long corridor, identical to hundreds of other Ministry corridors. The polished marble floors seemed to stretch into infinity, lined with oak doors. Sirius strode

up to the first door, whose plaque declared it to be the *Department for the Regulation of Regulations*, and pushed the door open.

Inside, a small, pixie-faced witch, sitting at a desk, looked up and frowned. Her nameplate proclaimed her to be a Miss Alice Wack. "Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for the Department for the Regulation of Underage Wizards," Sirius said in his most charming voice. "Might you be able to assist me?"

Usually Sirius' most charming voice melted the hearts of witches like chocolate in the hot summer sun, but this one looked merely nervous. "I'm sure I don't know where that is. This is the Department for the Regulation of Ensoceled Fruits and Vegetables."

"Actually," said Sirius, glancing at the plaque and then back at the witch behind the desk, "it seems to be the Department for the Regulation of Regulations. Or isn't it?"

Her flush deepened. "I think you'd better talk to Master Malfoy," she said. "He's in charge of the renovation plan."

"Bloody Lucius Malfoy," said Sirius through his teeth. "I'll show that maniacal bastard renovations. I'll renovate his face."

"Please go away, sir," said the witch. "You're frightening me."

Lupin pulled Sirius away from the door. "Thank you," he called back to the witch, "you've been very unhelpful," and he shut the door firmly behind them.

"Sirius, this is ridiculous. All roads lead to Lucius, you know that. I doubt there is a Department for the Regulation of Underage Wizards any more, or if there is, it's been transfigured into an espresso bar. Why are we bothering?"

But Sirius' eyes were bright with anger. This, Lupin knew, meant there would be no talking to him. He strode up to the second door on his right (*Department for the Regulation of Divination*, according to its plaque) and threw it open.

The office inside was empty save for a desk upon which sat an enormous crystal ball. It lit up when they poked their heads in, and spoke in a high trilling voice.

"Welcome to the Department for the Regulation of Divination," it said. *"We were expecting your visit and have therefore elected to be out of the office."*

Sirius turned slowly to Lupin. "This isn't going to work, is it?"

"No," Lupin said gently. "Look, if you like, we can look for Frances Parkinson instead. He's temporary Minister."

"He'll be on the fourth floor in half an hour," piped the crystal ball.

Sirius raised an eyebrow. "Well, then."

Lupin sighed. "Off we go," he said.

As Sirius reached for the door knob, the crystal ball piped up one last time. *"I'd tell you to have a nice day,"* it announced, *"but I already know you won't have one."*

"Oh, sod off," said Sirius sharply, and slammed the door behind them.

Upon leaving the infirmary with her books in hand, Hermione found Harry tooling around in the outside corridor with a disconsolate expression. She sighed and looked at him severely. "If they awarded points for moping, we'd have the House Cup in the bag for this year and for several years to come," she said.

"I can't help it," he said. "Oh, I found Ginny, by the way. She bit my head off. Thanks for sending me off on that fun expedition. Maybe tomorrow you can send me out to offer Snape a backrub."

Hermione ignored Harry's sarcasm; she knew this was his way of dealing with tension. "Bit your head off? That's not like Ginny. Are you sure you didn't misunderstand?"

Harry shrugged. "Well, she called me an oblivious moron pig. But maybe she meant it in a nice way."

Hermione was mystified. "How weird. Maybe she had a fight with Seamus?"

"Possibly." Harry did not sound as if he cared. "Are you off to the Potions dungeon?"

"I am, actually." They'd been taking turns helping Snape with his attempts to find the antidote, although Hermione suspected Snape neither wanted nor needed the assistance and that this was something Dumbledore had arranged to give Harry, Hermione and Ginny the impression that they were not completely useless. "Did you want to come?" Hermione asked, beginning to walk off down the corridor.

"I can't -- I'm supposed to be talking to Sirius in the common room this afternoon. I'm meant to be helping Snape tomorrow morning instead. He made me promise to show up at the crack of dawn." Harry made a face, falling into step beside Hermione. "I think he just wants me to miss opening presents on Christmas morning."

"So we'll do our presents in the afternoon instead," said Hermione, and patted his shoulder lightly. "We can make a party out of it. It would be good if we had *something* cheerful to do. And besides, it wouldn't be the same opening presents Christmas morning without --"

"--Without Ron. I know," said Harry, his eyes gone opaque.

"Harry --"

But he evaded her reaching hand. "I'll see you later," he said, and set off towards Gryffindor Tower.

Hermione sighed and veered the other direction, heading down the east stairs to the library to pick up the book she'd left there last night. She had borrowed it from Snape's laboratory and could imagine the heinous punishments that would be visited upon her if she lost it.

To her surprise, Ginny was in the library when she went in, sitting at one of the long wooden tables with a book open in front of her and a distant

look on her face. She glanced up when Hermione sat down across from her, but her expression hardly changed. "Hi," she said coldly.

Hermione reached into her cloak pocket, took out the second of Blaise's barrettes, and set it down on the table in front of Ginny. "Put this on your cloak," she said.

Ginny looked at it with minimal interest. "Is that one of Blaise's?" she asked.

Hermione, who had explained the story of Blaise's midnight Burrow visit to Ginny the previous day, nodded. "Draco says they're all right."

"Isn't that wonderful." Ginny could not have spoken with less enthusiasm had she been describing an upcoming date with Professor Flitwick.

"Ginny..." Hermione began, speaking carefully. "Is something wrong?"

"No." Ginny spoke with her eyes on the table. "But I need your help with something. A spell."

"What kind of spell?"

"I know there's a spell that will tell you when a magical object was created," Ginny said. Her hand had gone to her throat and was twisting the gold chain that lay against her lightly freckled collarbone. "But I can't find it, and I'm sort of in a hurry..."

"Ginny," said Hermione severely. "You're not planning on using that Time-Turner of yours again, are you?"

Ginny's eyes darted up and met hers: they were dark with a complex mixture of anger and resentment and a hurt that Hermione couldn't quite put her finger on. "Draco *told* you?"



"Well, yes," said Hermione, surprised. "He knew I wouldn't tell anyone, and he was asking if there were any ill-effects to using a Time-Turner too much --"

"He's probably told Harry as well," said Ginny bitterly. "I suppose I should have assumed he wouldn't keep anything from either of you."

"Yes, well, there *are* ill-effects, Ginny. It takes a toll on your body, going back and forth like that --"

"You used to do it every day!"

"But I only went back an *hour*. You went back *years*. And there aren't just ill-effects for you, there are all sorts of rules and regulations about using a Temporal Enhancement Device so that you don't change the past. You've been awfully careless--"

Ginny's dark eyes blazed. "I have not been careless."

"It's not that I don't appreciate what you did," Hermione said evenly. "This book is invaluable--" She pushed the *Liber-Damnatis* across the table at Ginny. "But that doesn't mean it wasn't stupid of you to take it. Do we really want something of Lucius Malfoy's here in our possession? I know you have the best intentions, Ginny, but intentions aren't always what we..." She trailed off, seeing the cold expression on Ginny's face. "Fine. Never mind. Just -- send that book back to the Manor. I've made a copy of it, and I'd rather the original was out of Hogwarts, just to be safe."

Ginny was trembling all over as she stared at the book lying on the table between them. "I can't believe you all," she said in a coldly quiet voice. "If it wasn't for me, Harry and Draco would still be stuck at the top of that bloody tower. I saved their *lives*. A little gratitude from at least one of you would be nice!"

"We are grateful--"

Ginny said a word so rude that it left Hermione blinking in surprise. "You don't act it. All *you* do is patronize me, and as for Draco and Harry, they wouldn't notice if I dropped dead on the floor. I don't know how you can stand it. Doesn't it bother you?"

Hermione was taken aback. "Doesn't what bother me?"

"Draco and Harry," said Ginny.

Hermione frowned. "I don't know what you mean. What about Draco and Harry?"

Ginny laughed; it was a short, unpleasant sound. "Doesn't the way they are with each other bother you? Like nothing else matters and nothing else exists. They've turned so much into each other that I hardly know which of them is which anymore. Ask Harry a question, you get an answer from Draco. When Harry's not in the infirmary he's so jumpy he bites off your head if you say anything. He just wanders around the Potions laboratory, dropping vials and spilling powders and looking miserable."

"Of course he's miserable," Hermione said. "He's got every reason to be miserable."

"He goes around saying Draco isn't going to die," said Ginny. Her hand was still at her throat, worrying the gold chain there. The charms on her bracelet clinked lightly as her hand moved.

"And most of him believes that, but some small part of him is probably terrified," said Hermione. "This is the way he's dealing with being frightened. We're all frightened. If you're asking me if I'm sorry they're friends, well, I'm not. I'm glad Draco has Harry to take care of him and I'm glad Harry has Draco to take care of *him*. Neither of them ever had any proper family before. I don't know why I'd be bothered by that."

"If I were you," said Ginny, her voice flat with a harsh clarity, "I'd be afraid that if Draco dies, he'll take Harry right along with him."

Hermione very carefully put her book down. "I don't know what you mean."

"Because you don't *want* to!" Ginny's released her hold on her bracelet and let her hands drop to the table. "You say 'they're friends,' like they're ordinary friends, but I've got friends, Hermione, and we're not like that. They're *dependent*, both of them, like the other one was some kind of ... of addictive drug they need to stay alive. How is it good for either of them

to be like that? Like half a person? It's so painful and terrible it hurts me just to look at them."

"Painful?" Hermione was bewildered, and beneath the bewilderment was a small but growing anger. "Terrible? I don't see anything painful or terrible about it. Of course they don't have an ordinary friendship; they aren't ordinary people. Do ordinary people have to face death every day? If you're going to be friends with Harry you have to know that you might die because of it. You have to be willing to *face* death for him. And Draco would. He'd die for Harry. If Harry needed him, he'd run a thousand miles to be with him. If he couldn't run, he'd walk. If both his legs were broken, he'd crawl. Everyone else wants the world saved and they expect Harry to do it. Well, Draco doesn't care about saving the world. He cares about Harry. And someone has to put Harry first, because God knows he isn't allowed to himself."

Ginny's hands where they gripped the edge of the table were white. "So Draco's supposed to do what? Sacrifice himself for Harry? Die in his place? He idolizes Harry. It's not fair."

"Harry's everything good he's ever wanted to be," Hermione said quietly. "He loves him like you love the better part of yourself."

"Harry has flaws," Ginny said. "We all have flaws."

"I know. But if Draco doesn't see them, what's the harm in that?"

"Because it makes him hate himself!" Ginny almost shouted. "And love, I thought, is supposed to make you stronger, not *weaker*. It's supposed to be something to live for, not die for. But you don't care. You don't care about him any more than any of you care about me. But you'll see. You'll see what it's like when they shut you out just like you and Harry and my brother used to shut me out for all those years and years. All those things Tom did to me and you never cared or noticed because you never looked -- you just saw what you wanted to see -- just like Harry looks at Draco and sees what he wants to see -- I could have died right in front of you just like Draco's doing now and *you wouldn't have cared* --"

"*Ginny!*" Hermione exclaimed, getting to her feet so quickly that she almost knocked over her chair. "That's not true."

"The hell it isn't," Ginny shot back, and now her eyes were bright with angry tears. She scabbled for her book-bag, shoved the *Liber-Damnatis* into it, and stood up, throwing her bag over her shoulder. "And I don't want that stupid barrette -- I wouldn't want anything that belonged to Blaise -- she's nothing but a - a prostitute! You *all* make me sick!"

Hermione flinched back as Ginny flung the jeweled ornament at her feet: it landed there with a faint clink. She knelt to pick it up and stayed there for a moment, on her knees, feeling as if she never wanted to get up again.

"*Origio*," she said finally, looking down at the barrette in her hand. "*Origio* -- that's the spell you wanted."

Ginny said nothing. By the time Hermione had straightened up, she was gone.

It had taken Percy almost two days, but finally he had managed to get his makeshift new office into a workable state. There were his quills and his inkpot; there were his stacks of parchment in the Out box, and the much smaller stack in the In box. Here was his desk, with its neatly labeled files; here was his FiloParch, with its meticulously detailed record of appointments. The only thing his office lacked was, well, more than two walls.

"Ahem." Overhead, someone cleared their throat. "Pray tell, what is the meaning of this? Why is your desk in the middle of the hallway?"

Percy glanced up to see Lucius Malfoy standing over him. He had his arms crossed over his chest and an expression on his pale, pointed face that would have curdled milk.

"It's not just my desk," Percy pointed out helpfully. "It's also my filing cabinets and Roll-o-Scrolls. Oh, and all my quills. Dashed inconvenient it was moving it all, too."

Lucius blinked. "And who are you?"

"Percy Weasley, sir, Assistant to the Director of --"

"A *Weasley*." Lucius spat the word out as if it tasted foul. "I should have known. Why, Mr. Weasley, are you not in your office? Are you aware that Ministry Regulations forbid the placement of furniture in hallways reserved for official use?"

"Well, I have to work somewhere, don't I?" Percy said in an injured tone.

"And your *office*?"

"It's a broom closet now," Percy complained. "I tried to work in there, but mops keep falling on my head."

"Perhaps they are trying to tell you something," Lucius suggested, a glittering look in his eye. "It was my impression that all personnel affected by the recent office...mixup had been instructed to return home until it was straightened out."

Percy was as appalled as if Lucius had suggested that he set fire to an orphanage. "Go home? When I have a report on flying carpets due to the Moroccan Minister at ten o'clock on Friday? I'll be lucky if I get to go home on Christmas Day!"

Lucius' expression was inscrutable. "Go home, Mr. Weasley."

"I most certainly will not," said Percy stubbornly.

"Go home," Lucius repeated, a dangerous tone to his voice, "before another office mixup occurs and you find that your desk has been Transfigured into a turtle, or perhaps some kind of repulsive insect."

Percy turned a dark pink, which clashed with his freckles. "My desk? Not my desk! This desk used to belong to Mr. Crouch! It's *real mahogany*! You can't possibly --"

With a weary look, Lucius waved his wand. "*Tortugas!*" he snapped.

Even those Ministry officials toiling in the bowels of The Department For Regulation of Sugar Quills And Other Writing Implements heard Percy's cry of anguish as it echoed off the walls. "*Not my desk!*"

With the tip of a polished Oxford loafer, Lucius, a look of smug satisfaction on his face, prodded the largish brown turtle which had appeared, dazed-looking, at his feet.

"Excellent," he said.

Ron had suffered a number of rude awakenings in his life. When he was seven years old George and Fred had practiced an *Accio* spell on him while he was sleeping and he had awakened the next morning in the lettuce patch. Just the year before he'd gotten quite drunk during the Halloween Feast and had woken up in the third floor girls' bathroom. But nothing had quite prepared him for waking up on the bare stone floor of a deserted castle, surrounded by broken chess pieces and being tickled through the bars of a gold cage by a stark naked girl wearing only her long black hair and a thoughtful expression.

"*Auuuugh*," said Ron, and bolted upright so swiftly that his head spun. "Get your hands *off* me."

The girl in the cage giggled and sat back on her heels. Her hair was long and opaquely black. It almost covered her, but not quite. "Good morning," she said cheerfully. "Sleep well?"

"Ugh." Looking away from her, Ron felt his head. There was a painful bruise just above his left eyebrow, but he seemed otherwise unharmed. He was still in the clothes he'd worn to the Manor party. His hand ached where the snake-shaped burn scar was, which sometimes happened when he was tired.

"You know who I am." The girl spoke again, leaning as close to his ear as she could get. "Don't you."

"Rhysenn," said Ron. "Yes, I know who you are."

"The Dark Lord's gone, if that's what's worrying you," she said. "He won't be back until nightfall."

"Actually, that's not what's worrying me," Ron said. "It's you."

"Me?"

"The naked thing. It's kind of distracting."

"Well, pardon me, I'm sure." She sounded indignant. A moment later, she asked him, "Is this better?"

He turned and looked at her. She had her long hair looped back over her shoulders and was wearing some kind of brief black corseted dress. It seemed an improvement if not by much.

"Thanks," said Ron, and stood up. He looked around. The room was as he remembered from the day -- hours -- minutes before, although the first time he had seen the room he had not noticed the beauty of it. The chairs that glowed like thrones on the polished stone floor, the torches held up on pillars wound with carved vines, the enormous fireplace carved with angels. Upon closer examination Ron would later discover that the carved angels were hiding their eyes behind their wings. Within a huge grate a fire burned fiercely green and orange. "Nice place you have here," he said.

"Quite a change from the Burrow," said a voice at the door. "Isn't it."

It was a thin cold voice, not immediately recognizable, although familiar. A shudder ran up Ron's spine as he turned.

It was Wormtail, lurking in the shadows by the door. His pale sweaty face gleamed in the torchlight, and below the cuff of his robes, the glint of his silver hand was visible.

"Although," said Ron, still addressing his words to Rhysenn, although his eyes were on his former pet, "it seems to be infested with rats."

Rhysenn chuckled. "That's not very nice," she said. "Peter is so awfully sensitive about his former condition, aren't you, Peter?"

"Shut up, you demon bitch," Wormtail snapped, his small, deep-set eyes flashing at her.

Rhysenn hissed at him through the bars of the cage. Ron was reminded briefly and surreally of being in some kind of zoo. "Sniveling rodent," she sneered.

"Lucius' whore," Wormtail shot back.

"Fascinating as this conversation is, I think I'm going to take a walk," said Ron loudly.

They both stared at him. "A *walk*?" Rhysenn said.

"A walk to *where*?" asked Wormtail.

"Away from you, for a start," said Ron. He straightened his shoulders. "I'm hungry. I'm tired of this room. You-Know-Who didn't tell me I have to stay in here. So I'm not staying." He narrowed his eyes. "Feel free to try and stop me."

"Oh, I wouldn't bother." There was a high-pitched giggle somewhere behind Wormtail's voice. "Enjoy your walk. I remember when we used to stroll around the lake together, me in your pocket..."

"Oh, belt up," said Ron, exasperated. "I was *thirteen*. I'm seventeen now. I'm over the whole pet rat debacle. I've moved on. You were a lousy fucking rat and you're a lousier fucking person. Now get out of my way."

Wormtail stepped aside as Ron stalked over to the door. His small eyes glittered malevolently. "Before you go...perhaps we might go somewhere to talk," he hissed, his teeth yellow in the lamplight. "I have a suggestion you might be interested in..."

"And I have one for you," said Ron, jerking the door open. "Drop dead," and with that, he stalked out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

"You know," Rhysenn observed, into the subsequent silence, "I really think I'm starting to like him a lot better than the last one."

When Sirius and Lupin arrived on the third floor they found it empty save for Percy Weasley, who was leaning against one of the hallway walls, a

stunned look on his face. Sirius paused and looked at Lupin, who shrugged as if to say, *All up to you, mate.*

"Percy," said Sirius, stepping forward, "we're looking for Minister Parkinson. Have you seen him?"

Percy said nothing.

"Percy," repeated Sirius gently, "is everything all right?"

Percy continued to stare vacantly off down the hallway. "That turtle," he said. "That turtle ran off with my report on flying carpets."

Lupin stifled a cough. Sirius swung around and looked at him sternly, then turned back to Percy. "You know, Percy," he said, "There are many brands of decaffeinated coffee on the market that taste just as good as the real thing."

Percy's head snapped around and he shot Sirius an indignant look. "I'm *not* mad," he said. "Or overtired, either. You told me to stay around the Ministry and take notes, so I've been staying. Only Lucius Malfoy turned my desk into a turtle."

"Why a turtle?" Sirius asked.

Percy shrugged. "Why not a turtle?"

"He has a point," Lupin said.

Percy raised a hand and pointed off down the hallway towards a distant door. "He went that way, by the way."

"The turtle?" Sirius asked.

Percy looked aggrieved. "Francis Parkinson."

Sirius clapped a hand onto the red-headed boy's shoulder. "Thanks, Percy."

Percy waved a hand. "No problem."

Sirius set off down the hall with Lupin in tow. The distant door turned out to have a plaque on it: *The Department for the Regulation of Memory Charms.*

"What do you suppose he's doing in here?" Lupin asked.

Sirius shrugged and pushed the door open. Inside was an ordinary Ministry office: desks, chairs, floating Roll-O-Scrolls, piles of empty inkbottles waiting to be refilled by office elves. He recognized very few of the dark-robed men milling about between the desks, but a few he knew by sight, and did not like.

In the center of the room stood Lucius Malfoy, a silvery-tall presence in black robes. He was talking to a stoutish, balding wizard with a round, hard face and a pug nose whom Sirius recognized instantly as newly-elected Minister Francis Parkinson. "What do you mean the dragon hounds have found no trace of her, Parkinson? I thought we knew every safe house in Britain --"

He broke off as if he sensed Sirius' presence, and turned. For a moment they locked eyes; Lucius smiled, showing sharp canine teeth.

"Malfoy," Sirius said. "I need to talk to you."

"Ah, Sirius Black," said Lucius, flashing a cool smile. "Here to give me a headache, I suspect."

"You know what I've heard is good for headaches?" said Sirius.

"Amputation."

Francis Parkinson made a low rumbling noise in his throat. "I really don't think --"

But Lucius silenced him with a wave of his hand. "Francis...perfectly all right. Black here and I are old friends." Lucius leaned back against the desk behind him, looking bored. "I suppose this is about your contesting of my adoption claims, Black," Lucius said. "Alas, as long as we're awaiting our court date, my soliciter has forbidden me to discuss the matter with you. So sorry. Care to talk about the weather instead?"

"I didn't come about that," Sirius said. "I came about a missing person. Ron Weasley."

Minister Parkinson flinched, and his expression darkened. Lucius himself snorted. "The Weasleys suddenly missing a brat?" he inquired. "How can they even tell?"

Sirius gritted his teeth. It was Lupin who spoke. "He's been missing since the party on Saturday," he said. "He was whirlwhinded away with everyone else, but he hasn't returned."

"It could be that he simply has no interest in going home," said Lucius. "There's another Weasley spawn moping about the corridors here who refuses to return home despite all inducements to the contrary. Perhaps the Weasleys beat their children."

"Percy is here because he works here," said Lupin tightly. "Ron is a child, and quite possibly lost somewhere, injured, unable to return home...it could be bad publicity for the Ministry if nothing was done to find him."

"Oh, no," said Lucius. "Not *bad publicity*." He smiled malevolently, and perched himself on the edge of the desk, looping his hands over one knee. They were very like his son's hands: elegant, delicate, elongated, perhaps a trifle prettier than their owners might have wished. "Come, now, Black," he said. "You're an intelligent man. Brilliant, in your own way. And not without insight."

"You know, I keep telling myself these things every day," said Sirius. "But they just sound so much better when somebody else says them."

Lucius ignored this. "We all saw what happened at the party. I daresay teenagers will be teenagers, after all. But after what young Weasley did -- well, sleeping with your best friend's paramour is never a bright idea, but when that best friend is Harry Potter, famous and powerful wizard, Magid extraordinaire, and when your transgressions against him have been publicly revealed in the most painful and humiliating possible way...well, wouldn't *you* be afraid to return home?"

"Are you suggesting that Ron is afraid to return because he's afraid of Harry?" Sirius demanded, incredulous.

"No, I'm not suggesting it," Lucius said. "I'm *saying* it."

The Death Eaters - for that was what they were, Sirius acknowledged to himself, not Ministry officials but Death Eaters -- sniggered appreciatively.

"Harry Potter is dangerously unstable," Lucius went on smoothly. "The wizarding world has known this for years but fear and recalcitrant administrators have prevented us from doing anything about it. Need I remind you that the last time a Magid went renegade a team of hit wizards had to be dispatched to deal with the problem."

"Renegade..." Sirius sputtered. "Hit wizards? Harry's not going to go berserk just because his best friend -- I mean, that's ridiculous, he's a perfectly well-adjusted child, he's never shown a spark of interest in abusing his powers..."

"Perhaps," said Lucius, examining his nails, "the impetus simply hasn't been there before. All sorts of things could trigger it. Rage, of course. A desire for revenge. Grief over a terrible loss of some sort..."

"Bastard," Sirius seethed, unable to hold himself back any more. The desire to leap over the desks and smash in Lucius Malfoy's leering, smug face was almost more than he contain. "If you think..."

"That will be enough," said Lucius, and the smug mask flickered. Beneath it, Sirius could see the other man's hatred of him, as cold and immovable as a Durmstrang glacier. "You are a fool for coming here, Black," he said softly, and around him the Death Eaters pressed closer. Their faces, like Lucius' were set and frozen. "You may be shielded by powerful magics and more powerful friends, but they cannot always be there to protect you, nor will their protections last forever. If I were you, I would not return here again. There is nothing here for you, Sirius Black, or for your werewolf pet."

At that Lupin, who had been almost entirely silent up until this point, stepped forward, placing a hand on Sirius' shoulder. "Why, Lucius?" he said quietly to the blond man in front of the desk. "Not that I expect you to tell me, but *why*? What larger purpose is this serving? What can one boy mean to you, even a boy who used to be Harry Potter's best friend? He's just a child."

Something flickered in Lucius' face, at the back of his arctic eyes. "Ronald Weasley is the same age as my own son," he said coolly, looking straight at Lupin for the first time. "And as you can see he has not been spared either. In war, there are no innocents."

"Are we at war?" Lupin asked flatly. "I hadn't noticed."

"Indeed," said Lucius. "And by the time you do, you will already have lost."

Harry, sitting crosslegged on a sofa in the middle of the Gryffindor Tower common room, looked at the fireplace with an expression of polite inquiry. "What did you want to talk to me about, Sirius?"

Sirius smiled at his godson.

"Look, it's about Ron," Sirius said. "I didn't say anything before because I didn't want to worry you unduly, and also I know this isn't your favorite subject at the moment."

"I--" Harry began, indignation and sheepishness chasing each other across his face.

"I know all about it," Sirius said. "Everyone knows all about it, Harry. Which I wouldn't normally tell you but unfortunately it pertains to the discussion at the moment. Ron," he said heavily, "has not yet come home to the Burrow."

Harry's green eyes opened wide behind his glasses. "He hasn't?"

"No," said Sirius. "And it's been kept quite quiet. I know Arthur and Molly have not even told Ginny. This afternoon I went to the Ministry and spoke with Lucius --"

Harry's teeth set visibly. "Lucius," he said, and managed somehow to make the simple two-syllable name carry an unsettling freight of rage and hatred. "Why him?"

"It was his Whirlwind Charm," said Sirius. "And he's quite high up in the Ministry of course, under the current regime. It is his considered opinion," Sirius went on tensely, "that Ron has simply run off. Legged it for France, or some such nonsense. He thinks Ron is ashamed to face you after what he did, and he also says..."

Sirius trailed off reluctantly, but Harry was more than happy to supply the rest of the sentence.

"He says Ron is afraid of me," Harry added coldly. "Because I'm Harry Potter and I'm dangerously unstable and all that."

"Pretty much, yes," Sirius agreed. "Not that Lucius himself is going to make the cover of Sanity Fair any time soon, but this afternoon didn't seem to be the time to bring that up. Obviously, something's going on. If something's happened to Ron, are they covering it up? Do they want something from Ron? If they're trying to get at you --"

"Then why no blackmail messages?" Harry said, his eyes blank with tension. "No requests for money, no severed toes arriving in the post?"

"Exactly," Sirius said. "Think, Harry. The last time you saw Ron..."

"Same as you," Harry said. "It was at the party."

Sirius sighed. "Bloody hell, maybe he did run off," he said.

Harry's eyes flashed. "He *didn't*," he said. "He wouldn't do that, and he's not afraid of me. At the party, when Draco called him over, he took everything Draco threw at him and just accepted it. He didn't fight back at all. He *knows* what he did wasn't right, he *wants* to make it up to me...he wouldn't just run away."

Sirius narrowed his eyes at his godson; Harry returned the look, his eyes even more intently green with the blue shadows around them. "You miss Ron?" Sirius asked.

"All the time," Harry said. His tone was not welcoming of further questions about his feelings. Sirius did not pose any.

"And Lucius -- Lucius didn't say anything to you about Ron?"

Harry shook his head. "Not that I can recall. He whirlwhinded everyone away -- after that, everything's a bit of a blur. Next thing I remember, really, we were up on the tower."

Sirius blinked. He suddenly recollected Percy, leaning against the corridor wall, pointing down the hall at the door through which Lucius had disappeared: *The Department for the Regulation of Memory Charms...*

Sirius narrowed his eyes at Harry. "So you don't remember anything from the casting of the Whirlwind Charm to the point where you were up on the tower?"

Harry shook his head. "I hadn't thought about it, but no."

Sirius expelled a breath. "And Draco?"

"If anything important happened, he hasn't mentioned it to me."

"Can you get him? I'd like to talk to him, too."

Harry nodded somberly. "Okay."

For a moment Sirius waited for him to get up and fetch Draco, before he realized that of course Harry didn't have to do that. Instead he watched as his godson's eyes unfocused, as his hands uncurled and went loose in his lap. He could see the rapid pulse that beat at the base of Harry's throat, the tensile energy in the slender hands and set jaw. There was a strength in Harry that ran through and through him like coils of steel wire. Lately it had been more evident. Sirius was glad to see it; James, much like Harry though he had been, had had none of that strength. He had been able to be brave when needed, of course, but he not had any capacity for ruthlessness of purpose or action. Sirius wondered now if Harry did. If he could be cruel if he had to be.

Harry's eyes came back into focus, dark lashes sweeping down to cover the expression in them. "He's coming."

"That's good." Sirius paused a moment and then plunged ahead with a question he was fairly sure would not be well received. "How does he seem? His spirits, I mean, not his health. Madam Pomfrey keeps me updated on that."

A spark of green fire between lowered lashes; Harry spoke evenly. "Well, I think he's sick of being stuck in the infirmary. And I'm sure he wishes Snape would hurry up with the antidote. But he's fine."

"He's fine?"

"He's fine." Harry's voice was still even. "I think he's tired of stupid questions about how he's feeling, but he's fine."

Before Sirius could reply to this, the portrait door opened and the subject of their discussion came in. Sirius wasn't sure what he had expected, but Draco looked much as he always had - perhaps a little thinner, more tired looking. He wore a red sweater that hung slightly loose and his eyes were dark smoky gold in the firelight. He nodded at Sirius and came to sit next to Harry, who moved slightly aside to make a place for him without having to look to see where he was. Sirius found himself clearing his throat. He wasn't exactly sure why but the pair of them made him nervous suddenly, two sets of eyes - green and gray - fixed on his with polite inquiry.

"Harry already explained to me what you were talking about," Draco said helpfully. "And now, I don't remember being taken upstairs either. I had thought it was just me, but apparently not."

"And you didn't talk about it?" Sirius asked. "You and Harry?"

"Kind of hard to bring up something you don't remember," Draco pointed out kindly.

"Well, what do you think happened?"

Draco crossed his legs and settled his elbows on his knees. "I think my father used a Memory Charm on us," he said calmly. "I think something happened that he doesn't want us to remember. He's always been a devoted practitioner of memory alteration spells and he can create charms that are impossible to detect or remove. I suspect we might never know, but..."

"Do you think whatever it was had to do with Ron?" Harry interrupted.

"I..." Draco hesitated. "I think it might very well have. I mean, since that was the last time anyone ever saw him..."

Tensing all over, Harry wrapped his arms around his knees. "I hate your father," he muttered, staring down at his shoes. "I hate your fucking bastard father."

Draco flinched and glanced sideways at Harry. For a moment his expression was laid open, so intent in its flawless uncluttered devotion that Sirius felt the press of old memories against the backs of his eyes. Then Harry turned to look back at Draco, and the concealing barriers went up again, Draco's face now blankly unreadable.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"It's not your fault," Harry said, although without much feeling. His tone was flat and dead. "I just feel so ... stupid."

"You couldn't have known," said Sirius.

"I could have figured it out," Harry disagreed flatly. "I just didn't want to think about it. When we got back here - when I came up to my dormitory - I found something on my bed, wrapped up like a present." He reached into a pocket on his jeans and drew something out of it. He reached his hand forward and opened it. On the palm of his hand was what looked for a moment like a broken toy. Blinking, Sirius realized it was a chess piece. A knight, made of green stone. It was broken in half.

"I thought..." Harry's voice had taken on a slightly ragged edge. "I thought it was from Draco's father. I thought he was trying to say that my move was over, it was his move now. It seemed like something he'd do. But now I don't think it had anything to do with me or Draco at all."

Draco's eyes flicked from the chess piece to Harry. "You didn't tell me," he said.

"No," Harry admitted. "I'm sorry. I didn't think it was important. Is it one of your father's?"

Draco frowned at the chess piece. "It looks kind of familiar," he said. "But I'm not completely sure where I've seen it before."

Harry looked entreatingly at his godfather. "Sirius..."

Sirius sighed. "Let me have it," he said, and reached out from the fire to collect the chess piece from Harry. It had been snapped in even halves, as if a knife had cut it cleanly in two. The marble was smooth, weighty and expensive. "So someone sent you a veiled taunt," he said. "Lucius, or one of his Death Eater cronies, or even --"

"Voldemort himself," said Draco, his voice toneless but intent. "But it doesn't make any sense..."

"No," Harry agreed. His own voice was tense with fear and something else. There was a dark light behind his green eyes. "No, it doesn't make any sense. After everything that's happened ... what would the Death Eaters want with Ron?"

It took Ron less than an afternoon exploring the castle to realize why Wormtail and Rhysenn had laughed at him when he said he was going to take a walk.

The castle was full of beautiful things, that was undeniable. Silver serpent pillars with topaz eyes and swords for teeth. Walls of books bound in bronze and agate. Heavy velvet curtains held with jade clasps. Huge leaded windows paned in blue and gold and scarlet. They looked out on a countryside of tinder-dry winter mountains, jagged as teeth. The sky was an arched blue bow overhead, and far below Ron could see a fast-moving pale silver river, as thin as one of Lucius' smiles.

But there were two things that were missing. Nowhere in this vast jewel box of a castle were there any other people. And nowhere were there any doors or windows that opened to the outside.

"Hello again," Ron said wearily, walking at last back into the room he had come from, with its gold cage and chessboards. He looked around: Wormtail was gone, although Rhysenn still sat quietly inside her shining prison. The scattered chess pieces on the floor had been cleaned up and placed back on their boards.

Rhysenn looked up. "They brought you some food," she said, a bit listlessly, and pointed at a silver salver set atop one of the tables. Ron almost ran over to the table and flung himself on the food there. It was extremely simple: bread, cheese, some chocolate. He didn't care; he was starving. "I get why you were laughing at me, by the way," he said between mouthfuls. "There aren't any doors here that lead outside. Are there?"

"There are no such doors at all here," Rhysenn said, twirling a lock of silky black hair idly around a finger. "The only way out of this castle is to Apparate."



Ron laughed shortly. "And you can't?"

"I could leave this place," said Rhysenn, a slight frown puckering the space between her eyebrows. "But then I would have to leave Lucius without his permission, and that I cannot do. I am bound to him."

"Then why the cage?" Ron asked.

"The cage restricts my ability to use certain powers of mine," said Rhysenn, with a moue of distaste. "Lucius, I suspect, fears me, although he should perhaps know better than that. Gold is the metal most unloved by demons, for it resembles the sun which we despise. It also affects our abilities."

Ron did not hear this last sentence of hers; his mind was whirling. "You're a *demon*?" he demanded.

She simply smiled.

"I've seen demons before," he said. "They don't look like you."

"I am demon only by half," she replied. "My other half is mortal, entirely. My mother was a demon herself; my father was a Malfoy."

"Right," said Ron, picking up the nearest chess piece. It was a rook. "So, you're all demon, then."

She frowned at him. "I do not think you understand the honor I do you, telling you the truth of my nature. I have told none before."

"Then why me? Why now?"

"Because there is no one here for you to betray me to," she said simply. "And never again shall you return to tell this story. Like a mortal man who has walked into Hell, there is no road back for you from this place."

"That's not true," Ron said, and tightened his hand around the chess piece until it hurt. "I'll escape."

"There is no escape."

"Then Harry will come and find me," Ron said.

She raised her eyes and looked at him. He saw how gray they were: had seen it that first day when she had come down the stairs with Charlie. And now that she had said she was a Malfoy, he could admit it. She had Draco's eyes. But where Draco's eyes were the color of moonlight seen

through a silver shade, hers were moonlight seen through fever. They had a scarlet cast and inside the pupils burned tiny flames.

"After what you did," she said, "he will not come for you."

"You don't know Harry," Ron replied.

"Oh, *don't* I?" Her voice was amused, curious. "You imagine he will come for you because he loves you. He gives love out carelessly, that one, and often where it is undeserving. I am a demon and perhaps you will think I do not understand, but I do not see what your love for him or his for you has done for you besides bring you to this pass. I have lived six hundred years and I have seen the results of love. Pain and terror, conflagration and despair. Fate may be impartial and Justice blind, but Love hates mankind and knows well that the best way to make him suffer is to kiss him with her sickness."

Ron did not look at her. He looked instead at the chessboard, with its repeating squares of light and dark. When he spoke, his voice was even. "Harry will come and get me if he has to walk through fire to get here. I *know* he will."

"You have faith in him, then," Rhysenn asked, her tone a question.

"Love is faith," said Ron.

For a moment, she looked almost startled. "Where have you heard that?" she demanded.

Ron hesitated a moment. Then he replied with the truth, because after all, she had had a point. There was no reason to lie. "In a vision," he said. "It was something I saw in my head."

"You mean just last night?" Rhysenn asked curiously. A moment before she had seemed both ancient and evil; now she seemed a curious, ordinary girl. Ron trusted this incarnation of her even less than the last one.

"No," he said slowly. "Last night wasn't the first time I've ever seen anything. I know I'm a Diviner. I've known it for a long time. I knew sometimes I could see things other people couldn't, or I would make

guesses that came true later. I think that's why I've always beaten Harry at chess. I could *see* what he'd do before he did it. But, God -- I couldn't *control* it. I could never, ever control it and all I ever saw were terrible things. And I felt a fool for not knowing what was real and what wasn't."

"And did you ever," her voice was black velvet, "tell anyone?"

"I almost told Hermione," Ron said, his voice distant. "Once. I wanted to tell her. I thought we were going to die and so it would be safe and she'd have to forgive me."

"Forgive you for what?"

"Not telling her what I'd seen." Ron's voice was remote. In his hand he turned the chess piece over and over. "Everything I ever saw was bad, before I learned to block it all. I always thought maybe I was just dreaming. Hallucinating. But I know she would have wanted me to tell her what I saw....to tell Harry." Ron's voice had sunk to a whisper.

She looked at him curiously. "And what did you see?"

Ron spoke swiftly. "I saw Malfoy. He was lying on a bed, and Harry was sitting on the bed and he had his face in his hands, and Ginny was there, and Malfoy was dead. That's what it looked like, anyway."

"Are you sure he was dead?"

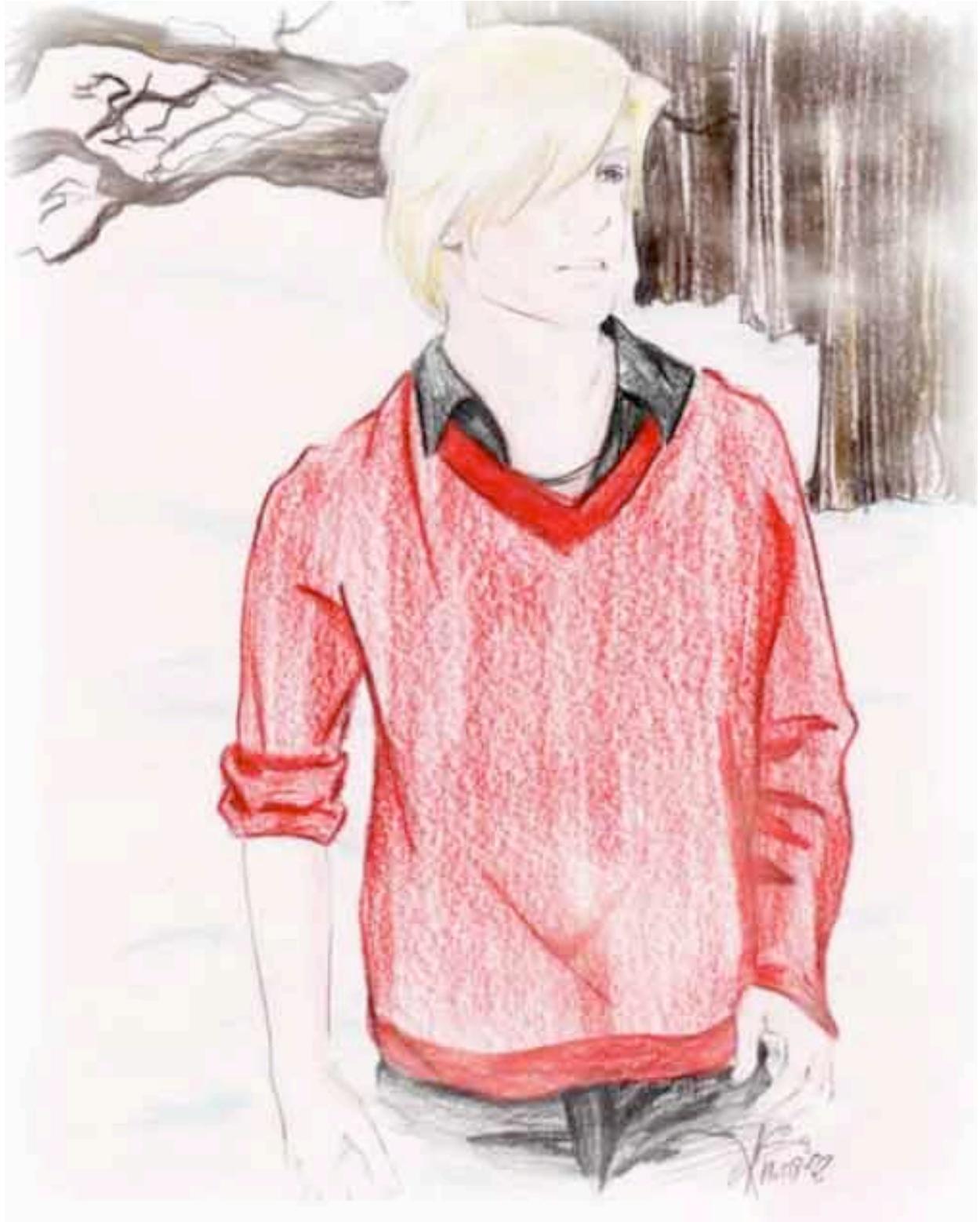
"Yes," said Ron, in the same rapid, unhappy voice. "I know when people are dead when I ... see them like that, in the future. I can feel it -- like something missing from them."

Rhysenn's eyes rounded into startled silver circles, but before she could speak the doors at the end of the room opened, and the Dark Lord came in.

Normally Draco was only a fan of long walks if they were taken by people who annoyed him. After the conversation with Sirius, though, Harry had headed to the Potions dungeon to find Hermione. Draco, not particularly wanting to be there while Hermione and Harry talked about Ron, had

remembered an errand he'd been putting off for several days and excused himself.

He was glad, now, that he had. It was pleasant outside, only a few white clouds chasing each other across a late-afternoon sky of filigree blue. The narrow path leading from the castle down to the greenhouses and bestiary was lined with evergreens and the faint and pleasant scent of sap drifted on the cold air.



Somewhere along the way Draco had picked up a bare tree branch. He dragged it along the top of the snow as he walked, carving delicate lines

and zig-zags into the surface. The air felt sharp and fresh and bracing against his skin, and the high clouds overhead reflected themselves in the lake's clear, iced-over surface like a fleet of scudding little ships.

He wondered if he would live to see the ice melt, and pushed the thought back. Death was unimaginable. He was seventeen years old, and his heart still beat, and the blood still ran in his veins. He lived, loved and thought. He could not imagine himself down in that gray place of shadows where the unmourned dead waited for deliverance that did not come. Surely his own death would not go unavenged, if it came to that. Harry would see to it.

Crack. The sound of a snapping branch brought him out of his reverie. Draco spun around, lifting a hand to shield his gaze from the sunlight reflecting off the snow. The icy path he had walked on stretched whitely back towards the castle, and standing in the center of the path was Seamus Finnigan.

He had his hands in the pockets of his navy wool cloak and wore a faintly abashed expression. The wind picked up loose strands of his blond hair and blew them across his face; he raised a hand to brush it out of his eyes. Draco found himself looking at Seamus' hands curiously. They were thin, artistic hands with callused fingers. Quidditch player hands, like Harry's. Like his own.

"Finnigan," he said. "I hope you have a really good reason for following me."

Seamus took what looked like a deep breath. "I wanted to talk," he said.

"An admirable goal," Draco commiserated. "Now all you need is someone to talk *to*. Don't let me hinder your quest." He turned away.

"No--" Seamus sounded a bit desperate. "I wanted to talk to *you*."

Draco cursed inwardly. He wanted to walk away and leave Seamus standing there, looking like a fool. But curiosity was stronger than antagonism -- he was more cat than snake in that way. He turned around slowly and crossed his arms. "Fine," he said. "And what missive from the Department of Oblivious Morons might you be passing along today?"

Seamus' chin set, but his voice was even. "I want to know why you don't like me," he said. "I want you to tell me."

"I usually request a fee for speaking engagements of that length."

"You know," Seamus went on, as if Draco hadn't spoken, "I keep thinking about it, and it doesn't make sense. I mean, I know I didn't like you when we were younger. But then again, nobody liked you when you were younger, Malfoy. Harry, for instance. He hated you a lot more than I did."

"Don't," said Draco, in a voice like poisoned honey, "compare yourself to Harry."

"So I can only assume this has something to do with Ginny," Seamus said steadily. "Which, you know, doesn't make any sense to me. Because if you wanted to be with her, you could. I'm not stupid. I know I'm second-choice. I should be the one who hates *you*."

There was a moment of silence. The cold air seemed to be pressing down on them, as if they were trapped under a glass jar. Draco shuddered slightly and unfolded his arms. "So maybe you might want to tell me," he said, "why you put a Tracking Charm on that bracelet you gave her?"

Clear red color flooded up into Seamus' cheeks. For a moment, he seemed to startle to speak. "A what? A -- how did you --?"

"My mother had a bracelet like that," Draco said in a savage tone. "My father used it to keep track of her. The arrow charm is a locator spell. I know that. Because I'm rich, Finnigan, and my parents could afford trinkets like that. The Weasleys, on the other hand, have more lawn gnomes than Galleons. Which, I suppose, is their problem. But it would make it damn unlikely that Ginny would have seen a bracelet like that one before. And you must have known that."

Seamus' cheeks were still scarlet. "It's just standard with those bracelets," he said. "I mean -- I never thought about it. I knew it had a Tracking Charm, but I figured she could set it however she liked once she figured out how it worked, and like I said, all the bracelets have them. They're usually wedding gifts, after all. It's for keeping the people you love safe."

"You should have told her," said Draco.

"I never thought I would ever use it." Seamus was fidgeting now.

"But you did. It's how you got to the Burrow that night. Isn't it?"

"I was worried! I heard about the Whirlwind Charm -- and when I owled Mrs. Weasley, she said that Ginny wasn't back yet -- and I thought I could find her -- bring her back safe --"

"She already was back safe when you showed up," Draco pointed out coolly.

Seamus looked stung. His eyes were wide, and very blue: a darkly saturated blue, like morning sky. "I was *worried*," he said again. "Did you -- does she know?"

"I didn't tell her, if that's what you mean." Draco did not point out that he had not told her because she would likely resent him if he did, and because he had no desire to add to her current overburdened emotional state. And because, somewhere in the far back of his mind, he was forced to admit to himself that with things the way they were it might not be so bad to have someone around who could always find Ginny if necessary.

"Thanks," Seamus said. "Look, I'm sorry. I'll tell her."

"Please yourself," said Draco, and turned away.

"Wait --" Seamus' tone was urgent. He took a step forward, his hand held out.

Draco took a swift step back, away from Seamus' hand. "Don't even think about it, Finnigan," he said pleasantly. "Touch me and I'll punch your eyes through to the back of your head so you can watch me walk away smiling."

Seamus dropped the hand. "Look. If we could just get along with each other, it would make things easier on everyone. I was wrong about the Tracking Charm. I'm sorry. If we could just be civil to each other --"

"No," Draco said.

Seamus looked astonished. "What?"

Draco stared hard at the other boy, so hard that Seamus swallowed nervously. When he spoke, it was in measured cadences. "Finnigan," he said. "I fear we are not understanding each other. Let me be clear with you. I think you are a tosser. A wanker. A weasel-faced, rubber-necked broom jockey with all the charm and charisma of a week-old head of lettuce. A control-obsessed maneuvering swine who, when not spending hours building up unsightly muscles, puts Tracking Charms on his girlfriend because he doesn't trust her not to run off with the first guy she sees who does *not* resemble a condom full of walnuts. Trust me. This is not one of those situations where a beautiful friendship is going to spring from the ashes of a great hatred. Because, in fact, I enjoy hating you. It gives my life color, complexity, and depth. It brings my soul joy. You're a creep, Finnigan. Live with it."

Seamus' eyes opened wide with astonishment. For a moment there was nothing: no movement, no sound, not the crackle of snow underfoot, not the brush of wind in the leafless branches. Only the look of hurt and shock deepening in Seamus' steady blue eyes.

Finally, Seamus spoke. "So that's the way it is, then?"

"That's the way it is," Draco said.

"Fine," said Seamus flatly, and without another word, turned around, and walked back towards the castle.

Draco leaned back against the nearest tree and watched him go, the calm satisfaction of a job well done humming pleasantly in his veins.

"I cannot shake the feeling, somehow, that I am responsible for sending a child to his death."

Snape turned away from the potions table, where he had been testing the temperature of several bubbling cauldrons. "What did you say, Headmaster?"

The older man, looking out the window at the darkening sky, did not reply for a moment. Finally, he said, "It was nothing, Severus."

"Ah." Snape returned his gaze to his cauldrons. After a moment, he spoke again: "Was it about Harry?"

"No. Well, perhaps. As you have often observed yourself, everything is about Harry. In some way or another."

"Sirius has given him the news about Weasley, then? I am surprised he is still here."

"You know why he's still here. I do not, however, expect that he will stay. Once there is more definitive news..."

"And you feel confident in letting him go?"

"I feel confident that I could not force him to stay." Dumbledore inclined his head. His tone was remote. "I think, perhaps, that at this point I have given him everything that I can give him. Perhaps I have had all the time with him that I am allowed. I wish I could have had him for longer. But I think that I have gone beyond the point where there is anything else I can tell him. The question now is whether or not he will choose to listen to what he has learned."

"Potter has never been much of a listener," said Snape, selecting a vial of rosy liquid and pouring it into the leftmost cauldron. The liquid turned black. Snape muttered and made a check mark with his quill on a nearby tablet of parchment.

"In his lessons, no. I think he absorbs things through experience." Dumbledore sighed. "If I could give him armor, I would give him armor. If I could make him invincible, I would make him invincible. But his greatest weapon remains his essential humanity. It is the one thing he has that our enemy never will. He is armored in his own human frailty, in his heart's knowledge of what he *does* have: his father's bravery, the sacrifice of his mother, the love of his friends, his own good sense. I can offer him no better or further protection. And yet..."

"And yet what?"

"And yet there is a cutting edge to every gift, isn't there? James was also foolhardy and Lily impetuous. And though his friends love him and he them, love is also a curse, in its own way."

"If Draco dies --"

"If Draco dies, Harry will be no use to anyone, not now and perhaps not ever again."

"Rage can be used."

"I do not think he would be angry. I think he would break apart. And it would take a wiser hand than mine, and more time than we have, to put him back together. And yet..."

"And yet what?"

"And yet how to separate them? For they must be separated. This most recent issue has changed all of my plans."

"You think they are too close, then?"

"Yes." Dumbledore ruminated. "It is good for neither of them."

"I am glad," said Snape, some sarcasm creeping into his tone, "to see you *finally* take issue with whether or not being led around by Harry is at all good for Draco."

"I do not think he is led. I think he chooses to follow, which is a different issue entirely. And in some other time -- as in the past he has been -- Harry would be the best thing that ever happened to Draco. But now. Given what we know...No. Harry must face this next step of his journey alone."

"He will not like that."

"Probably not."

"It will break their hearts," Snape said.

"Heartbreak teaches us about ourselves," said Dumbledore. "A broken heart spills all its secrets."

"I thought your policy was not to intervene," said Snape, waving his wand at the furthest cauldron. Its flame flickered and went out.

"It is," said Dumbledore. "I will not intervene."

There was a beach, and water that ran up and up the shore of the beach, never receding. There were clouds overhead, heavy and iron gray, that struck together like blocks colliding. And the sands of the beach were deserted, and along them blew the bits of a red plastic child's bucket, torn to shreds now, tumbling in every direction... and there was more, but he could not see it, it was not his dream to see, it was not a dream at all...

A hurricane tore through Harry's mind, catapulting him swiftly and instantly out of a previously dreamless sleep. He bolted upright in bed, the covers falling around his waist in a tangled welter, and tried to catch his breath.

He had no recollection of what he had dreamed, or even if he had dreamed. What he did have was a feeling of intense but remote misery, spearing sharply through him, bewildering in its strength. And he knew, without needing to examine why, that this was Draco's pain and desolation. Draco's thoughts and feelings, even filtered through Harry's own consciousness, had an unmistakable shape and color of their own -- a psychic fingerprint unlike anyone else's.

Malfoy? Harry sent out an experimental tendril of thought, and was none too surprised at not receiving an answer. He swung his legs over the edge of the bed, fumbled sleepily under the bed for his Invisibility Cloak, and threw it around his shoulders. He took care to walk quietly through the near-empty dormitory room so as not to wake Seamus, who was sleeping the sleep of the just, a pillow jammed under his cheek and a faint smile on his face. He looked unbelievably healthy -- rosy-cheeked, bright-haired, faintly cherubic. A bitter flicker of resentment passed through Harry, leaving him feeling ashamed.

The night-time corridors were silent and deserted; the infirmary door was shut tight. Harry opened it with the care born of years of silent sneaking around the grounds. Stepping into the room, he blinked his eyes against the sudden light. The infirmary walls were lined with floor-to-ceiling windows and through them, the moonlight poured with a hurtful brilliance. It turned the curtains around Draco's bed to sheets of white fire.

Harry went forward, and pulled the curtains back. They rattled on their metal rings. Draco was lying face-up on the bed. His left arm was across his chest, the scarred hand curled in; his right arm was flung across his face. His pajama top had rucked up over his torso and the moonlight was more darkly pencilled in the spaces between his ribs than Harry would have liked.

"Hey," he said. "Malfoy."

The arm across the face was withdrawn, and Draco looked up at him. Surprise flickered across his face, followed by amusement. "I woke you up," he said. "Didn't I?"

"Yes. Nightmare?"

"Yeah." Draco sat up, and propped his back against the wall behind the bed. He pulled his pajama top down, and shrugged. "I'm fine. Just lying here thinking," he said, matter-of-factly. The tone of his voice said, *I don't want to talk about it.*

"Thinking about what?"

"Oh, you know. The big questions of life. Like, if toast always lands butter-side down, and cats always land on their feet, what happens if you strap toast on the back of a cat and drop it?"

"I can't believe I woke up for this," said Harry.

Draco chuckled, very slightly. "You don't have to stay. I'm fine."

Harry looked at him. He wanted to say, "I'll stay if you need me." But Draco would never say that he needed him, even if he did. Draco, who never said he needed anything, who would have considered a verbal expression of his own wants to be declassè, an undignified fuss over nothing. Draco, who belonged to the class of people who, wounded and bleeding to death on the ground, might at the very end admit that perhaps there had been days when they felt better. Draco, who wouldn't even admit he needed an antidote for the poison that was slowly killing him. No, Draco wouldn't say anything.

Draco looked up at him with curious wide gray eyes. "Everything all right, Potter?"

Harry answered his question with a question. "Are you going back to sleep?"

Draco crossed his arms over his chest in his usual sleeping position and looked consideringly at the ceiling. "I don't think so," he opined finally.

"I'll stay then." Harry sat down in the chair by the bed, and leaned his elbow on the nightstand. He felt tired but quite alert. Outside he could hear the faint sound of wind as it struck against the windowpane. "Why do you sleep like that anyway, Malfoy?"

Draco cut his eyes sideways. "Like what?"

"Like this." Harry crossed his arms over his chest, fingertips touching his opposite collarbones.

"Oh, I don't know. My father used to have the house-elves take my covers away sometimes in winter. He thought it would be good for me. Make me stronger. Bloody freezing winter nights, too. I still get cold a lot, but I think it's mostly in my head."

Harry took a moment to ponder the myriad ways in which he hated Lucius Malfoy.

"Some things you never forget," he said finally.

Draco uncrossed his arms and put them behind his head. He stared up at the ceiling. "You slept in a cupboard," he said. "Didn't you."

Harry nodded, propping his chin on his knee. He liked the way Draco said it, without any pity or horror, just as matter-of-fact as if some people happened to grow up sleeping on four-posters while others chose cupboards as a matter of course.

"It must have been dark all the time," Draco said. "And the bed must have been small." He was still staring up at the ceiling. "Because you always keep everything you might need in the morning right by the side of the bed, and reach for it without looking, like you're used to waking up

without light. And you don't ever move or turn over while you're sleeping. You must have rolled off the bed onto the floor a few too many times."

Harry laughed. "You do not know pain until you've landed on spiders in the middle of the night."

"Oh, I don't know about that, Potter. Remember, we had *giant* spiders."

"Mmm." A faint pang went through Harry at that, and he looked away from Draco. The curtains around the bed stirred in the faint breeze, making a soft sound, like wind in long grass. He thought of people whose missing limbs ached when cold weather came; Harry ached where he was missing people.

"Thinking about Weasley?" asked Draco. He rolled onto his side, head resting on his hand, and looked at Harry. The moonlight coming through the window turned his eyes into silver shields of elliptical light.

"How'd you guess?" Harry's voice caught on an indrawn breath. "Never mind. You probably think I'm being stupid, after what he did..."

Draco was silent for a moment. Harry let his eyes roam over the room. It recollects to him the look of an empty cathedral with its high and vaulted ceilings, the enormous windows through which were visible the distant trees of the Forest, and everywhere the softly blowing curtains like uneasy ghosts. Why, he wondered, did Draco prefer it here to his own bedroom in his own dormitory?

"I don't think you're stupid." Draco's smile was a ghost of its ordinary self; there seemed an odd wistfulness in his gaze, or perhaps it was just the lack of light. "Or, at least, no stupider than you usually are. We don't stop caring about people just because they do idiotic things. Friendship is not that fragile. Not real friendship, anyway."

"I really thought I hated him," Harry said, a little wonderingly.

"You haven't got it in you," Draco said remotely, and shrugged. "I'll say this for whoever orchestrated the whole situation: they certainly *wanted* you to hate him. Why, do you think?"

"So I wouldn't go after him when he disappeared," Harry said immediately, having thought about this already.

"But then why send you the broken chess piece? That was like a taunt, a '*catch me if you can*'. They must know it's the sort of thing that would send you barreling after them. It doesn't make any sense." knowledgeable

"Because they know I won't leave now," Harry said.

The elliptical eyes widened. They seemed the only light things in the darkness. "Why not?"

"Because of you," Harry said. "I won't go without you."

Draco's hand tightened on his pillow. "And I can't go," he said, bitterly. "I mean, I could -- I'm strong enough still --" He took a ragged breath. "But if you're going to be out there running away from the enemy -- who am I kidding, I couldn't keep up the way I am now. The best I could manage would be strolling away from the enemy. Which isn't very impressive." There was a live current of tension underneath the smoothly regulated voice. "If I came with you, I'd just slow you down."

"I would never let you anyway," said Harry. Weariness had pared away everything but the barest honesty from his voice and words. He heard himself speaking with no small surprise. "And I wouldn't go without you. Not because I'm afraid to go alone, but because I wouldn't leave you while you were dying, and they know that."

"You've never admitted I'm dying before," was all Draco said, but the fingers holding the pillow, which had been whitely bloodless, relaxed their grip.

"Because we *will* cure you," Harry said. "Snape said he had most of the ingredients for the antidote identified, didn't he? But until he has them all - no, I won't leave."

"Why not?" Draco asked.

Harry looked down at his hands. He wondered how much of all this was revelatory to either of them, how long they had both known and

understood the intractability of the forces, exterior and interior both, that kept them bound together. "Does it matter?"

Draco's voice was soft and unusually defenseless in reply. "I guess it doesn't."

Harry looked up. Draco had shut his eyes, and while he did not look relaxed, Harry felt that the strung-up nervous tension which had wound him past sleeping was receding. "Besides," Harry said, more lightly. "I don't even know where to start looking for Ron right now. I have to figure that out first."

Draco's eyes fluttered open. "Oh, right, about that," he said. "I had some ideas..."

"Are you saying I still cannot see my son?"

Narcissa's voice was like ice. Sirius looked at her and swallowed nervously. "I'm saying it still isn't safe."

Her mouth tightened. She stood by the window in the small upstairs room, her arms tight at her sides, her shoulders straight and angular. Everything about her body language forbade approach, so Sirius stood where he was, unsure what to do.

The house they were in made him nervous -- it belonged to an old friend of Narcissa's and was very obviously the abode of previous Death Eaters. He could not have explained exactly how he knew this, but everything in the house teased at his old Auror-senses, whispering of a history of malignant spells and spilled blood, layered over with a skin of rich furnishings.

Narcissa put her hand to the sash of the curtains. Outside the sky had gone from a gray-white pearl to a black one and the room was full of shadows. "I want to see my child," she said. "He's ill, and even though you won't tell me how ill, I can see in your face, Sirius, that he's very ill indeed."

"He's in Dumbledore's hands," Sirius said. "Dumbledore and Snape will do everything they can for him. It's not safe for you to go to Hogwarts, you know that. The Ministry is entirely controlled by Lucius at this point --he's watching the Floo network, he'll be watching the roads to Hogwarts -- he'll be trying to keep an eye on Draco-- "

"Is he dying?" she asked.

Sirius felt his muscles tense. "What?"

For a moment, Narcissa's face seemed to flicker, and behind it he saw another face, all iron. "You heard me. Is my son dying?"

Sirius hesitated.

"Yes," he said.

Her hand fell from the window sash but she made no other movement. "I want you to promise me something, Sirius," she said.

"Yes," he said again. "Whatever you want."

"If my son is going to die, then I want to be there with him when it happens. I have never been there for him for even one important event in his life. I want to be there with him when he dies." Her expression was grave and composed. He could see Draco in her face, in the thin angles and planes of it, the barely but perfectly controlled tension under the surface. "And if you can't do that for me, Sirius..."

"I can do that for you," he said. "Narcissa --"

"What?" Her voice was remote. He might have been someone she had never met before.

"He knows you love him," Sirius said.

"I very much doubt that," she said. Her voice was the voice of winter biting dead the leaves on the trees. "I don't think he actually believes in anyone's love for him. He's learned to live without it. In an abstract way, I admire that. But I'm his mother, and I love him, and even if he's learned to live without believing he's loved, I don't want him to die that way."

She had begun to cry, a silent, effortless, almost aphysical crying. Tears ran from her eyes like the water that ran from the mouths of the snakes in the fountains at the Manor. She did not lift her hands to wipe them away.

Sirius took a step forward. "Narcissa--"

"Go away, Sirius," she said. Sounding, for that moment, very much like Lucius. "Just go away."

He went.

"Potter, are you falling asleep?"

Harry jerked awake guiltily. "What? No. Not at all."

"Of course not. It was just the snoring that confused me," said Draco with some amusement. Harry sat up, glared at him, and then glared generally around the infirmary. He could not have been asleep for more than five minutes but it seemed to him that the night had greatly advanced. Light had crept by degrees into the sky outside, and the frosted-over windows cast a lacework of shadows against the sheets of Draco's bed. They patterned his skin as well, tracing a fine spider's web of lines across his face and hands.

"Well, it's not as if we were getting anywhere anyway," Harry said crossly. "I mean, I don't know what your father could possibly want with Ron. If he's got him, I don't see why he isn't letting us know he's got him. I mean, all right, he probably sent me that chess piece, but that's a lame and pretentious gesture if there ever was one. And it still doesn't explain anything."

"You know, I made a number of useful suggestions towards that end, which you missed due to having fallen asleep."

"I was not a--oh, all right, so I was. What did you say?"

"Well, I had a couple ideas. One was that he took Weasley as bait, and then found out about that whole...rift between you two, and being who he is, my father would assume you wouldn't have any interest in Weasley

any more after that. So he might be trying to figure out what to do with him now."

"Somehow I can't help but figure that whatever plan he comes up with will probably not involve either daisies or ballroom dancing lessons."

"No. Probably not. You don't think..."

"What?"

"That my father's maybe trying to get Ron over on their side?" said Draco, with some nervousness. "I mean, you wouldn't be able to bring yourself to hurt him no matter what...and if they threatened him enough..."

Harry looked at him. "He wouldn't do it," he said. "Ron hates Voldemort as much as I do."

"Nobody hates Voldemort as much as you do," said Draco.

Harry cocked his head to the side. "Don't you?"

"I hate what you hate," Draco said. "And I want him gone because he's a threat and a danger. And I'm none too pleased about this poisoning thing, but I suspect that that was my father getting his kicks on his own. But then again, Voldemort did require my father to have me. If it wasn't for him, I might not exist. There's a paradox for you."

Harry's head was spinning. "I didn't know you knew that."

Draco smiled a humorless smile. "My father told me that while he was still stuck in St Mungo's Home for the Sorcerously Befuddled. A useful piece of information. Anyway, that's not my point. My point is that you hate him more than I do, just like I probably hate my father more than you do. In fact, I'm slightly surprised that you aren't just haring off after him, like you said you wanted to before. Get Voldemort, you get my father and all the other Death Eaters in one fell swoop. Save the world, save Weasley, save us all. Seems like something you would do."

"I didn't realize this was a how to save the world' planning session," said Harry dryly. "I would have brought my notes."

"It might not be the best time," Draco said in amusement. "It's three in the morning. Any plan we come up with now is bound to be ridiculous."

"Define 'ridiculous'," said Harry.

Draco's eyes sparkled and for a moment he resembled nothing so much as an oversized kitten, with all of a kitten's affectionately cruel playfulness. "All right, how's this for a plan. We pick the lock on the infirmary door with a cucumber, escape from school, sneak into the crowded streets of Knockturn Alley while carrying our bell collection, hide in the shadow of a nearby Death Eater, wait till he takes us to Voldemort, then -- bam! We steal his trousers."

"That *is* ridiculous," Harry said with a yawn. "Voldemort's trousers would never fit us."

"And the infirmary door isn't locked. That was the second flaw in my plan."

"Isverybadplan," said Harry, collapsing once more upon the nightstand. Exhaustion was wrapping itself round him like a warm, dark blanket.

"You know," said Draco, "you can go on back to your bed if you want."

"Nerh," said Harry, rebelliously. "Stay here. Keep company. Think of plan."

"We attack Voldemort with cheese," Draco suggested.

"Cheese not scary," said Harry.

"Of course it's scary! It's mold! Mold is innately frightening!"

"Cheese not scary," Harry repeated.

"Fine, then. Instead, we wander around the Ministry going up to different officials and asking them, 'Have you seen kidnapped Ron Weasley lately?'"

"That's good," Harry said amenably, and yawned into the darkness of his folded arms. "I go sleep now."

"Okay," Draco said. His voice, for a brief moment, was devoid of reserve or irony: it was only gentle, so much so that later Harry thought he had imagined it. "You do that."

The Dark Lord was alone, unaccompanied by Lucius or Wormtail. He wore, as always, black, and his paper-white face bore a meditative stamp as he looked at Ron.

"My Diviner," he said, coming closer. "I see you are ready for me already. Seated at the table, waiting with alacrity to play another game."

"No," said Ron. He knew that to defy the Dark Lord was to risk death and terrible injury, but at the moment, it seemed preferable to another game of chess. "I don't want to play."

Voldemort said nothing to that, only came across the room and sat down opposite Ron at the chess board. With a hand like a bloated white spider, he gently prodded at a few of the fallen pieces. "I could force you," he said. "But that might break you, and I would prefer not to break you. I should tell you, though, that now that the doors in your head have been thrown open, you cannot close them again. This is your only hope of controlling it."

"Controlling what?" Ron said.

"Controlling your gift. Gift, blessing, curse. You are a Diviner and like the ancient Oracle it is imperative that you know yourself. If you do not learn to master this talent, it will master you. Did you ever wonder why every vision you see is of terror and death, little Diviner? It is because you work so hard to block every sight of the future from your mind that only those phantasms so strong in horror that they are uncontrollable can break the barriers you have created. Eventually, if you continue in this manner, it will shatter your mind."

"I don't believe you." Ron's voice was without emotion.

"I should think that you," Voldemort said, his voice like a coiling snake, "of all people, should desire to strive to master a talent whose realization

would allow you to see through illusion. Illusion, little one, has not treated you well."

Ron slowly set the rook down on the board. It seemed to look back at him out of incurious jewelry eyes. Behind him, in the cage, Rhysenn rustled in her gown. "I'll be green," he said at last.

"I rather thought you would be," said the Dark Lord.

It was the sharp pain in Harry's shoulder that woke him up. For a moment, he froze without moving, trying to remember where he was. He rarely fell asleep with his glasses on. Now they felt embedded in his face. He raised his head slowly, wincing at the bright light that lanced into his eyes.

It was full morning and the infirmary was flooded with sun. Draco was sitting on top of his neatly made bed, reading a book. He glanced over at Harry and grinned. "Madam Pomfrey thought you were dead," he said by way of a good morning. "She saw you all draped over the nightstand and dropped her wand. It was *great*."

Something tickled at the back of Harry's mind. He was supposed to be somewhere right now, wasn't he. He just couldn't quite remember where. "Did you tell her I was alive?"

"Where's the fun in that?" Draco said equably. He had somewhere along the line gotten dressed, Harry noticed. Out of the pajamas, he did look a little healthier, and there was color in his cheeks.

"Sadist," said Harry, and stretched with an enormous yawn. His muscles popped and he winced. He really needed to get some exercise; practice some Quidditch or fencing. He wondered if Draco was well enough to come with him and then felt guilty for having wondered it.

"Slacker," said Draco. "Oh, and by the way -- do you remember what day it is?"

Harry, blinking sleep out of his eyes, yawned. "No." Then he paused. "Oh. Wait. It's not --"

"And there are *zero* shopping days left until Christmas!" announced Draco with malign glee. "I would have written you a Christmas card explaining what the last eight months of our beautiful friendship have meant to me, but I couldn't be bothered."

"We've been friends for ten months," pointed out Harry, slightly insulted.

"I know, but the first two months were really only kind of so-so."

"Thank you, Malfoy. I am truly touched, and in recognition of the fact that it's Christmas, I will *not* push you off the bed. Even though I want to."

A faint smirk touched the edge of Draco's mouth. "Hey, wasn't there supposed to be some spectacular seasonal extravaganza going on this afternoon?"

"What--? Oh, you mean the Christmas thing. Well, it's not exactly a big party, Malfoy. Just a few people in the Gryffindor common room. Exchange of presents and all that."

"Oh, that's fine," Draco said, sounding offended. "I'll just sit here in the infirmary all Christmas Day, alone and dying slowly."

"That's *not funny*," said Harry, so fiercely that Draco quailed, which was possibly a first ever, although Harry was not in any mood to appreciate it. "Anyway," he added more gently, "I just assumed you'd be coming."

Draco, being Draco, didn't seem happy about this either. "Oh, I don't know."

"It's okay if you don't have presents for anyone. Under the circumstances..."

Draco sighed. "I have presents for people," he said, to Harry's surprise. "But it seems like a Gryffindor sort of event. Not necessarily for me..."

Harry was honestly perplexed. "Well, what do the Slytherins usually do for Christmas?"

"Oh, you know. Ritual bloodletting." Draco grinned at Harry's confused expression. "Come now Potter. We celebrate Christmas just like you do."

My father was all about remembering the less fortunate at during the holidays."

"The poor?" Harry asked. "Really?"

"Yes. He said it was very important that we remember to put up wards during Christmas to keep the poor out because otherwise they might try to burgle our house while we were at church."

"You went to *church*?"

"Just to confiscate the collection plate," said Draco with a breezy wave.

Harry shook his head. "I never know whether to believe you or not," he said.

"Isn't that what makes me so devastatingly charming?" Draco inquired.

"Oh. *no!*" announced Harry suddenly, leaping to his feet with a start.

Draco looked alarmed. "Well, maybe devastatingly charming was a little strong. How about 'wickedly alluring'?"

"Oh, bugger," wailed Harry, dropping to his knees and scrabbling around on the floor for his Invisibility Cloak. "I was supposed to be helping Snape in the Potions dungeon and I forgot."

Draco chuckled lightly. "My antidote?"

"Oh, damn, *damn*. He's going to kill me." Harry was on his feet, shoving the cloak in his pocket. "I have to go."

"Sure, you sleep over and then you bail out first thing in the morning...and you'll probably forget to call..."

"Shut up, Malfoy," said Harry, running his hands through his ridiculously untidy hair in a futile attempt to tame it. "I'll see you in the common room later, okay? Stay in bed, and if you need anything, you know, you can just look for me, and Ginny said she was going to drop in later, and remember to get rest and--"

"Go away, Potter," said Draco. "I'll see you this afternoon."

Harry went.

When Harry arrived in the Potions dungeon, Snape was not there, but Hermione was, industriously crushing Ashwinder eggs with a small mortar and pestle. She dropped the pestle with a little clatter when Harry came in and clapped her hand over her mouth. "Oh -- *Harry!*"

"Well, who else?" Harry came a little ways into the room, glancing apprehensively around. Hermione noted how disheveled he looked, as if he'd slept on the floor. His hair stood up around his face, a halo of soft black thorns. The laces on his boots were untied and was that...a pajama top he was wearing under his robes? "Is Snape here?" he demanded, looking worried.

"No," Hermione said slowly. "No, he *was* here, but he left when you didn't come. He was really angry, Harry. I've hardly ever seen him so furious."

Harry sighed. "I was with Draco," he said.

"I thought you might have been," Hermione said. She bit her lip. "Is he all right?"

"He's fine. I went to see him and I fell asleep on the nightstand. Damn." Harry flung himself wearily down on a stool across from Hermione's and looked entreatingly at her. "How furious exactly?"

"Very furious, Harry. It was stupid of you not to show up and you know it." Hermione made her voice as severe as she possibly could. "Was there some reason you had to spend the night in the infirmary?"

Harry looked away from her. He was playing with something he held in his right hand, nervously turning it over and over. It glinted brightly between his fingers. Finally, he said, "Look, I know it's ridiculous. But I have this feeling like nothing can happen to him if I'm there. So I feel like I should stay."

"You mean you think he can't die with you there," Hermione said flatly.

Harry looked down, his long eyelashes brushing the tops of his cheekbones. "Well, you sure know how to make it sound stupid."

Hermione sighed. "Oh, God, I don't know," she said. "If anyone could keep him alive through sheer force of will it'd be you, Harry. He'd do anything for you and maybe that includes not dying."

Harry spun the small gold object he was holding between his fingers. When he spoke, his voice was constricted. "You make it sound like it's my fault."

"Your fault that he's ill?" Hermione's heart softened, he looked so brokenhearted. "Oh, no, I didn't mean that."

"I sometimes feel," Harry said, in an odd, distant voice, "as if that Polyjuice potion or whatever it was hammered these sharp hooks into me, into my skin. Hooks attached to a cord. And on the other end of the cord are more hooks, and they're attached to Draco. And the cord is flexible and infinitely long, and however far apart we are it connects us. Most of the time I don't think about it. It's part of me now, and who I am. But sometimes I look at him and I..."

"And you what?" Hermione asked, her voice very gentle.

"And I can see where the hooks go into *him*," Harry said in the same distant voice. "Where they cut and make him bleed. It's still an injury, Hermione. And I think...what has this done to him, to me, to both of us? Maybe we were better off when we hated each other."

"You mean so you wouldn't care he was dying?" Hermione demanded, half indignant and half bewildered. This was not like Harry; he did not think or speak figuratively. He saw things as they were; he did not have visions of invisible cords and sharp hooks that drew blood from unresisting flesh. Hermione shuddered.

"So he wouldn't be dying at all," Harry said.

For several hours Harry helped Hermione in the Potions classroom, both hoping and not hoping that Snape would return. On the one hand, he

wanted to get his apology and explanation out of the way. On the other hand, he didn't like getting yelled at.

On the other *other* hand, as Ron had once been wont to say, Harry was enjoying the time with Hermione. Given the current state of their non-relationship it seemed something of a guilty pleasure, but there it was. He wasn't sure how helpful he was being, as in his distracted state he several times handed her the wrong ingredient -- when he passed her a jar of beetle shells instead of the mandrake leaves she had asked for, she rolled her eyes at him -- but it was pleasant to be around her nonetheless. He liked watching her work, crouched and serious over a low-burning flame, adding ingredients to a small cauldron. Liked the way she wailed *Harry, this isn't burdock root! It's nettle powder!* Liked the way she pushed her hair back while she worked and finally, with a scrunched face of despair, wound it in a bun atop her head and thrust a quill through it.

"That never works," Harry pointed out. "Your hair always falls down anyway."

"Merh," said Hermione, or something very like it. "Hand me the newt's blood. Not that I think there's any newt's blood involved here, but Snape did say to try everything."

Wordlessly, Harry pushed the vial of newt blood towards her, then went back to toying with the coin he'd picked up in Lucius' office. It was heavier than an ordinary Galleon and had a comforting weight in his hand.

"Harry," said Hermione slowly.

He looked over at her, surprised by the tone in her voice. She sounded surprised, and more than a little nervous. "What?" he said.

"Is that..."

He followed her gaze. When he realized what she was looking at, he jumped in surprise, dropped the coin in his hand, and tried to pull his sleeve down. It did no good, however -- she'd seen the watch around his wrist, its cracked face reflecting the light of the cauldron fire.

Hermione went back to work again, her scarlet cheeks the only sign of her agitation. A few moments of tense silence passed, during which Harry's fidgeting reached near-record proportions. Finally, he spoke.

"Just go on and ask me," he said, in a resigned tone.

"I haven't got anything to ask you," Hermione said tightly. Her cheeks were the color of the vial of newt's blood. "You want to wear that watch, it's your business. It's *your* watch."

"Hermione --"

"Runespoor eyes, please," she said tensely.

"Hermione, *listen* --"

"Fine, I'll get them myself --" she broke off, her hand partly outstretched to reach past him. "Harry, why've you got a Bulgarian galleon?"

Harry blinked at her. "What?"

"This." Hermione picked up the gold coin he had been playing with and looked at it closely. "This looks like one of those coins that Viktor used to...but this isn't Bulgarian around the edges..." She turned it over, looking perplexed. "Where did you get this, Harry?"

"Oh, I..." Harry thought for a moment of telling her that he'd picked it up off Lucius Malfoy's desk, then thought better of it. He'd listened to her long rant about how foolish Ginny had been to abscond with Manor property, and didn't feel like hearing it directed at him. "Erm. Malfoy's coin collection," he said finally.

"Draco has a *coin collection*?" Hermione looked dubious, but apparently decided to let it slide. "Well, I don't know what kind of coin this is. It looks...well, I'd say Romanian if I had to take a guess."

Harry held out his hand and she gave him the coin. He held it lightly. "Is there any kind of spell that would tell me..."

"Where it's from? No, you'd have to ask a Gringotts goblin. They can tell you everything about any coin -- where it was minted, what bank it was

last held at. They have ways of tracking money that are really interesting, and I can see your eyes are glazing over with boredom, so I'll just be quiet. Can I have the Runespoor eyes, or am I going to have to get them myself?"

His mind suddenly awchirl, Harry absently handed her a tall glass jar.

"Harry," Hermione wailed. "These are *bat toes*."

"Sorry," Harry said.

The brightly colored lights strung through the Gryffindor common room cast a soft and multicolored glow over everything. Ginny, demurely seated beside the largest armchair, was busy stirring a bowl of hot spiced punch Harry had brought up from the kitchens. Harry himself was standing over by the window, watching the light snow as it flurried against the leaded panes.



Hermione, having just finished arranging the stack of wrapped gifts by the fireplace, settled back onto the couch with her stack of parchments on her lap. The copy she had made of the *Liber-Damnatis* was slightly unwieldy: bound with loose strips of twine, it had a tendency to slide apart. She caught Ginny casting it several resentful glances and cleared her throat unhappily. She and Ginny had never really fought before and she was not enjoying the experience.

"This book is really a wonderful resource," Hermione said, aloud and slightly nervously. Harry glanced over from the window; Ginny did not raise her bright head from the punch bowl. "I'm so glad we have it. It's like an exact guide to the Four Worthy Objects, how to locate them and how they work. Some of the translating is really difficult, but it's definitely worth it. There's a step-by-step instructional about how the final ritual has to be completed..."

"You said it required blood," said Harry, still staring out the window. Hermione didn't like how he looked: distant and remote.

"Yes. The life's blood of a dark wizard at his full power has to be drained and used in the ceremony."

"Or her full power," said Ginny, without looking up. "There are female dark wizards too, you know."

"Erm," said Hermione. "I guess that's true." She cleared her throat. "I wonder where Draco is?"

"Probably admiring himself in a mirror somewhere," said Ginny coldly. She poked at the bowl with the silver punch ladle. "Seamus, by the way, since you all seem to care so much, is going to be a little late. He was taking a letter to the owlery."

"Oh, uh..." Hermione looked beseechingly at Harry, who shrugged as if to say this was her problem. "Who's he writing to?"

"No one. It was my letter. I was writing to my parents about Ron."

Harry turned away from the window and looked at her. "I hope you aren't going to suggest that we don't care about that either," he said. His tone

was mild, even gentle, but there was a look in his eyes that took Hermione aback. *That's not my Harry.*

Ginny didn't lower her eyes, but her voice, when she spoke again, had lost of some of its antagonistic quality. "No. I know you do. Well -- not Draco, but --"

"He cares as well," said Hermione quickly.

Ginny's mouth thinned into a straight line. "Draco wouldn't care if Lucius turned my brother into a mushroom and ate him with sprouts. Well, all right. He cares because Harry cares. But that isn't caring, if you ask me."

Harry snorted. "It bloody well is --"

The portrait door swung open, silencing them all. While they stood motionless, Draco came in, carrying several wrapped packages. The door swung shut behind him and for a moment he simply stood where he was, surveying them all with a faint but arrogant smirk. "Merry Christmas," he said. "Sorry I'm late."

Hermione heard Ginny draw in a sharp little breath. Had Hermione been a slightly different kind of girl, she might have done the same. Draco had apparently decided that the key to not being asked constantly all afternoon long how he was feeling was to look as gorgeous as humanly possible. He wore dark wool trousers, the lines as impeccably cut as if they'd been made with a razor, and a soft slate-colored sweater that managed to make his eyes look blue. Hermione was sure he'd probably spent hours picking out the color. Around his face his hair, freshly washed, waved in almost-white baby-fine tendrils.

He came forward then into the room, and glanced around with a considering air. Finally, he said, "The Slytherin common room looks better. Who decorated yours?"

Hermione was affronted. "We did."

"It looks dodgy," Draco proclaimed. "Then again, Christmas color schemes are inherently doomed. Red and green is not a good combination." He glanced around. "Is there somewhere to put these packages?"

Harry, looking as if he were trying not to laugh, relieved Draco of the wrapped gifts he was carrying and placed them under the tree. Draco immediately sprawled himself across the largest and softest sofa, accepting a glass of spiced punch from Hermione with one immaculately manicured hand. He glanced around. "On second thought, the decorations aren't so bad. At least they hide the red and orange. I don't know how you Gryffindors survive in here. Like constantly living in a giant moldering pumpkin."

"Drink your punch," said Hermione sweetly. She rolled her eyes towards Ginny. After a moment, Ginny gave her a faint smile back.

Draco's eyes were still roaming the room, seeking out something to mock. Harry, perching himself on the edge of the sofa, complied. "You could make fun of our Christmas cards," he suggested, pointing to the large board beside the fireplace where professors' and former Hogwarts pupils' holiday cards were fastened with Spellotape.

Draco settled himself into the cushions and looked dolefully at the cards, his eyes sliding from the enormous card from Hagrid to Lockhart's showy gold heart-shaped photograph of himself. "It's no fun when you *tell* me I can do it," he complained, took a sip of punch, and choked. "Is that a photo of Oliver Wood in a *dress*?"

Harry nodded cheerily. "It was some kind of bet, I think. If they lost to the Falmouth Falcons..."

"He looks terrible." Draco raised an eyebrow. "Some people should never wear pastel. Basic black and pearls, that's Oliver. Maybe a nice low heel."

"I'll be sure to pass that along," Harry grinned. Having Draco there seemed to have made him slightly less grave: his green eyes glowed with amusement. "Here -- we might as well start with the presents now."

"All right." Ginny scooted herself over to the pile of packages. Tucking her hair behind her ears, she began to sort through them. "Who wants the first one?"

"Throw over that big orange one," Harry said, stifling what looked like a mischievous grin. Ginny complied, and Harry caught the brightly

wrapped package out of the air and dropped it in Draco's lap. "For you," he said.

Draco sat up straighter, a curious look on his face. "From who?"

"That one's from mum and dad," Ginny said. Her own lips were twitching.

Narrowing his eyes, Draco ripped the wrapping away to reveal an oversized bright orange sweater with dark green sleeves. Mrs. Weasley had thoughtfully stitched an enormous "D" to the chest.

"Heavenly God," said Draco, staring in abject horror. "What *is* this?"

"It's a sweater," Ginny said severely.

"This," said Draco, "resembles a sweater in much the same way that Millicent Bulstrode resembles a goddess-like vision of beauty."

"It looks better on," Harry said, now unable to stifle the grin.

"On what?" Draco demanded. "On *fire*?"

Harry gave him a look. Draco glanced from Harry, to the sweater, then back at Harry. Then he sighed, and to Hermione's great amusement, put the sweater on. It was enormous on him -- the sleeves hung to his knuckles, and the hem of the sweater would have fallen nearly to his knees had he been standing. Even Ginny could not contain her giggles.

"I hate you all," said Draco, mournfully.

Hermione tried to hide her smile. "Here -- this one's from me," she said, and tossed a silver package at him. As he reached to catch it she saw a flash of green at his wrist and realized to her amusement that he had turned Blaise's barrettes into a pair of cufflinks. A moment later she was distracted as Harry handed her a package in blue wrapping and Ginny tossed her a small pink box. For a few moments everything was the blissful sound of tearing paper and people exclaiming over their gifts.

Harry had given Hermione a blue glass ring on a thin silver chain -- she saw Draco look sideways at him when she unwrapped it, but neither of them said anything. "Thanks, Harry," she said, and put it on. Draco had

given her a dark green shawl charmed to be warm in winter and cool in summer; Ginny had given her lip gloss charmed to sparkle, scented like ivy blossoms. Draco had given Ginny a box set of everything written by Aurora Twilight, from *Pants of the Oppressors* to *Trousers, Arise!* Hermione was sure this must have some private meaning as Ginny looked quite pleased to get it.

Amid the confusion Draco quite quietly handed something to Harry that he had not put with the other gifts. It was a book, and not wrapped. Hermione glanced up. She had to admit that she was quite curious about what Draco and Harry had planned to give each other.

Harry turned it over curiously. It was a slender book, very elegantly bound in dark green leather with a number of silver buckles holding it closed. Stamped across the front were six silver words.

"*The Malfoy Family Code of Conduct*," Harry read out curiously. His eyes widened. "I've heard you talk about this, but I didn't realize it was a real book."

"It is," Draco said. "And there's only one, so don't lose it or muck it up, Potter."

"Only one?"

"Only one," Draco repeated, looking amused, but serious. "It's handed down from Malfoy to Malfoy; everyone gets it on their thirteenth birthday. You're a bit late, but then I guess you're a late addition to the family."

Harry laughed. "Does this make me an honorary Malfoy, then?"

"Yes," Draco said, quite gravely. "You are my blood brother, after all."

"Then I get to keep it until..."

"Till I have any children, I suppose," Draco said, and a dark light flashed at the back of his eyes.

Harry's hand tightened on the book. "Thanks, Malfoy," he said. "I'll...I'll read it."

At that, the darkness went from Draco's expression, and he smiled. "Better you than me," he said. "It's quite boring."

Harry gave him a wobbly sort of look, then rooted around in his own pocket and drew something out. Hermione was struck by the fact that neither Harry nor Draco had bothered to wrap their presents for each other. Perhaps it was because they were boys, and therefore uninterested in presentation? Although no one could accuse Draco, with his perfectly groomed hair and elegant clothes, of being uninterested in presentation.

"Here," Harry said, and thrust something at Draco. A parchmenty something, that crackled when Draco took it.

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed, too startled not to speak. "The *Marauder's Map*?"

Draco glanced up, lazy eyes sparking with curiosity. "What's the Marauder's Map?"

Sometimes Hermione forgot how short a time she and Harry had actually been friends with Draco Malfoy. She looked at Harry, who leaned down over Draco's shoulder and traced the lines on the page with his finger. "It's the castle," he said. "You can see where everyone is all the time, so if you're in the infirmary and you want to know where we are, this'll show you. It's ace for sneaking around too, of course, and when you're better --"

"This is really impressive magic," Draco interrupted, eyebrows raised. "Did you make this?"

"No," said Harry. "My dad made it."

Draco's eyes widened and he glanced up at Harry in surprise, but before he could say anything, the portrait door opened again and Seamus came in.

"Hello," he said, looking around the room. "Sorry I'm late."

He had a navy wool coat on and his hands were full of packages. Ginny, seeing him, reached out her hand and he went to sit beside her, dropping a kiss on her cheek. Hermione's eyes went to Draco. He had tensed all

over when Seamus had come into the room, and now lay rigid on the couch, watching Seamus out of narrowed eyes. Harry, perched on the sofa arm behind him, was tapping his fingers nervously.

"Here," Ginny said a little too brightly, and handed Seamus a gift-wrapped box. Looking pleased, Seamus handed around the gifts he'd been carrying -- one for Hermione, one for Harry, and one for Draco as well. Draco did not lean forward to take his, so Harry took it for him and dropped it in his lap. Draco looked at Harry as if to say, *et tu, Brute?*

Harry rolled his eyes. "Thank you, Seamus," he said loudly, holding up what looked like a card for a year's subscription to Quidditch World News. "You didn't have to."

Seamus beamed at him. "No problem, Harry. And thanks for the comic books -- they're wicked."

Draco was now glaring daggers at Harry's back. Harry studiously ignored him.

"Draco," Ginny said, unexpectedly. "Open your present."

Draco turned his ferocious glare from Harry to her. "Weasley..."

"He doesn't have to open it now," Seamus said hurriedly.

Draco's eyes went flat and opaque. With a muttered curse he reached for the box in his lap and ripped it open. Something that flashed a bright silver fell out into his lap. He stared at it in silence, and everyone in the room stared at him. It was Harry, finally, who picked the gift up and held it up to the light.

It was what looked to Hermione like a small silver sculpture: carved in the shape of a narrow dragon winding around itself in several coils, it was as elegant, gorgeous, and expensive-looking as Draco himself. The eyes of the dragon were tiny green stones and its sharp teeth glittered like crystal.

Harry whistled aloud. "Nice," he said, and handed it to Draco. Draco took it in one long-fingered hand and looked at it with a blank expression. Everyone watched him -- Ginny, her wide eyes dark, Seamus looking as if

he were holding his breath, and Harry with the same mixture of exasperation and fondness that Hermione felt herself. Finally, Draco said, flatly, "Does it do something?"

"Do something...?" Seamus looked uncomfortable. "No. It could be a paperweight, I guess."

"Well." Draco poked it with a finger for good measure. "It's just a little dragon ornament, then?"

"Er...yes."

"Oh, I see," Draco said as if he had just been enlightened as to something important. "A dragon. Because my name's Draco, right? And that means dragon, right? How crashingly original of you, Finnigan. I mean, nobody's ever thought of that before. Least of all me."

Seamus flushed an unhappy red, but it was Ginny who spoke.

"Draco," she hissed. "Don't."

Draco opened his gray eyes wide. "Don't what?" he inquired. "I'm just telling Finnigan here exactly what I think of his little present. Doesn't he deserve to know?"

"You're being a bastard," she said, her brown eyes level with his. "Stop it."

Seamus cleared his throat. "Ginny, it's all right --"

"No, it isn't." Ginny stood up, and yanked Seamus upright by the elbow. She glared at Draco, her lips flattened into an angry line. "Draco," she said, her voice very clear and level. "Apologize to Seamus right now."

Draco lowered his eyelashes and smiled. "No," he said.

"Seamus has never done anything to you!" Ginny almost shouted. "And I'm tired of you treating him like this. You're just jealous."

Draco raised his eyes and the expression in them was searing enough to make Hermione wince. She wanted to reach out and restrain Ginny, tell her that this wasn't the way, that Draco would despise this kind of

behavior as common and childish. But she couldn't. "Jealous?" he said in a very soft voice. "Of Finnigan?"

"You know you are," Ginny said. "You don't want me, oh no, but you don't want anyone else to come anywhere near me either because -- because what? Because I'm your property? You want me to wait around for you forever? You hate Seamus because he's all the things you aren't -- kind, and gentle, and truthful --"

"And stupid," Draco added. "Don't forget stupid."

"At least he knows how to treat people he loves," Ginny said harshly. "All you do is hurt them and cause them pain."

"I'm not exactly sure how you'd know that," Draco said in the same soft voice, "seeing as how you aren't one of them."

Ginny whitened. For a moment everyone in the room simply stared at her -- Harry, Hermione and Seamus with anxiety, and Draco with a cool indifference. It was Seamus who reached out to her first.

"Ginny --" he began.

But she jerked away from his touch, and fled to the portrait hole. She ducked through it and was gone. The Fat Lady could be heard calling after her in concern, *"Where are you running to, love? It's Christmas!"*

Seamus spun back around. His handsome face was twisted into a look of such fury that Hermione was astonished ... Seamus was always so even-tempered and level-headed. He took a step towards Draco, who raised an eyebrow but did not otherwise respond to Seamus' advance, despite the fact that Seamus' hands were balled into fists at his sides.

"Malfoy," Seamus snarled. "I don't care how ill you are -- get up --"

Harry sprang lightly to his feet, putting himself between Seamus and the couch where Draco lay. Seamus recoiled, and stared at Harry in astonishment.

"Seamus," Harry said evenly. "Go after Ginny."

He looked levelly at Seamus, and Seamus, white-faced and murderous, glared back. Seamus and Harry had never been terribly close, but they had shared a bedroom since they were eleven years old. Seamus had been Chaser to Harry's Seeker for nearly three years. They had always been on good terms. Seamus was, in this situation, entirely in the right. And Hermione knew that if Seamus took one more step towards Draco, Harry would knock him down without thinking about it.

Seamus' eyes dropped to Draco, who had raised himself into a sitting position on the couch. His face was entirely enigmatic. He could have been reading a railway timetable for all the expression he showed.

"And look at you," said Seamus in a tone of voice Hermione had never heard him use before. He kept his eyes on Draco while he spoke. "Hiding behind Harry Potter, like you always wanted. Taking advantage of the fact that he's a good kind person and you've weaseled yourself into his good graces. He'll protect you even though you aren't worth it, because he's better than you are, Malfoy, you sniveling malicious little sadist. He's worth ten of you."

Draco's expression didn't change; only his eyes widened slightly as he looked up at Seamus. Next to Seamus' eyes, his no longer looked blue.

"I know that," Draco said.

Seamus blinked, as if startled. Then his expression rearranged itself. His mouth curved into an expression of disgust. "So you're a coward, too. If you --"

Harry reached out a hand. "Seamus --"

But Seamus flinched away from him. "Leave it, Potter," he said. "If Malfoy's that important to you, then I won't --" He raised his chin, and looked levelly at them both. There was an odd kind of dignity about that look that Hermione could not help but like. "I feel sorry for you both," he said, turned around, and walked to the portrait hole. He ducked out of it, and it closed behind him with a final-sounding click.

Harry sank down on the couch next to Draco and put his head in his hands. "Bugger," he said in a muffled tone.

Hermione, getting up from her place by the fire, came over and put her hand on Harry's shoulder. "Bugger indeed," she said mournfully. "Draco, you idiot. What possessed you?"

"No idea," Draco said, cocking his head to the side and giving the silver dragon in his lap a considering glance. "But now that I've had a chance to think about it, I actually rather like this paperweight. Do I have to give it back?"

"YES," said Harry and Hermione, in unison.

"Drat," said Draco.

Ginny was halfway to the library when Seamus caught up with her. She heard him behind her before he called out her name and almost didn't turn around when he did, but he called her again, and she paused. She didn't turn, but she paused.

"Ginny," he said. "Wait."

"I don't want to talk to you right now, Seamus," she said, as evenly as she could. She kept her eyes fixed on the wall at the end of the corridor ahead. "I'm sorry."

She heard him expel an exasperated breath. "Ginny..."

"Please don't apologize," she said in a small voice. "I don't --"

"I'm not going to *apologize*," Seamus said, sounding incredulous. In fact, there was a note in his voice she had never heard before; she turned around finally and stared at him in surprise.

"I *am* sorry," he said, and she flinched a little under the level blue of his gaze. He had his hands in his pockets and his shoulders were tensed. He was a little hunched over -- she had always thought of him as rather big, but he wasn't really. He was bigger than Draco, certainly, but then Draco was built like a dancer or a swimmer, fine-boned and lightly muscled. Seamus was slender too, but his frame was larger, his shoulders broader.

Right now, however, he looked suddenly...small. "I am sorry," he said again, " but not for anything I've done."

Thoughtlessly, her hand went to touch the bracelet around her wrist. It had become a nervous gesture. "Seamus..."

"All I've done," he said, in the same steady voice, "is care about you, and try to be there for you. I'm here because of you. Otherwise I'd be home with my family. And I told myself that maybe you didn't show it, but you did appreciate it. I told myself that you had a lot on your mind and were wrapped up in events I couldn't possibly understand, and that if I just stayed here and was *there* for you, eventually you'd notice. I thought it would matter if I was patient. I thought it might matter if I was understanding. I thought I should try to be kind. But now I realize that all that matters is that I'm not Draco Malfoy and I never will be."

Ginny did not know what to say. This was not what she had expected. Surely he was exaggerating. Surely she hadn't been so unkind to him. She reached inside herself for that passion she had felt in the common room, that urge to defend and protect Seamus. But she could not find it. It had vanished along with the wreck of her secret hopes in Draco's stormy gray eyes.

"And I've wondered," Seamus went on. "If I tried to be more like him, would that make any difference? Is it that you want someone who'll treat you badly, who doesn't really love you, who *wants* to hurt and humiliate you? Who lies to you? Who treats you like you're a stupid little girl? Where did you learn that that was what you wanted?"

"No!" Ginny wasn't sure what she meant by this strong negative, but she knew she didn't want to hear any more. "Don't-- listen, I--"

"I'm leaving," he said.

She stared. "Leaving?"

"Leaving," he repeated. His expression was utterly serious. "I'm going home. None of you want me here. I'm just in the way. I'm tired of it, Ginny. I'd take a lot to be with you, but not -" he broke off, and for the first time, his voice wavered and she understood that this was much

harder for him than he was making it seem. "Not," he finished, "if you don't want to be with me."

Ginny's lips parted but no words came out. She had no idea what to say. Some part of her heart, as she looked at this beautiful, kind, clever boy who loved her, broke a little at the sadness in his expression.

The rest of her felt nothing at all. He might as well have been talking about some other girl, some girl she didn't know. Perhaps somewhere inside her she had the energy to tell kind lies, to beg him to stay, to reassure him that he was wrong about her lack of love for him. Perhaps. But she couldn't find it.

She raised her chin. "Do you want your bracelet back?"

He flinched. "No," he said. "I gave it to you. Keep it."

"Seamus." She was so tired. "I'm sorry."

He looked away from her. The torchlight painted his hair in shades of ash and bronze, drew liquid-gold lines along the edges of his jaw and collarbone. "I won't speak ill of someone who's dying," he said, his accent very pronounced for a moment. "But why him? Why Malfoy?"

Ginny took a moment before replying. "I think," she said, "that he reminds me of someone else that I loved once."

It was the most honest thing she had ever said to him.

He nodded slightly, and drew the back of his hand across his eyes. "I'll leave tomorrow," he said, turned, and walked away.

Ginny watched him go. Then she resumed walking down the corridor and into the library. It was utterly deserted, as she had thought that it would be. Her bookbag was where she had left it, underneath a chair. She dragged it out, opened it, and took out the small black shabby diary that had caused her so much desolation.

She placed it on the table and from her robes, drew out her wand. She felt -- cold wasn't the word, exactly. She knew she should feel anger towards Draco, guilt about Seamus. Instead she felt merely determined. So Draco

had shown her that she had been right; she wasn't wanted and didn't belong. They thought she was a useless fool. Hermione had as much as said so earlier. Very well then. She would show them. And when they came to her weeping with gratitude, she would throw it back in their faces.

She touched the tip of the wand to the diary.

"*Origio*," she whispered.

A bright string of numbers and words appeared for a moment across the surface of the diary. A day, a month, a date. A time.

They faded.

Ginny took a deep breath, and reached for the hourglass at her throat.

"No Malfoy shall wear orange, except on Fridays, or during teatime." 'A Malfoy should never let family stand in the way of opportunity.' 'Any Malfoy who puts a book down on its face and breaks the spine will be punished with horrible death' -- do Malfoys actually follow all of these rules?" Harry asked curiously. He was sprawled on his stomach in front of the fireplace, his nose buried in the *Malfoy Family Code of Conduct*. Draco was watching him over the back of the sofa, unable to shake a feeling of bemusement that Harry was actually reading the thing.

He shrugged. "Of course we do."

"All Malfoys should eat a live toad each morning for breakfast as it aids in digestion. That one, too?"

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Well, all right, not every single one. Although look at it this way: eat a live toad first thing every morning and nothing worse can happen to you for the rest of the day. Philosophically, it's a sound principle." He looked thoughtful. "Also, toads are sort of tasty."

Harry wrinkled his nose. "Would it be impolite at this point in the conversation to just run away from you?"

"Poor Neville," interrupted Hermione suddenly, looking up from her armchair next to the fire. "He was so upset about Trevor."

Draco blinked at her. "Please deconstruct that segue for me."

"Trevor was his toad," said Harry succinctly. "It died."

"Oh is that who he kept complaining was missing?" Draco asked, with the air of the suddenly enlightened. "I thought it was someone he *knew*."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "If Trevor had been a person don't you think the Students' Council would have agreed to help Neville look for him?"

Draco shrugged. "I figured he was just someone unpopular," he said.

"As always, your empathy is astounding." Hermione stood up. "And now, I am going to the library. I assume you two plan to stay here, drink the rest of the punch, insult each other as a way of pretending you're not really friends, and then pass out on the floor?"

"Actually I was going to pole-dance around the Christmas tree," said Draco, pointing at it, "But your plan sounds like more fun."

"Yeah," said Harry, still reading. "I like punch."

Hermione looked as if she were suppressing a smile. "I'll let you know if I find anything," she said, and left, her books and parchments clutched to her chest.

Harry raised his head from the book to watch her go, his eyes intently evergreen behind his glasses.

"You gave her that ring," Draco said, as soon as the portrait door had closed behind her. "I thought you said looking at it made you ill."

"I changed my mind." Harry sat up, stretched, and moved to the rug in front of the fire. He picked up the silver poker. "I got it for her because I loved her and I thought she'd like it. I still do love her and I still do think she likes it."

"But you put it on a chain." Draco stuck one finger into his punch, then sucked the punch off his knuckle. "Maintaining some distance there, Potter?"

"Maybe." Harry prodded at the fire with the poker. It was hard to tell whether the heat of the fire or slight embarrassment had turned his cheeks scarlet, but scarlet they were. "It's just... I hardly felt I could...after what happened at the Manor..."

"You mean the *demon sex*?" said Draco loudly, obviously taking great and sadistic pleasure in watching Harry start and nearly fall into the fireplace.

"Shut up, Malfoy. Someone might hear you."

Draco chortled and put his punch glass down. Then he stood up -- and nearly overbalanced. 'Bloody Weasley sweater,' he muttered, yanking the offending garment off over his head and hurling it onto the couch. The resultant static electricity turned his hair into a crown of silver spikes. He went over to the fireplace and sat down next to Harry, taking something out of his pocket as he did so. "Here, Potter," he said. "The second part of your Christmas present."

Harry looked at the object suspiciously. It greatly resembled a coil of dark gold wire. "What's that?"

"Just give me your hand," Draco said. Somewhere behind his eyes, a smirk was struggling to escape.

Harry sighed, dropped the poker, and extended a hand towards Draco. Draco took the proffered wrist and turned it over so that the scar on Harry's palm faced him. In the firelight it looked like a thin streak of silver. Against Draco's very white fingers, Harry's own skin looked nearly brown. "Hold still," Draco said, and began to wind the gold coil quickly and efficiently around his friend's wrist.

Harry stifled a yawn. "I think I drank too much punch," he said sleepily, then took his hand back as Draco finished tying the gold wire. He looked curiously at it -- it was, up close, very slender and strong. "Does it do something?"

Draco sat back. "Just wait a second."

Harry waited, and looked at the band around his wrist, and enjoyed the warmth of the fire at his back. The air smelled like evergreen and cinnamon and faintly of limes, which was probably Draco's cologne. It came in expensive bottles from some wizarding shop in Venice and Draco claimed a bottle of it cost more than a new Firebolt. Harry had no idea why anyone would pay such vast amounts for the privilege of smelling like a citrus fruit but knew better than to mention this to Draco.

The band quivered then. Harry jumped -- it tickled against his skin. He watched curiously as it spun lazily like a pinwheel around his wrist, describing three quick rotations. Then it stopped and was still. He looked curiously up at Draco.

Draco smiled at him, a smile made lazy by punch and the late hour. The light of the high-burning fire painted the right side of his face in red and gold. Gryffindor colors. "Congratulations, Potter," he said. "You're still a virgin."

Harry goggled at him. "What?"

"A *virgin*," Draco said, obviously enjoying himself immensely. He reached out and pulled the gold wire off Harry's wrist. When he tossed it into the fire, it let out a single high singing note that made Harry jump. "That was unicorn hair, you utter pillock. Tie it around your wrist and knot it; if it doesn't fall off, then I suppose the most we can lay at your doorstep is a couple of naughty dreams and that episode with Cho Chang in the girls' bathroom fifth year. Oh, yes, I heard about that. Buck up, Potter. You're a virgin. Enjoy it."

"But why --?" Harry began.

"I'm not entirely sure," said Draco. "Perhaps your standards are too high."

Harry scowled. "I meant, why would Rhysenn want to sleep with me?"

"Perhaps her standards are too low."

"Malfoy..."

"All right, all right." Draco snorted. "You mean why did she lie? I don't know. Why does anybody lie? I'm not sure, Potter. Don't ask me why

there's evil in the world and people are cruel to puppies and ickle kittycats go to bed hungry. I don't know, and furthermore, it's too late for ontological explorations of the universe. If you mean why did Rhysenn lie to *you* about *that*, probably because she took a disliking to your face."

"There's nothing wrong with my face," objected Harry.

"Actually, your mouth's crooked, did you know that? When you smile, one side's a little higher than the other. And --" Draco relented with a grin.

"All right, all right. Honestly, she probably lied to you because she's a *sex demon*, Potter. And if she crawled into bed with you, I'd assume we can guess what she was after. But you were drunk, if you recollect. I would have been surprised if you could stand up, much less..."

Harry felt himself turning red. "I get it," he interrupted hastily.

"Ah, but you didn't then, and therein lies the problem." This was obviously the most fun Draco had had in weeks. Harry felt obscurely miffed. "She was probably resentful of your lack of interest."

"Well," Harry said, "she did say that something had happened to her that night that had never happened to her before."

Draco grinned hugely. "I think it was more a case of something *not* having happened," he announced. "And I think we've solved almost every part of this mystery except one..."

Harry gave him a narrow look. "What?"

"Why did she want to sleep with you in the first place?"

Now Harry was definitely miffed. "Lots of people want to sleep with me!"

"Oh really? Did you take a poll? And Myrtle voting sixty times doesn't count."

Harry growled something under his breath.

Draco smiled in a placating manner. "Just winding you up, Potter. Never let it be said by me that you are not a burnished sex god."

Harry was amused despite himself. "*Burnished?*"

"According to *Passionate Trousers*, being burnished is absolutely essential."

"Malfoy, if you don't stop reading that crap, I will cut your supply off. It's rotting your brain."

Draco twitched slightly. "I can't help it," he said worriedly. "It's strangely compelling."

"Don't tell me you're actually interested in whether or not Rhiannon escapes the clutches of evil whatsername. The busty woman with the leather fetish."

"Lady Stacia?" Draco was suddenly animated. "Oh, Rhiannon escaped from her ages ago. Tristan seduced Lady Stacia and tied her up in her own dungeon with a spare pair of trousers. Then he and Rhiannon escaped..."

"And lived happily ever after?"

"No, then he actually turned out to be Tristan's evil twin Sebastian."

"Is there any reason that--"

"Harry!" A voice, urgent and anxious-sounding, cut across their conversation. Harry twisted around and looked up in surprise. Hermione stood in the open portrait hole. She carried a sheaf of parchment in her hands: Harry recognized the copies of the *Liber-Damnatis* she had made earlier that day. Her face was as white as her dress.

It was Draco who stood up first, fluidly uncurling himself from the floor like smoke rising upward. "What is it, Hermione?"

"It's about Ron," she said. She stepped into the room and the portrait swung closed behind her. Her eyes were large and dark in her pale face. They swung beseechingly towards Harry as she spoke. "I'm afraid...I mean, I've found out...Harry, I think..." She took a deep breath, and said in a steadier voice, "I think I know what Lucius would want with him."

Harry stood up slowly. "What?"

"It's the last part of the Four Worthy Objects spell," Hermione said. "Remember how I said the last part of the spell requires a wizard's life blood?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, but I thought you said -- I mean, it said it required a *dark* wizard's life blood. Ron's not a dark wizard. Even if he wanted to be he isn't old enough to be one that was any *good*."

Hermione nodded. "The word is *Conjuretor* -- it means a powerful Dark wizard. But it means something else, as well."

Harry got slowly to his feet. Now he was facing Hermione, with Draco beside him. He resisted the urge to reach out and grab onto something for support. It was Draco who spoke before he did, asking the question to which Harry did not really want an answer. "What else does it mean?"

Hermione bit her lip. "It means *Diviner*," she said.

This time falling into the past was like falling into dark water; it closed over her head, and for a moment she thought she was drowning. When she came out of it, gasping and on her knees, his voice was the first thing Ginny heard.

"Oh, I don't know about *that*." He sounded desultory and amused, but the tones were the same -- carefully lazy, softly alert. "It is not as hard to raise the dead as you might think."

Ginny raised her head, blinking the dizziness away. She was kneeling in the narrow aisle between two tall shelves of books. The stacks must have been arranged differently fifty years in the past. And it was lucky for her, because the shelves hid him from the view of whoever else was in the room. Tom's voice had come from somewhere to her left; she cautiously leaned to the side and glanced through a gap between two books.

The library was dimly lit by candles; the torches seemed to have been blown out. A number of the longer reading tables had been pulled together in the center of the room to form a T shape, and around them sat a group of students in their school robes. Most appeared to be

Slytherins, although here and there the blue of Ravenclaw was visible. There seemed to be no Hufflepuffs among them, and no Gryffindors.

"But, Tom -" protested a girl in blue Ravenclaw robes, who looked vaguely familiar to Ginny, "You know it's impossible, really."

"Very little is impossible, Priscilla," said the voice Ginny would never forget if she lived to be three hundred. A cool, unhurried, serpentine voice that wound you in its coils and refused to let you go. She shivered, hearing it, as if a snake had slithered over her grave. She stood on her tiptoes and tried to gaze over the books but she could not properly see him. Only the edge of a black cloak, a slim white hand moving as it gestured. "There are certain methods of ...sympathetic magic, by which a soul might be bound or retained and later transferred to a useful vessel. Such a preserved entity is very hard to destroy. A kind of immortality, if you like. Such spirits are easy to summon back. And then, of course, there are cruder methods of necromancy. In those cases, however, the dead rarely come back as one might remember them..."

The boy at Tom's left chuckled. "Zombies," he said.

The girl Tom had called Priscilla shuddered delicately. "Zombies are so messy," she said. "Dropping foul bits of themselves everywhere. Lucius says that --"

"He says a lot of things," said a brown-haired boy with a sharp, irritable air. "Most of them are doubtless lies."

Tom's tone was cool when he spoke again. "What do you mean by that, Avery?"

"I'm talking about Lucius Malfoy," said the boy called Avery, sounding aggrieved. "He's only a child and he talks as if he were in on all your plans, Tom. But he's too young to be one of us. It's irritating."

"Lucius may be only thirteen," said Tom. "But his family name is a thousand years old. Malfoy Manor counts its birthdays in centuries. Their vaults in Gringotts, their castles in Romania, their wealth and connections, all outweigh the disadvantages of Lucius' youth."

"He's arrogant," said Avery, a hard note in his voice.

"We are all of us arrogant, Avery," Tom replied. There was a slight edge to his voice. "If nothing else, Lucius would be useful for his access to the perfect unplottable headquarters."

"That enchanted castle in Romania that he's always going on about, that no one can get into or out of?" Avery sounded dubious. "I think he made that up."

"I know that he did not." Tom's voice was still clear and soft, but with an undercurrent of annoyance. "In any event, I think we have all said what needs to be said this evening. If no one else has anything to add, I say we adjourn this meeting. Priscilla, if you don't mind, I'd like you to stay behind."

To Ginny's relief, no one had anything else to add. With murmured good nights, they all filed out, all but Tom and the girl Priscilla, who sat with her chin on her hand and looked at Tom while the others departed. He did not look at her, but seemed engaged in studying a speck on his shirt cuff.

"Miss Clearwater," he said at last, and she jumped. "You're a girl, aren't you?"

"Yes, Tom," said Priscilla, in something of a breathy voice, looking a bit as if she'd just been told they'd be holding Christmas twice this year. Behind the row of books, Ginny rolled her eyes.

"Then you must have something like a hand mirror," he said, and there was the tinge of a drawl to his voice; it made him sound like Draco. "I need one for a spell."

"Oh, I -" She looked flustered. "I haven't got one with me, but I could go and get one."

"Yes," said Tom. "Why don't you do that."

She left, casting a glance back at Tom as she went. He did not appear to notice. Instead, he stood up, and waved a lazy hand at the tables: they rearranged themselves instantly, like obedient pets. Ginny could see him now more fully, the angular white face like a pale fingerprint between the black hair and black collar of his cloak. She watched, fascinated, as he

Summoned various objects to himself, so swiftly that it seemed as if they were appearing out of thin air. A silver bowl, a brass-bladed letter opener, an hourglass, a stoppered vial. Watching him do magic was like watching an artist paint. His movements were beautiful in their economy and swift effect. She wondered if Harry and Draco could have done magic like this, had they ever bothered to learn to master their Magid powers.

She watched as he caught the stoppered vial out of the air and set it down carefully on the table. And then, he raised his hand a last time, and out of the air he caught a small black book.

The cover was no longer tattered. The letters across it stood out clear and gilded. Ginny felt her stomach drop out, and for a moment the solid ground beneath her feet seemed to turn to mist. She held on tightly to the shelf in front of her.

He set the book down on the table, and looked at it ruminatively. Then he drew the silver bowl towards himself, and lifted the letter opener in his left hand. He placed the blade against his palm, and slowly closed his hand around it. The expression on his face did not change, but Ginny winced for him as clear red fluid seeped between his clenched fingers and dripped into the bowl. The drops fell slowly, one by one, and Ginny imagined that the silver bowl rung like a bell as they struck it.

When enough blood had spilled, Tom drew his hand back, took a strip of linen from his pocket, and bound the cut methodically. Then he lifted the black diary from the table. He dipped the fingers of his uninjured hand into the bowl, and flicked a spatter of blood across the diary's cover. When he spoke it was in a sibilant whisper.

As thou art bound

Let us be bound.

Thee to me --

The diary threw upward a single flash of light; for a moment it illuminated his face and Ginny's stomach contracted in recognition. That heart-shaped face framed by its black hair, the narrow mouth and angular eyes were so familiar. So loved and so hated.

"Oh, *Tom!*"

Both Tom and Ginny jumped; Tom spun around, dropping the diary. Priscilla Clearwater had come quietly into the library; she stood just inside the wards, pale and hesitant. "Your hand..."

Tom set the bloody letter opener down on the table in front of him, and frowned at her fiercely. "Did you bring me the mirror?"

"I..I didn't, no. As soon as I got downstairs, Professor Coulter said he had to see you right away. He sent me off to get you."

Tom's face hardened. "This had better be important, Miss Clearwater."

"He says it is," she said, and held the library door open for him.

Tom sighed. Then, wrapping his injured hand in a fold of his cloak, he followed her.

The door shut behind them. Ginny stood still for a moment, her knees gone to water. The bitterness of the memories seeing him had evoked in her was frightening, but what was more frightening was that not all the memories were bitter. In the beginning, he had been only words on a page to her. Then a voice in the night, speaking to her while she dreamed. And then a face, to match the voice. She had not been surprised that he had turned out to be beautiful. She had never thought he could be anything else. She remembered Elizabeth looking up from a romance novel and smiling dreamily, "Boys in books are just better." And Ginny had laughed.

But that was before he had taught her the truth: that love was betrayal and beauty an illusory lie. Despite herself, she heard Seamus' voice in her head: *You want someone who'll treat you badly, who doesn't really love you, who wants to hurt and humiliate you. Who lies to you. Who treats you like you're a stupid little girl. Where did you learn that was what you wanted?*

From you, Tom, she thought remotely. *But I'm not eleven years old any more.*

She stepped out from behind the bookshelf, and walked over to the table with a quick stride. She did not look back.

"But," Harry said blankly, "but Ron, I mean, he's hardly a Diviner at all, he's never Divined anything..."

"You don't know that," said Draco. He tried to keep his voice as even and emotionless as possible. It was difficult. The blank look in Harry's eyes frightened him, and the knowledge that neither of them would want to hear anything he might have to say about Ron tapped at the back of his mind. He felt suddenly shut out, even though Harry was still standing right beside him. "He might have..."

"And lied to me about it?" Harry's voice sparked with bitterness. "I suppose that's certainly possible."

"Or just not known what it was or not wanted to talk about it," Draco said. "Not everything is about you, Potter."

For a moment Harry's eyes sparked as well, their unlikely green color as suddenly bright as smashed window glass. Then he nodded. "I know. You're right. It's just..."

"Just it still seems like if he wanted a Diviner, he could have found someone other than Weasley, yes," said Draco. "I won't claim that hurting you wouldn't have been an attractive side benefit for him. He does hate you."

"But you don't think he's...bait, then?" Hermione asked from her place on the stairs.

"If he was just bait for Harry," said Draco, raising his eyes to look at her, "then why go through so much effort to make Harry hate him?"

Hermione's lips parted as she looked at him, her eyes darkening. "Because it doesn't matter," she whispered. "Harry is Harry...he'd go after Ron regardless."

"Ahem," said Harry. "I'm still here. And I don't hate Ron."

Hermione's head whipped to the side and she stared at him. "You don't?"

He shook his head. "No. I hate what he did, but...I think you were right. I think it might not have been his fault."

Draco felt something inside himself twist slightly - he knew without needing a fuller explanation, what Harry meant. He knew Harry could not quite understand how Ron might have allowed himself to be compelled in such a way, knew that Harry felt that there must, somehow, in Ron, have been some underlying desire to betray his friend that had simply been played on by outside forces. Knew that Harry could not really understand what had happened but would forgive Ron anyway - and it was so like Harry, wasn't it, to be able to forgive without needing to understand.

I would never forgive, Draco thought. If I were him - never.

Hermione expelled a long breath, and then she had dropped her books on the floor and had run at Harry, flinging her arms around him, hugging him tightly. He caught her as if this were the most natural thing in the world, and stroked her hair.

Draco began to feel that perhaps he ought to go somewhere.

"I think I'm going to go somewhere," he said, backing towards the door slightly. Harry and Hermione broke apart and turned to look at him. Their hands were interlaced.

"Where?" said Harry.

"Somewhere that's...else?" Draco hazarded.

Harry's eyes widened. "Like where? Do you want me to walk you back to the infirmary?"

"No." Draco tried to think of a place no one would be able to accompany him. "I'm going to take a bath," he said with all the dignity he could muster.

"You just washed your hair," Harry pointed out. "How many baths do you need?"

"Well," said Draco, lamely. "You know."

Hermione looked confused.

Draco thought irritably at Harry, *Look, I'm trying to leave you alone together. Why must you be so difficult all the time?*

Leave us alone? But why?

Don't be dense.

"That's right," said Hermione aloud, "just telepathize away. Don't mind me, standing here watching you two make faces at each other. HONESTLY."

Draco ignored this. *This is about you and Ron and Hermione, not about me. I think you two need to talk and you don't need me around making it awkward.*

But I do need you, Harry said, looking confused.

You need something, Potter, Draco thought, and turned away to the portrait door. *But don't ask me to tell you what it is.*

Ginny had made her calculations carefully: it would take Tom at least ten minutes to get down to the Slytherin dungeons, and ten minutes to get back. Add another five minutes at least to talk to Professor Coulter (who she knew from her parents had been the Head of the Slytherin House before Snape) and she had at least twenty-five minutes. Which was fine, as she doubted she'd need more than five.

Still, it seemed to take an age for her to walk across the library and arrive at the table strewn with Tom's things. Well, perhaps strewn wasn't the word. They were carefully arranged, the blank little diary next to the vial (it had ink in it, she could see that now), the stained blade beside the bowl of blood.

She stood for a moment frozen, her hand extended over the table towards the silver bowl. This was what she had come for, of course. Tom's blood. But then again -- *Tom's blood*. Her heart beat a rhythmic tattoo of inquiry against her ribcage. *What do you think you're doing, Virginia Weasley?*

This is so far beyond you. This is huge. This is Tom Riddle we're talking about here. Do you really think this is a good idea?

She pushed the voices down and reached for the bowl. Then she blinked. *Okay, I can't go flinging myself through time with a bowl full of blood. I need some kind of...container. Where the hell is that vial I packed? Think, Ginny. Think.*

Half swearing under her breath, she reached into her pocket and began emptying it onto the table. Both the books she carried everywhere were in there -- she set the *Liber-Damnatis* on the table, and put the diary on top of it. She *had* brought a vial, she knew she had -- she dug down deeper into her pocket --

-- and the library door slammed open. Heart splintering in terror, Ginny threw out a hand to keep herself from falling. Her right elbow jogged hard against hit the table, which shuddered; the bowl overturned itself, drenching the books she had set down next to it with blood.

Oh, no. No, no no. How could he possibly have gotten back so quickly? It's barely been a minute --

She raised her eyes. He was a shadow in the doorway, backlit by the torchlight from the corridor outside. She could see only the outline of him: cloak and hair and angled shoulders. There was a slighter shadow next to him. "Priscilla," he was saying, "if you ever send me on a wild goose chase like that again, I shall be very displeased with you --"

Ginny fumbled the tattered diary off the table with numb fingers --and stared. The blood that had splashed on it had vanished the way that ink had once vanished into its pages. It was spotless. Her astonishment loosened her grip, and she dropped the diary at her feet.

Oh, no.

She went to her knees, scrabbling at the little black book, jamming it into her pocket. She could hear the girl's voice growing closer. "Tom, I'm so sorry, he said he'd be right there -- Tom, what is it? What's wrong? You look so strange --"

Ginny jerked her head up. And bile rose into the back of her throat. Tom Riddle was standing less than three feet away from her, a look of utter, blank astonishment on his face. He froze where he was, and stared at her.

And Ginny stared back, rigid, unable to move. She had only to reach for the Time-Turner around her neck, she knew. It promised certain and immediate escape. And yet she couldn't move.

"Tom...?" said Priscilla, uncertainly. Several steps behind Tom, it was apparent that she could not see Ginny.

He did not turn around. "Stay outside the wards, Priscilla. Don't come forward. Good. Now turn around and get out of here, if you know what's good for you."

Apparently Priscilla did know what was good for her -- she gave a startled squeak, but obeyed him. Tom did not look away from Ginny, not even when the library door opened, and then closed behind the departing Ravenclaw girl. Nor did Ginny move. She stayed where she was, on her knees, as he took another step forward. The faint candlelight picked out the angles and shadows of his face, the round youthful chin, the long mouth and longer eyes. She had seen him before, of course, but never up close like this, never alive like this. Never with a pulse that beat at the base of his throat, lips that twitched nervously, spots of burning color on his cheekbones. Never real.

"You're a ghost," Tom said, speaking less to her than to himself. "You must be."

Oh God, does he know me? Ginny thought, her heart almost crystallizing inside her chest -- but no, in his eyes there was no recognition at all. Eyes so blue they were nearly black: eyes the color of the flames that might dance along the edge of a live coal. How could she have forgotten the color of his eyes?

"How else could you get past the wards?" he said, and now there was the beginning of an edge to his voice. A clear, fine edge, the edge of a glass knife. "The spells on them are *perfect*. I invented them myself." His eyes narrowed. "Oh, but you're no ghost after all," he murmured, eyes dropping to her throat. "You're breathing." He paused, eyes narrowing. "For the moment."

That unlocked Ginny's frozen limbs. Her hand flew up of its own accord, scrabbling for the Time-Turner around her throat.

Tom was too quick for her. His white hand flashed out, and she felt the chain jerked from her neck, lifted over her head. The Time-Turner sailed through the air and he caught it as handily as Harry might catch the Snitch. Helpless now, she stared up at him as he opened his hand and gazed at the small gold hourglass lying on his palm.

"What magic is this?" he demanded. His voice was a low hiss. "Is this how you got past the wards? You're no student here. I've not seen you before, and I never forget a face. And you went for this the moment you saw me. But it's not a Portkey...so what is it?"

She was silent.

His mouth curved into a smile, curling up at the corners like burning paper. "Then I suppose I'll just have to experiment with it a bit myself," he said. "See what it does, this little talisman."

"No -- oh *no*." Her protest burst out of her. She could not prevent it. "Tom --"

"I don't recall saying you could call me that." His arrogant boy's voice cut across hers, silencing her. In that moment he had something of Draco about him -- something to the tilt of his chin, the angle of his smiling-yet-not-smiling mouth was like Draco's. The shape of their eyes, too...but then, in other respects, he was just like Harry. If Draco and Harry could have been somehow combined, all their worst qualities married together into one person, perhaps the end result would have looked a bit like Tom Riddle. "So you know me," he said. "You know my name. Who are you? Not a student. Some Gryffindor's sister, sent to spy --"

"I'm *not* a spy."

"Then what are you doing here? No one at this school has the power to break my wards -- perhaps that fool Dumbledore --"

Ginny flinched away from the cold fury in his voice. With the speed of a striking snake, he flung out a hand and caught at her arm, jerking her to her feet. His touch lanced through her with a terrible sort of ecstatic pain

that was like the pleasure of biting on a broken tooth. He yanked her towards him by the wrist, his other arm snaking around her waist.



He held her pressed against him, as close as a lover might, but his hands on her body were like ten sticks of ice. A sick faintness closed over her as he whispered against her neck, "How much did you see? How long have you been inside these wards, watching? How much of your mind needs erasing, little brat, little spying *Gryffindor* brat --"

Pain shot through her arm as his grip tightened on her wrist until she was sure she could feel the bones inside grinding together. A little wail of agony escaped her throat.

A look of smug satisfaction flashed across his face. He bent his head to whisper in her ear, his mouth near her throat as if he meant to drink from it. "Did that hurt?" he murmured; his breath was cold against her skin. "*Crucio* of course has a certain...traditional elegance, but sometimes the simplest methods are the best ones. Don't you find?" he added conversationally, then, tightening his grip, slammed her hand hard into the side of the table.

Pain like a spearpoint of agony shot through her and she heard as well as felt a bone in her hand splinter.

"*Tell me*," he hissed at her, and she knew he meant *tell me how you got past my wards* but what she heard was his old voice, the soft, caressing voice of her child's dreams, *tell me Ginny tell me what you're thinking hoping dreaming nobody understands you but me nobody will ever love you like I do you'll never belong to anyone else never I promise you never* --- and the pain of that old betrayal was worse than the pain in her hand, and it gave her strength. Without even stopping to think what she was doing, she leaned back and spat in his face.

She could have done nothing that would have astonished him more. He jerked away, his grip on her loosening momentarily. "You --" he began, but she had torn herself free of his grasp, had spun away -- he reached for her -- and she swung her fist at him, hard, a high arcing swing that caught him square in the solar plexus and doubled him up. She heard him shout something at her but she didn't care -- she was running, running as fast as she could towards the library door. Something parted around her like invisible wet curtains drawing back and she knew she'd broken through the wards and was outside them. She heard Tom shout behind her and then she was at the library door and had thrown it open and she hurled herself through it and --

Directly into someone standing on the other side. She shrieked aloud and cringed back, terrified it was another of Tom's Slytherin minions -- then her mouth fell open as a familiar voice spoke to her out of the dimness.

"Please," said Dumbledore. "There is no need for banshee imitations. You are quite safe."

She gaped up at him. It was most certainly Dumbledore, though the hair she knew as snow-white was auburn now, and there were fewer wrinkles around the pale blue eyes. Despite his light words, there was a look of grave and stern concern on his face. He laid a hand on Ginny's shoulder and spoke again, looking past her:

"Master Riddle," he said. "There are regulations against running in the library, you know."

Tom drew in a little gasping breath, audible even at this distance. Ginny turned slowly and looked back at him. Even now it was like looking at the sun: he burned her eyes. He stood where he was, suddenly less terrifying than he had been a moment ago. He seemed an ordinary boy now, school tie askew, sweaty and disheveled. He had been correct about his wards, she saw without much surprise: behind him, the library looked empty and undisturbed. "I'm sorry, sir," he said, his voice even. "But this girl -- she's not a student --"

"Yes, I know that," Dumbledore said. "And now, Master Riddle, if you please. Give young Miss Weasley back her necklace and we will trouble you no longer."

"*Grimoire*," Draco said.

Nothing happened. The door to the Slytherin common room remained tightly closed.

Draco seethed inwardly. Was it his fault he hadn't been paying attention lately when the new password was assigned? He had *things* on his mind. Saving the world type things. And Pansy made them change the password every two weeks these days, usually to something deeply inane. Cursing Pansy, Draco restrained himself from kicking the dungeon door.

"*Pureblood*," he muttered through his teeth. That was a popular one, and usually got hauled out of retirement every few months or so. No dice this time, of course. "Um. *Muggle-bait*. No. Okay. *Wormwood*. *Basilisk*. *Slytherin Pride*. Um. I suppose '*Die Mudblood die!*' is too long. Oh, fuck. Pansy, you useless bint."

"*Doppelganger*," said a voice behind him.

The door swung open.

Draco turned around and looked behind him. It was Snape, looking even greasier and more haggard than usual.

"Never let it be said that the stolid Miss Parkinson does not have a sense of humor of a sort," said Snape. "What brings you down from the infirmary, Draco?"

Draco shrugged. "Hey, Professor. I wanted to get a few things from my room. I'm tired of living out of my suitcases."

Snape nodded. "Run along, then."

Draco bit back the response that Malfoys did not run, and went on his way with dignity. A few minutes alone in his room was sufficient. When he emerged, freshly changed into a worn and comfortable t-shirt, Snape was standing in the Slytherin common room, looking spectrally thoughtful.

"Before you return to the infirmary, Draco, there was something I wanted to speak to you about."

"That's all right." Draco shrugged. "I wanted to ask you something, too."

"Ah?" Snape cocked an eyebrow. "And what was that?"

"I want to know about the poison," Draco said. "I want to know about the symptoms, and how long I have left. I know what my father told me, but I'd rather hear it from you."

A look of surprise passed across Snape's face. He put a hand out, and rested it atop the back of the nearest couch. "I respect your wish to know," he said. "But I am not sure how it would be useful --"

"It would be useful," Draco said quietly. "Surely you know me well enough to understand that I'd rather know. And I know you won't lie."

Snape sighed. "Very well," he said. "But I will tell you one thing first. If, when I'm done explaining this to you, you want me to cast a Memory charm on you so you can forget it, I will. Is that understood?"

A wave of light-headedness passed over Draco. "Yes," he said. "I understand."

Snape's eyes darkened. Then he leaned back against the wall and began to speak. Telling Draco, in a flat and even voice, what would happen to him if no antidote was found. What the symptoms would be. How long it would take. What he could expect. Draco half heard him. The other half of him was remembering his father. Being taken hunting with his father when he was eight years old. Hunting the way Lucius did it: aiming the curses to maim the animals but not kill them, or to kill slowly. And then the hours of waiting, watching, observing the death. Lucius had wanted to get his son accustomed to death, for one loves what one is accustomed to, or so went his reasoning. Once Lucius had dismounted beside a dying hippogryff, thrashing its last breaths out in a bank of scarlet snow. He had steeped his gloves in the blood and, rising, put them to either side of Draco's face, leaving crimson handprints where they touched. *And what do you say to me now, Draco?*

Thank you, father.

The blood had gotten in his mouth. It had not tasted like blood at all, more like burned sugar.

Draco had thought his father was wonderful then. And knew he was somewhere now, watching his son's own slow death, holding his gloved hands away this time, not wanting to get them bloodied. The poison would do his death-work for him.

"Thank you," said Draco, when Snape was done explaining. He saw the Potions Master looking at him anxiously. "I appreciate you telling me the truth."

"Do you want a Memory Charm?" Snape asked.

Draco shook his head. "No. I don't need it." He felt the side of his mouth twitch into what was nearly a smile, looking at the expression on Snape's face. "I can stand it," he said. "I was imagining worse."

Snape nodded somberly. "Sometimes I forget," he said. "Because you are so young. But you are Lucius Malfoy's son, after all. I imagine you have seen things that would make most children's nightmares look like peaceful daydreams."

Now Draco did smile. "Am I a child? I didn't think I was."

Snape did not reply. Instead he drew a clear glass flask from his cloak and held it out to Draco. "Speaking of nightmares," he said. "This was what I wanted to talk to you about. Another side effect of the poison is sleep disturbance. You may find yourself having peculiar dreams. This is a *Somnolus* potion. It will give you dreamless, instant sleep."

Draco accepted the flask. "Thank you. I appreciate it." He turned and crossed the room to the door, then paused there, and turned back to Snape. "Professor -- before I go back to the infirmary, I was wondering --"

"Yes?"

"Do the others know everything you just told me? Does Harry?"

Snape's mouth twisted into a thin line. "You have other things to worry about besides Potter and his delicate sensibilities, Draco," he snapped, surprising Draco with his vehemence. "Do not waste your remaining energy on him."

Draco blinked. "Professor, with all due respect. Harry is --"

"Your friend?" Snape's tone was suddenly cool and slippery as glass. "Or just someone whom you allow to lead you around?"

Draco paused with his hand on the dungeon door. "He doesn't lead me around," he said, his fingers on the bronze bolt. He felt slightly feverish and suddenly longed for a cool windowpane to lean his cheek against. "I want to go where he goes. It's not the same thing."

Snape looked almost surprised, but said nothing. Draco pushed the door open and went out into the corridor. It was dank and almost cold down here, especially when the door closed behind him. He leaned back against the nearest wall and unscrewed the top of the flask Snape had given him. When he took a sniff of the sharp-scented liquid a wave of dizziness rolled over him, as if he'd taken a mouthful of Archenland wine.

His grip tightened on the flask, and he thought about the steps up to the infirmary, his bed there, and how much he wanted to fall asleep and dream nothing, remember nothing. Just for a small while. Surely he'd earned a little piece of oblivion.

He began to climb the steps.

"I still don't understand," Ginny said softly, "how you know who I am."

She sat on a hard chair in front of Dumbledore's desk, her eyes on her hands. Her left hand was swelling up and turning black along the side. It hurt to even try to close it. She was sure Tom had shattered a bone there but it did not seem very important at the moment.

"I wish I did not know who you were," Dumbledore said. His voice was even. His right hand rested gently atop the Time-Turner which sat on the desk before him. The light in the office was not bright: it was a small office, an office for a Transfigurations professor. The Time-Turner gleamed a dull gold under his touch. "But the truth is, I have been expecting you, Miss Weasley."

"How could you possibly have been?" Ginny felt too stunned to be bewildered, but she wondered if she had perhaps heard him wrong. "I shouldn't even be here."

"No, you should not be here. That is very true." At the tone in his voice, Ginny glanced up and then wished she hadn't. The look in his eyes was more than somber: it was wearily despairing. "But the fact remains that you did make this journey. And in doing so..."

"Have I changed history?" she whispered.

Dumbledore looked, for a moment, amused. "That would depend on what you mean by history," he said. "If you are asking if everything you know will be altered when you return to your own present -- no, it will not. If you are asking if you have changed my future, the future of young Master Riddle -- why yes. You have indeed."

"Tom." Ginny squeezed her eyes shut tightly. "Professor Dumbledore, sir - I have to warn you about him. He's not what you think, he's --"

"No." He spoke sternly. "I do not want to hear about the future, Miss Weasley. I know more than I should already."

"But he's going to *kill people* --"

"Be *quiet*." Dumbledore's voice, though quiet, was like a whip cracking across her face; she flinched back. "I cannot know these things, and if you insist upon telling me them I will Memory-Charm myself into forgetfulness before I can act upon my knowledge. I am deadly serious."

"Then you're just going to let them die?" she whispered.

"In your time are they not already dead?" Dumbledore sounded weary.

"Not all of them," Ginny said. "I just want to save the people I love."

Dumbledore sighed. "Time plays tricks upon us all, Miss Weasley," he said. "Should you succeed in altering history, the people you love might perhaps never be born. You might never be born. The truth is that I do not know why you are here. I received a message telling me of your impending visit, and requesting me to end it and return you to your own time. Certain .. clues within the missive indicated to me that the author was a particular person I happen to know and trust. Therefore, I am carrying out these instructions -- and, indeed, you are here as he said you would be. However, that is all that I desire to or should know of the future. It is now time for me to ensure that you return safely to your own time, and I intend to do so. Come here."

Ginny stood, cradling her injured hand, and went to Dumbledore's side. She bent her head and allowed him to slip the Time-Turner over her head. It fell against her chest and she shivered at the touch of cold glass

and metal. He glanced up at her, and she saw the deep concern in his light blue eyes. "And Tom..." she whispered.

"Time will put you beyond Tom Riddle," Dumbledore said. "And thank God for that. Tom never discounts an injury, and you made him look a fool. He will not soon forget it."

"No." Ginny half-shut her eyes, thinking of the look on Tom's face when Dumbledore had called her Miss Weasley. His eyes when he stared at her. He would not forget her, and no amount of time could put her beyond Tom. "No, he won't."

A look of concern passed over Dumbledore's face. "Miss Weasley..."

But her hand had gone to the Time-Turner and flipped it over. His concerned expression wavered before her and flickered out like a lamp as the spinning must caught her and flung her outward, her broken hand clutched protectively to her chest.

It took only eight chess games this time, to break through the block and allow him to see the future.

Perhaps it was because this time Ron was making a conscious effort to see ahead. He carefully threw his mind forward, visualizing the board the way it would be in five minutes. Ten minutes. After one move. After six. He moved the pieces as if it were automatic. He was winning. He didn't care.

Halfway through the first game he noticed that the green knight was missing. It had been replaced by a black piece. He did not ask why. He moved his pieces. The games went on.

"You are," said the Dark Lord, "doing very well."

Ron glanced up. "I need some water," he said, and went back to playing. A few moments later he found a glass of water at his right hand. He drank it and set the glass down and moved a piece and lost the game.

"Again," the Dark Lord said, and the eighth game began. Ron's hand was aching again as he slid his last piece forward and then the board exploded

into a thousand colors like a kaleidoscope blown apart and he caught at the back of his chair but he fell anyway.

The visions came more vividly now, less like dreams. He saw again the Ministry on fire, flames that bloomed like orange flowers from the shattered windows. He saw Hermione on her knees in some unfamiliar place; she clutched a silver flask to her chest as if it were something precious. For a brief moment, he saw Draco, standing in what looked like an alleyway, splashed with blood and dirt. His expression was one of utmost rage. And then he saw Lucius Malfoy with his face in his hands as if he were weeping -- but surely he couldn't be -- and barely had he digested the strangeness of this when it dissolved away and he saw instead a girl lying on a bed of torn clothes and tangled hair. And he knew, as immediately as he had ever known anything, that although he could not see her face, only the bright hair that shawled down over her, that it was Ginny and that she was dead.

He flung himself upward out of the vision with a hoarse cry and found himself back on the cold stone floor of the Dark Lord's castle. He started to get to his knees. Something knocked him back down. There were hands holding his arms. He tried to pull free but the grip was too strong. "Let me go," he shouted, hardly aware of what he was saying, "Let me go, I have to get to my sister, my *sister* --"

A hand clapped down over his mouth, cutting off his breath. He bit at it savagely and heard a yelp. He tasted satisfaction, and blood, before something hard came down sharply against the back of his head and all the lights went out.

She was cold. Dumbledore's beautiful office was warm: a fire burned in the grate behind the Headmaster's claw-footed desk. On his golden perch behind the door, Fawkes sang softly. The room smelled of treacle and Christmas.

But Ginny was cold. She'd been cold since she'd arrived back in the present, dumped unceremoniously on the floor of what was now a disused classroom. Dumbledore had been there, waiting for her. Expecting her. His blue eyes cool and stern. His beard white, as she had remembered it. He

had turned silently and she had followed him, her heart heavy with dread.

Ginny shivered now, and wrapped her arms around herself. Her hand ached dully; Dumbledore had healed it with a touch, but it still felt sore. The Time-Turner around her throat was cold. She could feel the icy line of the chain cutting into the back of her neck.

Dumbledore looked at her over his spectacles. He seemed remote to her, very far away. "Well, Ginny," he said. "Is there something else you'd like to tell me?"

Ginny unwrapped her arms from around her chest and gripped the sides of her chair. "I explained everything," she said dully. "Anyway, you already knew. You knew where I'd be tonight. You knew when I'd come back."

"True." Dumbledore leaned back in his chair and looked at her, his fingers templed under his chin. "After all, how could I not know? It was fifty years ago that I found Tom Riddle chasing a red-haired girl I had been warned to look out for out of an empty library. Of course now I know that it was hardly empty; he had it well-warded. Tom was always clever with wards."

"I tried to tell you," Ginny said, her voice listless. "You didn't want to listen..."

"No." Dumbledore's voice was cold. "I did not. You had caused enough damage to the fragile fabric of events as it was. All I could do was try to forget what you had told me. I could not of course ever entirely erase my suspicions of Tom Riddle. He managed to surprise me in the end, anyway. He surprised us all."

"You told me," Ginny said, shivering uncontrollably now, "that time would put me beyond Tom..."

"That," said Dumbledore, "was before Tom put himself beyond time." He paused and looked at her consideringly. There was no gentleness in his expression. "He remembered and hated you for years," he said. "How long he must have waited for you, the Weasley daughter. And then, just as you were born, Harry destroyed him. A bitter disappointment for the talented

Master Riddle. Still, he had Lucius Malfoy to carry out his revenge for him. Ever the loyal servant, our Lucius. Of course, Harry thwarted that, too. And now we come full circle to the cause of it all." Dumbledore held out his hand. "Give me the Time-Turner, Ginny."

Sick with misery, Ginny reached up and unclasped the chain. It slid into her hand like water, and she closed her hand around the cool hourglass. Her Time-Turner. The only thing that had ever made her special or powerful. "You knew," she whispered, feeling the cold glass against her fingers. "You knew I stole it...you've known all this time."

"Surely you realized we allowed you to steal it," Dumbledore said calmly. "You cannot imagine theft from the Stonehenge Museum would be so easily overlooked. When the alarm was set off...we knew. We let you take the Time-Turner. After all, I knew you would need to use it to make the journey you made today. Now, however, I would like it back. If you please..." And he held out his hand.

Weighted with despair, Ginny handed the Time-Turner over to him. He sat back, still holding it, the gold just visible through his fingers.

"You have not," he said, "yet told me why you felt today's journey was necessary. My assumption would be that you planned to do some harm to young Tom Riddle and thus prevent him from ever becoming Voldemort. Am I correct?"

Ginny shook her head. "I'm not that stupid," she said. Her voice sounded flat to her own ears. "I know you can't change the past like that." She turned her face and looked at the window that gave out onto the Quidditch pitch. Outside the sun was beginning to set, turning the pitch and the sky behind it the green-gold of tarnished copper. "I went back to when he made the diary he used on me because I knew he'd need to use a piece of himself to make it. Blood...a bit of his hair...whatever it was, I thought I could get it and make an Epicyclical Charm out of it. Like the one Harry has, that's got a chip from Draco's baby tooth in it. I've made one before. I could do it again. You can find someone with their Charm. We could have used it to find Voldemort with. Or if we destroyed it -- he might even die..."

Ginny let her voice trail off, and sat in silence, not looking at Dumbledore. Having said the plan aloud for the first time, she realized how utterly ridiculous it sounded and could barely stand to listen to her own voice.

When Dumbledore spoke, his voice was dry. "An interesting plan, lacking in exactly one particular. Do you know what that particular is?"

Mutely, not looking at him, Ginny shook her head.

"You cannot make an Epicyclical Charm for the Dark Lord." Dumbledore's voice was terrible in its truthfulness. "Because the Epicyclical Charm holds a piece of the soul of its object. What Harry wears around his neck is a bit of young Master Malfoy's soul; the spiritual energy that makes Draco who he is. But *the Dark Lord has no soul*. He bartered it away years ago for power. Should you attempt to make an Epicyclical Charm for him, it would melt and slip through your fingers like water."

Ginny raised her head. She looked at Dumbledore. She was sure her stricken realization must be written all across her face. But he did not look as if he pitied her. His face was full of the most terrible severity.

"I cannot guess at your motive for what you have done," Dumbledore said. "Perhaps, like your older brother, you desired glory and the adulation of your friends. Perhaps your hate for Tom Riddle is actually simply so great that it deprived you, if momentarily, of your reason. Perhaps you truly wished to aid in the fight against Voldemort. But I doubt that, for if that had been the case, there would have been no need for the secrecy which you employed. You put us all in danger with your thoughtless actions."

A long silence followed this. Ginny found she could think of no rebuttal at all, nor did she even wish to. She found herself thinking of Tom again, the real Tom this time, the blue-eyed demon who had thought nothing of breaking the bones in her hand to get her to tell him her secrets. Years later he would break down the walls of her heart and mind for the same purpose, and those, unlike her hand, would never be repaired. *I'm broken*, she thought, *broken and useless, everything I do turns out wrong...*

"I think, perhaps," Dumbledore said, more quietly, "that it might be time for you to return to your dormitory. For the rest of the holiday period, please consider yourself confined to the castle."

Ginny rose to her feet. There was a harsh pressure behind her eyes. "I'm sorry, Professor," she said.

"So am I," said Dumbledore. "You might think that because I allowed you to take the Time-Turner, it means that I tacitly approved of your actions. I did not. Time is a complicated entity, full of paradox and contradiction. But that does not mean you are not responsible for your actions. You very much are."

"I know," Ginny said. She felt suddenly exhausted. She reached for the door knob, then paused, and turned back to the Headmaster.

"Professor," she said quietly. "There's one thing..."

He raised his eyebrows. "Yes?"

"When you saw me in the library...when I was with Tom...you called me Miss Weasley."

Dumbledore said nothing.

"That's how he knew who I was, later, isn't it? I mean -- was it an accident? Why did you say my name in front of Tom?"

Dumbledore was silent. In the leaping light of the flames, his eyes were shadowed and his face seemed scored with a thousand lines. He looked old, tired and old. "Everything happens for a reason, Ginny," he said at last. "Everything."

Fragmented. That was how she felt. As if she had to walk very carefully as she made her way up the tower stairs because otherwise a yawning gap might open up in the floor beneath her feet, and she would tumble into it without warning.

She kept her hand against the wall, guiding her upwards. The portraits stared at her as she went by.

At the top of the stairs it took Ginny a moment to remember the Gryffindor password. The Fat Lady looked at her oddly when she finally recollected it.

"Shrivelfigs."

The portrait door swung wide.

Ginny stepped through, and into the common room. It took her a moment to realize what she was looking at. She saw Harry first, sitting on the edge of the sofa, and then she saw that he had his arms around Hermione. Hermione's face was against Harry's shoulder. She sprang away from him when the portrait door closed behind Ginny, and their two white faces turned towards her at once like the white pages of a book fluttering open.

"Ginny," Hermione breathed. Her eyes were large and dark. "Oh...Ginny."

Ginny stood still and stared at them. They seemed to her to be actors in a play, rehearsing some dramatic moment in which she had little interest. She was aware that Hermione had stood up and come over to her and that Harry had followed.

He looked pale and strangely shellshocked. He said to Hermione, "I'd better go and talk to Snape about the Memory Charm..."

Hermione nodded at him and he was gone without looking at Ginny. It was Hermione who turned back to her and began to speak, haltingly at first. Ginny felt as if she were drowning in the words that flooded from Hermione's mouth. Chess pieces, Memory Charms, the necessity of a Diviner's blood for Voldemort's spell. Somewhere inside her Ginny knew she was crying out but the cries seemed muffled in cotton wool. It was not until Hermione said her own name that the shaft of her words pierced the numbness surrounding Ginny.

"Ginny, I'm so sorry I was angry with you before about taking that book from the Manor," she was saying, her hand on Ginny's shoulder. "Without the copy I made of it, we'd never have found out any of these things. I'd never know how the ritual of the Four Worthy Objects works or that it

needs the blood of a Diviner. I doubt there's another book in the world with all that information in it...and I was so nasty to you about it. I'm really sorry, Ginny. And I'm sorry I got after you about returning it to the Manor, too -- did you send it back already?"

Ginny's hand went automatically to the pocket of her robe. She slipped her hand in and felt around for the *Liber-Damnatis*.

The pocket was empty.

Very slowly she removed her hand. When she spoke, her voice was calm. "I sent it off this afternoon," she said.

She remembered taking the things she had brought with her out of her pocket. Setting the *Liber-Damnatis* down on the library table, the diary on top of it.

"Oh." Hermione gave her a woebegone smile. "I was just worried."

"I understand," Ginny said.

She remembered picking the diary up, dropping it. Kneeling down to get it. And then Tom, coming into the wards, driving all other thoughts from her head.

"Well, don't worry, Hermione," she said calmly. "I took care of it."

She remembered running out of the library, not stopping to look back to see Tom. Or to see the book she had left there on the table, next to the overturned bowl that had held his blood. The book she had forgotten.

"Thank you." Hermione's voice was soft. "And about Ron -- obviously we don't have any proof of anything; Harry thought we should talk to you first, and of course we'll..."

But Ginny had stopped listening. Only a supreme effort allowed her to remain outwardly composed. Waves of horror were breaking over her -- small waves still, lapping at her feet, but soon they would be enormous breakers, crashing over her head, blinding and deafening. She wanted to get away before that. She had to.

"I think I should go upstairs," Ginny said abruptly. "I need to lie down."

She was aware of Hermione protesting.

"I'm fine," Ginny said. "I'm really fine. I just want to be alone for a bit."

"Ginny..."

It didn't matter. She had turned away from Hermione and was running up the stairs to the boys' dormitory. She was aware that Hermione would be wondering where the hell she was going, but she didn't really care. Let her wonder. It didn't matter. Ginny fled down the hall to the door at the end of it -- her brother's old room. Unlike the dormitory rooms, the Head Boy's room had a door that locked. She tore it open and flung herself inside, slamming the door closed behind her.

The room was dim in the fading sunlight and dust motes danced in the air. The bed was stripped bare, the mirror over the bed denuded of the photos which had once crowded the frame. The trunk at the bed's foot stood open and empty.

Leaning back against the door, Ginny could see herself reflected in the mirror on the opposite wall. Red hair, white face, the hem of her cloak splashed with rust-colored stains where some of Tom's blood had spilled.

Tom's blood.

Her heartbeat quickened to an almost unbearable pitch. It was hard to breathe. She pictured the Liber-Damnatis, remembered slipping it out of the bag and into her pocket that afternoon. And now it was gone, and she had left it in exactly the place where it should never have been left. Alone now she let her mind race ahead of her, realization blossoming into abject horror.

I left it there, right on the table with the rest of his things, he'll see it the first thing he does, as soon as he walks back to the table, he'll see it right there. He'll know I left it. He'll pick it up...

She sank down slowly against the wall, gathering the hem of her cloak in her hands, her head buried against her knees.

No wonder that was the book I picked up in the Manor, no wonder my hand went right to it, none of this would have happened if it hadn't been for me -- Tom would never have heard of the Four Worthy Objects if it hadn't been for me, and Ron--

This is all my fault.

She took a ragged breath, and lifted her head up off her knees. Without quite stopping to think about what she was doing, her hand slipped into the top pocket of her robe and drew out the diary. She looked at it for a long moment. It had been splashed with blood earlier that day; now it looked bare and clean. She remembered how it had once drunk up the ink she used to write in its pages, vampirizing her thoughts, draining out her dreams. She'd written in it so trustingly. Tom, where are you Tom? I waited for you, looked for you all day.

She remembered the boy in the library. His pale face, heart-shaped under its cloud of dark hair, the blue eyes the color of blindness. The hands that burned with cold heat where they touched her.

I heard you call me, Tom, this afternoon in the corridor. I ran so fast I thought I'd die, but you weren't there. You're never there. Where are you?

Her hands tightened on the book. Somewhere in the past, Tom Marvolo Riddle was sitting down to examine the book she'd left there for him so conveniently. Somewhere he was reading all about the Four Worthy Objects and the power they conferred. Somewhere his twisted clever brain was pondering the feasibility of obtaining these objects. Somewhere he was wondering how to get hold of a Diviner. How to drain out their blood. Somewhere he was thinking that someday, when he had enough power, he would do this.

You don't talk to me any more, Tom. Did I do something? Are you tired of me? Talk to me, Tom. Talk to me, please.

With a sharp exhalation of breath that was like a sob, Ginny tightened her hands on the book and ripped at it -- the binding was strong, and it took two tries before the first handful of pages tore themselves out. She hurled them away from her, and went back to work on the diary, clawing at it with a terrible dry fierceness that hurt like tears. In fact, she was also crying, although she did not realize that until later -- her tears spilling

down onto the diary as she shredded it apart, and the sound of her own weeping drowned out the sound of tearing pages and another sound too, a sound that rose from the crumpling pages, a soft sound that was very much like mocking laughter...



Harry almost didn't stop by Snape's office to ask him about Memory Charm removal potions. Later, he would be glad that he had. Much later than that, he would be less glad.

It was immediately evident to him when he walked into the office that Snape was furious. With him, he suspected, and tried to apologize for having missed their appointment that morning. Snape, however, was having none of it. "Speak your piece, Potter," he snarled, his pale face gone even paler with rage. "What do you want?"

Harry explained, whilst Snape looked at him with loathing, as if he were a particularly repellent fungus.

"There are no potions that remove Memory Charms, as you would know had you ever paid attention in my classes," said Snape, when Harry had finished. "Not without damaging the brain of the subject. Not, I suppose, that one could tell the difference with you, Potter."

Harry bit back his annoyance. "I *know* that," he said. "But Hermione thought there might be a potion that would at least let us know definitely if I'm under an *Obliviate* spell or not. She said it would ease her mind," he added, knowing that Snape actually had a grudging respect for Hermione and might do this for her sake, even if he wouldn't have for Harry's.

Snape gave him a long, inscrutable look. Then he turned away and crossed the room to the cabinet behind his desk. From it he took a slender blue bottle. He closed the cabinet door and came across the room to Harry. Harry jerked away in shock as Snape slammed the flask down on the table in front of him with such enormous force that a single long crack appeared in the glass, bisecting it from top to bottom.

"Take it, Potter," he said, through his teeth. "And in the meantime, is there anything else I can help you with? A *Somnolus* Potion so you can sleep at night?"

Harry, startled by the sound of cracking glass and even more by Snape's comment, blinked and stared. "What?"

"You heard me." Snape loomed above Harry like an enormous black bat, his thin lips curled in disgust. "I was beginning to think you might not be exactly like your father. I realize now that that was a vain expectation."

Harry's fingers tightened on the edge of the table. "My father," he said slowly. "My father was brave and kind and honorable. I *wish* I was just like him."

"Your father." Snape's voice was a dagger. "Your father was a complacent, selfish, unfeeling idiot. He assumed that because everyone loved him, he must therefore deserve that love. And look at everyone who loved him; where are they now? Your mother -- dead. Sirius Black -- twelve years in Azkaban. Remus Lupin -- dragging through life as an unemployable failure. Peter Pettigrew --"

"Pettigrew never loved my parents!" Harry flung back, incensed. "And none of those things were my father's fault! He didn't ask for any of that to happen!"

"Of course he didn't," Snape sneered. "And you --look at you. He damaged you along with all the rest, left you orphaned, an outcast among Muggles. And yet instead of blaming him you aim to follow in his footsteps and leave behind you your own trail of dead."

"My own *what?*" Harry couldn't believe his ears. Snape had said horrible things to him before, dozens of times, but never anything quite like this.

"You know what I mean," said Snape, his voice sharpening to a needle point. "Don't pretend that you don't know that what you've done to Draco is unconscionable."

Harry had been ready, with protestations and objections, to defend himself and his father, but this punched the breath out of him. He stared at Snape, trying to form a response, but the Potions professor silenced him with a fierce glare.

"Do you want to hear the symptoms of the poison?" Snape hissed. "The poison you seem to think it will be so easy to find an antidote for -- so easy that I don't even need your assistance, so why bother showing up to help me? Do you *want* to know what will happen to Draco if an antidote is not found?"

Harry couldn't quite get enough air into his lungs to answer this. Something was compressing his ribcage.

"The symptoms," said Snape, now in his driest classroom voice, "are as follows: lassitude and weakness first. Then loss of balance and coordination. As the toxins break down his muscles and organs he will begin to feel some pain. His magical ability will suffer. His ability to heal will desert him and at that point even a minor cut might prove fatal. He is already experiencing some dimming of his vision. Soon enough that will become blindness --"

"*Blindness?*" Harry gagged as a wave of nausea so intense it was nearly pain rose up and over him. The tabletop he was staring at seemed to explode in a thousand dizzying flecks of color, all flying apart. "I don't--"

"Blindness," said Snape again, his voice flat with a lethal finality. "After the loss of sight, things will progress rapidly. He'll have greater trouble staying alert until eventually he collapses into a coma. From that point on death will arrive inevitably within a matter of days. Perhaps you'll be around to hold his hand at that point -- knowing you, I doubt it -- but it won't matter. He won't know you're there. And then he'll die. Now," and Snape's voice dropped an octave, "does that mean anything to you, Potter, or do you accept it simply as the inevitable consequence of your own stupidity?"

Harry was still holding on to the tabletop but he could no longer see it properly. "You don't understand," he said unevenly. "I'd do *anything* --"

"You've done *enough*." Snape's voice cut through his like a knife snapping a slender cord. "Perhaps you could not have helped the initial enchantment which bound you to Draco but certainly you could have resisted taking advantage of his attachment to you. Just because someone would follow you into hell does not mean you have to send them there."

Harry blinked at Snape. Something tugged at him, something like a half-recalled memory or a dream. He swallowed. "I've never tried to hurt him," he said, hearing the weakness in his own voice. "Never. I've always --"

"You mean you've never thought about it," Snape said harshly. "How long did it take you to notice he was ill? He begged me not to tell you, not to spoil the wedding, and I refrained because I was not sure. But I myself

could see it in his face, although we spoke only briefly. I could see the shadow of approaching death. Where have you been looking, Potter, that you didn't see it? Not at Draco, for all you call him your brother, your friend. And now I suppose you're planning to drag him after you on some insane wild goose chase after Voldemort --"

"No." Harry was shaking now. "No, I told him I wouldn't go without him and I wouldn't go with him until he was better --"

"He packed his bags. Did you know that? I found them at the foot of his bed this morning. If you stay, he'll kill himself with guilt that he's the one thing keeping you here. And if you go without him, he will kill himself trying to follow you. He isn't strong enough--"

"I would never leave him while he was dying!" Harry shouted fiercely, his chin jerking up. "*Never*. But you're not giving me any choices -- any bloody choices at all -- stay or go, it doesn't matter, does it -- *what do you expect me to do?*"

Snape stood still a moment, looking at Harry. His black eyes were narrowed, but Harry could see, somehow, in Snape's expression, that underneath the sneering disdain some rusty part of him really did care about Draco. Really did want what was best for him. And that part of Snape Harry could not push away or deny or declare to be wrong, for in his heart he felt the same way. "I plan to find the antidote," Snape said at last. His voice was cool and for the first time, not ungentle. "And when I find it, I will come and tell you that I've found it. And you, Potter -- you will go away. *Without* Draco. This final battle, whatever it is, is *your* battle. If your other friends are stupid enough to wish to come with you, that is their lookout. But it will be a long time until Draco is entirely well again and he *needs rest*. He needs to be left alone. Since he was born, he has been someone else's puppet, a contrivance to be played with and put to use. His father's. Slytherin's. Ours. And now yours. Whether you use him in love or in hate, it hardly matters in the end. It is still *use*. Cut your ties with him and let him decide what use he wants to put himself to. Do that, and I might perhaps begin to believe that you are not in fact like your father. Do it, and I might begin to believe that you actually are his friend -- that he is not simply yours."

Shock has a way of crystallizing a moment. Harry looked at Snape, and seemed to see right through him, somehow, a blind imperfect seeing,

through to the truth of what the Potions master was saying. It made sense, in the way that one's greatest and worst fears always make sense, in the way that when they come true there is a recognition and realization that strikes at the heart -- as if one were greeting an old friend. *Oh, there you are. I knew you were coming. I've been expecting you.*

"All right," Harry said, and was startled by the clarity and steadiness of his own voice. "All right. I can do that."

Snape looked taken aback, so much so that in another world or time, Harry would have been pleased. "Do you think so? It will hardly be easy."

"Find the antidote," Harry said. He was barely aware of what he was saying. "I can't do that -- nobody else can -- you have to. And I don't care about *easy*. I just --" He broke off, and steadied himself against the table. He could feel the beat of his own heart, hard and painful, against the inside of his ribs. "You didn't like my father," he said. "And you thought he was selfish. But you didn't say he was a liar. He kept his word. And I keep my promises. I promise you, I'll do it. Just find the antidote and I'll--"

"This is not an *exchange*," Snape cut in, his tone severe. "I plan to find this antidote whether you keep your promises or not, Mister Potter. As for whether or not you are a liar, that remains to be seen."

"I don't care what you think of me," Harry said. He drew back from the table, straightening up. "I don't think much of you. And I hate it that I think you're right. And maybe you aren't. But I can't take that chance. I'll do it. But not for *you*." He raised his chin, looked steadily at Snape one last time. And for the first time in their long unpleasant acquaintance, Snape looked away first. "You *know* why," Harry said, almost in a whisper, and turned away.

He half expected Snape to call out to him as he went across the room to the dungeon door, and opened it, and went through. But Snape was silent. Harry shut the door behind him. He had made it almost halfway down the corridor before he had to run to the nearest window. He pushed it open and was violently and desolately sick into the cold winter air outside.

Slowly the darkness ebbed away and the room began to come back into focus for Ginny. The scattering pages of the diary, having already imbibed the spilled blood of Tom Riddle that day, proceeded to drink up the tears that spilled from Ginny's eyes and clung to her damp hands as she tore at them. She did not notice.

A soft noise, like the inhalation or exhalation of a breath, rose from the pages as they fluttered down around her, but Ginny, in the extremity of her hysteria, did not notice. "Tom," she sobbed aloud, ripping at the book's binding now, "I hate you Tom, I hate you, I hate you, I *hate you* --"

The binding came apart in her hands, rending itself in half with a sound like tearing flesh. A sticky dampness oozed from it -- half-coagulated ink. With a guttural noise, Ginny flung the ripped remains of the book away from her and buried her face in her stained hands, swaying back and forth. She did not see the light that rose from the broken binding, a pale echoing ghost of the light that had burst from the book when Tom Riddle had bound a piece of his soul into it fifty years before.

Ginny rocked herself. The metallic taste of ink and old parchment in her mouth was like the taste of blood. "Tom," she said again, whispering now into the darkness behind her hands. "Where *are* you, Tom...?"

All around her, the pages of the diary fluttered and rustled softly in the still air, like the wings of restless birds in the moments before a storm breaks.

The light of sunset came creeping slowly into the infirmary like blood spilling slowly into water, tinting the air scarlet. The west wall of windows gave out onto a rose-gray sky chased with the last threads of clouds, streaked gold and black. A sky full of spangles and tinder. One of the loveliest sunsets Harry had ever seen and he barely looked at it.

He had stopped in the center of the room upon coming in and now stood where he was, letting the bloody light coalesce around him. All the beds in the room were stripped bare except the one Draco lay on, several feet away, a huddled shadow in the dimming light.

The infirmary air was cool but not cold and the faint wind whispered to Harry of his own shortcomings, failures and blindness. He wanted Hermione -- wanted her with him, badly. But how could he tell her what Snape had just told him? She might hate him and either way it would break her heart. He wanted Ron. But Ron was gone and that was his fault, too. He wanted Sirius. But Sirius would try to prevent him from doing what he had to do. He wanted his parents. But they were dead.

And he wanted Draco. Wanted with a fierce drawing pull something he could not define but which Draco's mere conscious presence could give him and which nothing else precisely could. It was a wanting bad enough that he forced himself to stand in the middle of the room without moving until he was entirely sure that he could cross the room and stand next to Draco's bed and *not* shake him awake to demand comfort and consolation or even simply to be told in that deadly drawling voice that things were not really that bad.

They really *were* that bad. And he had let them get that way.

The light was darkening like old blood drying. Harry found he had crossed the room and was standing over Draco's infirmary bed and looking down at it and at the boy who lay on it, asleep. Draco's chest rose and fell lightly, stirring the blankets, but otherwise he was motionless, his cheek pillowed on his curled arm, his eyes shut fast.

Harry had often woken up to find Hermione propped on her elbow, looking down at him. Having never, to his recollection, had parents who stood over his bed looking down fondly at him while he slept, it had always seemed odd to him. Did people look all that different while they were asleep? But now, he began to see it -- sleep had not added anything to Draco's face, but had rather taken away. Taken away the guardedness and the irony and the constant lively animation that was a distraction more than anything else. With all that gone, he could see the curious vulnerability that expressed itself in waking moments through anger and silence and even a peculiar sort of shyness. Could see through the translucent skin the blue tracery of veins at Draco's temples, laced across his eyelids. Could see the bruising under his eyes.

Harry knelt down slowly next to the bed and put his elbows on the mattress. He could hear Draco's soft deep breaths and could feel how completely the other boy was asleep. Could feel how deeply his

exhaustion had wound him in its dark coils, and Harry was glad for it, because he wanted to be with Draco but he also wanted to be alone. Somehow Harry felt that this moment was his own, that it was terribly important, that some great decision was about to be made or unmade inside him.

Your father told me to imagine what it would be like for me if you died, Harry thought. His thoughts arranged themselves as if Draco could hear him, although Harry knew that he could not. He almost thought he could hear the beat of Draco's heart through the coverlet both their hands lay on. Its accelerated tempo seemed twice his own. He told me to imagine it, and I tried, but I couldn't. And I thought perhaps that it was simply because I didn't want to, but I realize now it was more than that. The truth of it is that you are more myself than I am, now. If I lost you, there wouldn't be any more me. I'd be someone else. And I hope I never have to be that person. I never want to have to be that person. I've changed, since before I knew you. I'm better now. Stronger. And that's because of you. And this is how I've paid you back...

Draco stirred slightly, and Harry shrank back, but Draco was only settling himself more deeply into the cushions. Harry sat where he was for a moment, then leaned forward again, and put his head on his arms. He closed his eyes.

He had not been brought up by Petunia and Vernon Dursley to know anything about prayer. On the rare occasions that they went to church they did not bring him with them. Hoping or pleading for divine intervention was, in its way, a foreign concept to him. But inside everyone there is some power that is entreated in times of despair, and Harry was no exception. He had always begged help from fate or chance or some dim recollection of his parents, and so he did now, bargaining as fiercely as his exhausted spirit would allow.

Let Snape find the antidote, he prayed, and I won't ever ask for anything else. I'll keep the promise I made. I will sever myself from Draco so that nothing I do can ever hurt him again. Let Snape find the antidote and I will go after Voldemort myself. I'll destroy him. I was born to destroy him and I've been too cowardly up until now to do it. I know maybe that's what you want from me, and maybe this is punishment for my failure. But please. Give me one more chance. Or if you must punish me, punish me

some other way. Because if you do this to me now then I will never be any good to myself or anyone else ever again.

A sudden light flared behind Harry's eyelids, bright as sunlight. He jerked his head up in surprise -- and saw that it was the infirmary torches, having all lit themselves at once in preparation for the evening. The room was suddenly brought with a warm ocher glow. Harry blinked against it, half-blinded, and heard the creak of the bed as Draco shifted and turned over, grabbing at his pillow to block the light. Harry froze, feeling suddenly extremely awkward, as the pillow slid off the other boy's head and a single gray eye, blinking curiously and half-hidden by tangled white-blond hair, appeared over the crook of Draco's arm.

"Potter? That you?" Draco's muffled voice was thick with sleep, lacking its usual drawling crystalline delicacy.

"Erm....yes," said Harry, not seeing how a denial in this case would get him anywhere.

"Oh." Draco blinked at him again. "Everything all right?"

Harry took a deep breath and lied. "Just came by to see if you wanted me to bring you up any supper."

Draco gave a slight shake of his head. "No. Too tired," he said, and behind his soft muffled tones Harry heard Snape's voice hissing at him, *weakness lassitude exhaustion*.

Blindness.

"I'm sorry I woke you up," Harry said tonelessly. "Can you go back to sleep?"

"Mmmph." Draco appeared to think about this. "Are you going to stay?"

Harry took another deep breath and lied again. "Yes. I'm going to stay."

"Mmmmph," Draco said again, and fell instantly back to sleep, rolling over onto his back with the pillow clutched in his arms. Harry looked at him for a moment and then spun around with a quick violence, revolted

by his own lies and trapped by the need for them. He sank down onto the floor with his back to the bed, his arms looped around his knees.

He did not know long he sat there. Long enough for his legs to begin to cramp from the cold stone floor. Long enough for the darkness outside the windows to become complete, and for the torches to begin to dim as the night gathered itself around the castle. He sat there, half-listening to the sound of Draco's breathing and half to the soft noises inside his own head, so lost in thought that it took him a moment to come back to reality when the infirmary door opened, and Dumbledore and Snape walked in.

"Ginny? Ginny, are you in there?"

Seamus stood and looked at the shut door of the sixth-year girls' dormitory. He'd been knocking and calling for at least five minutes, with no appreciable results. He was beginning to feel rather stupid. Actually, he thought, he'd gone well past beginning to feel stupid several minutes ago and had now most definitely arrived at feeling very stupid indeed. All the portraits up and down the corridor were staring at him. It was extremely awkward.

"Ginny..." He sighed, and dropped his hand. "Okay, then. I guess you aren't there. Either that, or you're there but you don't want to talk to me. Which is fine. I just came by to say that..."

Seamus paused. What *had* he come by to say? That he was sorry for being an enormous git? He wasn't though, actually, he was quite sure he'd been right. And he was also sure that if he had to spend one more night sleeping under the same roof as Draco Malfoy, murder would be committed. It was hardly worth it when Ginny barely seemed to notice whether he was there or not.

"...That I'm leaving," he went on. "I was hoping we could say goodbye, you know, in a civil sort of way. I'm not angry, and..."

"Yoo-hoo," said a voice at his left.

Seamus jumped and stared.

Just to the left of the door was a small portrait of a young witch in pale green robes. She wore a mop of fair hair and a mischevous expression.

"You know, there's nobody in there," she said, jerking her chin towards the door. "Although it's lovely to hear that you're not angry. Is there anyone in particular that you're not angry at, or are you just making the point that you're a generally mild-mannered sort of fellow?"

Seamus ignored this. "Have you seen Ginny Weasley? Red-headed girl, sixth year?"

"I know who she is." The portrait girl's smile widened. "Out of curiosity, are you Draco Malfoy?"

"Thankfully, I am not," replied Seamus sharply. "Why? Has he been coming around here?"

"Alas, no," she sighed, casting her eyes upward. "I just hear a lot about him. That's *all* the sixth year girls talk about. I thought you might be him - you know, fair-haired, good-looking, all that. But if you're not, it can't be helped."

"So I've been told," said Seamus.

"You don't know where he might be, do you?"

Seamus counted silently to ten. It was not sufficient. "Probably wanking off to photos of himself in the third floor bathroom," he said tightly.

"Oooh, really! Thanks!" The girl in the portrait beamed, and vanished, racing out of the frame.

Seamus rolled his eyes and leaned back against the wall. He was even more glad he was leaving. The urge to throw the portrait on the ground and step on it had been nearly overwhelming. This was unusual for Seamus, who had never had much of a temper. He wanted to leave now, more than ever.

But he *still* wanted to say goodbye to Ginny before he did.

With some hesitation, he reached into his pocket and drew out a small glittering object. It was a tiny gold arrow on the end of a chain. The other half of the Tracking Charm on Ginny's bracelet. He had meant to give it to her before leaving, and explain to her what it was. He supposed he owed her that.

Briefly, he heard Draco's voice in his head. *So maybe you might want to tell me why you put a Tracking Charm on that bracelet you gave her?*

He stood still for a moment, staring at the arrow in his palm. Surely it wouldn't hurt to use it, just this one last time. After all, she couldn't be very far away. She'd never know.

He raised his hand, the arrow dangling from the chain between his fingers. "*Point me,*" he said, and the arrow began to spin.

Instinctively, Harry grabbed for his Invisibility Cloak, hurling it around his shoulders as the door closed behind Dumbledore and Snape. He scrambled to duck behind the nearby chair and knelt there, breathless, as footsteps approached Draco's bed.

Had it simply been Dumbledore, Harry would not have felt the need to hide himself. But he didn't think he could stand talking to Snape again just now. He didn't think he could stand to have Snape even *look* at him. He was afraid he'd be sick again, or worse.

He remained utterly motionless as Dumbledore came to stand at the foot of the bed, looking somberly down at Draco. After a moment, Snape joined him. There was a strangely unreadable look on his narrow, angular face.

"Did you want to wake him, Severus?" Dumbledore asked, drawing his eyebrows together thoughtfully. All the twinkle had gone from the pale blue eyes behind the familiar spectacles; Dumbledore looked weary, tired and old.

"I had hoped he might perhaps not yet have taken the *Somnolus* potion I gave him," Snape said. "But then again, if I were him, I would have taken it myself."

"It might perhaps," Dumbledore said, "be worth waking him, to tell him of your success."

The words went through Harry like a blazing arrow. All his muscles tensed and he thought instantly and with a dazed sort of shock of his own frantic whispering in the dark:

Let Snape find the antidote, and I'll never ask for anything else.

Snape said nothing for a moment. He took a step towards the bed, and then leaned forward. The furling edge of his dark cloak almost brushed against Harry's arm as he bent over Draco and, to Harry's immense surprise, briefly and lightly touched the sleeping boy's hair with the tips of his Potions-scarred fingers. It was the first and only gentle thing Harry had ever seen him do.

"I think," said Snape, and straightened up, "that I would prefer not to wake him, regardless. I suspect, in any event, that the sleeping potion will have made him too groggy to properly comprehend the news."

"Then we should go and tell the others," Dumbledore said. "His friends. They should know you have had this breakthrough with the antidote, Severus. Hermione, and of course, Harry as well, especially Harry...I am sure they have been terrified that he might die at any moment. It would only be a kindness to do what we can to relieve their fears."

Antidote. Breakthrough. Draco's not going to die.

Crouched behind the chair, Harry dug his fingernails tightly into the palms of his hands. For some reason, he recollected the moment four years ago when he had heard McGonagall say that Ginny Weasley had been taken into the Chamber of Secrets and at his side, Ron had collapsed silently, sliding wordless to the floor. He felt like doing that himself now, although in relief rather than in horror. His heart beat a hard tattoo against the inside of his ribcage. *Antidote*, it said with every beat. *The antidote*.

The corner of Snape's lip twitched. "Lucius will be most displeased," he said.

"Yes," said Dumbledore dryly. "I received another letter from him this morning, in fact. I used it to prop up a wobbly corner of my desk." He reached out then, and lightly clasped Snape's shoulder. "Thank you, Severus," he said. "For what you've done, in such a short space of time and having so little material to work with. No one else could have done even this much..."

A spasm of something passed across Snape's face, and perhaps if Harry had paused to wonder what it meant a great deal of pain and grief could have been avoided. But he didn't. He was already struggling to his feet, trying to balance the desperate need for silence against the sudden almost-hysteria that seemed to be gripping his chest in a vise. Drawing his cloak even tighter about himself, he crept around the bed and past Dumbledore and Snape. He managed to make it out the open door and into the corridor before he began to run.

"Did you hear something, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore glanced up at Snape, who had half-turned to look towards the infirmary door. The room was quite still, save for the drift of the loose bed curtains and the lengthening shadows along the floor. "No," he said. "I did not. Severus..."

Snape turned back towards the bed and looked again at Draco. "Yes?"

Dumbledore followed the Potions professor's gaze and looked at the boy on the bed. Though he was deeply asleep, his sprawled posture made him look as if he had been flung there from a great height. The hands clasped around the pillow made him seem younger than he was, and the moonlight coming through the window threw spidery silver lines along his bare thin wrists. They made Dumbledore think of the veins running so closely below the skin there, freighted with their weight of lethal toxins. "I recollect your policy of shared guilt, Severus," Dumbledore said without taking his eyes from the dying boy on the bed. "But none of this is your fault."

"We are none of us blameless," Snape said, automatically.

Dumbledore sighed. "When will the antidote be ready?"

"I would prefer that you not call it that," Snape said, raising his eyes to look at Dumbledore.

"Severus -- it is *an* antidote. Even if it is not *the* antidote you were looking for. It buys us time, and that in itself is an immeasurable help."

"I said it would double his remaining lifespan. From one month to two. I have not saved his life, merely prolonged it and to me that is not --"

"You have given us enough time to discover a final antidote," said Dumbledore firmly. "And you *will* discover it. You have identified every ingredient --"

"Every ingredient but one," Snape said. The hollows under his eyes were darkly shadowed. "And what if I never find that one? That it should elude me even this long alarms me, Professor. Two months is not such a long time as all that. Eight weeks. Not a long time to live, when you are seventeen years old. Not a long time at all."

"I know that, Severus," Dumbledore said, with a weariness that was like pain. He paused a moment, watching the shadows as they moved across the bed, passing like the light touch of hands over Draco's sleeping upturned face. "I know that."

The arrow on the end of the chain led Seamus down the stairs, through the common room, and, to his surprise, up the stairs to the boys' dormitory. He quickened his step, wondering if Ginny had been looking for him here -- there was no one else but Harry still in the boys' dorms over the holidays, and Harry was usually in the infirmary with Draco.

However, the arrow led him past his own door and down the hall to the small staircase at the end that led to the old Head Boy's room. Seamus blinked in surprise, but the arrow stayed steady, pointing towards the door. With a shrug, he mounted the few steps and pushed the door open.

The first thing he became aware of when he entered the room was that it was empty. Ginny might have been here recently, but she was gone now. This was not entirely surprising; the tracking charm had a certain delay

on it, and if she had just left or was still nearby, it might take a short while to adjust to the fact.

The second thing he noticed was the smell in the room. It was like the metallic tang in the air just before an electrical storm. It was the smell of lightning. It sent a nervous tingle through Seamus' veins.

The third thing he noticed was the faint silvery sheen cast over the air in the center of the room. It rippled for a moment and was gone, like a face half-seen in the contours of a cloud that disappears when the viewer moves.

Suddenly nervous, Seamus shivered. He meant to take a step back and walk out of the room. But as he moved to retreat, a flicker of moonlight came through the window and he caught sight of the scattered and torn bits of paper lying on the floor. He blinked, his curiosity sparked. Wondering if this had anything to do with Ginny's visit here, he went forward, kneeling down to examine the wreckage -- it looked as if someone had gone at an old book with a pair of garden shears. Pages ripped in half, binding ruptured, lining lacerated as if it had been torn at with sharp nails.

Kneeling as close to the remains of the book as he was, he found that the coppery metallic tang was stronger than it had been. He tasted copper in his mouth and his skin stung as if he were being bitten by ants. There was a faint dizziness in his ears.

He would never be able to explain what led him to do what he did next. It would not matter. It would be a long time before Seamus Finnegan was in a position to explain anything to anyone again.

He reached into the breast pocket of his cloak and drew out his wand. He raised it slowly and pointed it at the book, trying to recollect the spell that returned things to their original state.

"Resurgat," he said.

For a moment, absolutely nothing happened.

Then, slowly, like leaves lifted by an autumn wind, the pages of the book began to rise and swirl about him. Stiffening in alarm, he stood up. The

pages rose with him, swirling more quickly now. They whispered softly as they brushed against each other, the whisper-crackle of old paper. It was like being surrounded by fluttering birds. And the sound of it was like rain. Or perhaps that was the ink that ran from the pages and dripped upon the floor like blood running from a cut wrist. And it was red like blood. And the metallic scent in the air was stronger than ever. And Seamus began to realize that he had made a very serious mistake.

He tried to take a step backward, but the whirl of paper had formed a solid wall against his back. The silver shimmer that had vanished before when he looked at it had returned, barely visible beyond the white blur of fluttering pages. But it was neither formless now, nor half-seen, nor did it vanish when he took another step back. It had the shape and form of a human being -- a man, tall and slender. And where there should have been eyes were twin blue flames.

Seamus' wand struck the stone floor with a clatter as his grip on it loosened. A scream was building up in his chest, but before it could leave his throat the shape seemed to melt and flow towards him through the air like water. Something struck him with the force of a tidal wave, and blackness erased his vision.

It was taking Harry longer than he had thought it would take him to pack, and his nerves were beginning to jangle with the tension of worrying that someone would come in and find him hurling everything he owned into his old knapsack. Explanations, in that case, might be difficult.

He paused, breathless, and surveyed the wreck of his trunk. What exactly ought one to pack for a vengeance quest from which one was not entirely expecting to return? He'd thrown in his clothes. His sword, properly minimized via a Shrinking Charm. The mysterious coin which he had taken from Lucius' desk was carefully secured in a side pocket. Tomorrow he would present it to the goblins at Gringott's and ask about its origins. His wand. Sirius' penknife. His Invisibility Cloak. He had no food; he would have to buy some at the station. On top of everything he put the book Draco had given him that afternoon. *The Malfoy Family Code of Conduct*. He doubted it would be that great a read, but for some reason he couldn't bear to leave it behind.

He zipped the bag tightly and stood up. His hands were shaking slightly. He crossed the room to the mirror that hung on the opposite wall, and looked hard at his own reflection.

White face, green eyes, black hair. There was color in his cheeks -- fever-bright splotches of red. His mouth was a bloodless white line. And across his forehead, the scar stood out as jaggedly as if it had been drawn there with ink.

He raised his right hand and touched the scar lightly. Then he took a deep breath. "*Oblitescus*," he whispered, and winced as a bright flash of pain sparked behind his skull. Then it was gone. When he took his hand away, so was the scar.

He stared at himself in the mirror for another long moment. He knew that concealing the scar was necessary -- it made him far too recognizable -- but without it, he seemed some other person completely. Some other Harry.

If I lost you, there wouldn't be any more me. I'd be someone else.

Harry exhaled a deep breath. It did not matter, perhaps. The scar was with him always whether it was visible or not, seared across his own internal landscape. The mark of his life's single defining moment. More than what he could do or who he loved or who he was loved by, it made him who he was. The boy who didn't die. The boy who'd been spared for a reason.

Let me find the antidote and I will go after Voldemort myself. I'll destroy him. I was born to destroy him and I've been too cowardly up until now to do it.

And suddenly Harry was remembering. Remembering Christmas Day when he had been thirteen years old, Hermione looking at him with enormous eyes, *Harry doesn't want to kill anyone, do you, Harry?*

And his own voice, answering back, *Malfoy knows. Remember what he said to me...? 'If it was me, I'd hunt him down myself. I'd want revenge.'*

Oh, yes Draco would understand his desire for revenge as Hermione and Ron had not and never would. He'd always known Draco comprehended

that dark part of himself because he shared it. He'd understand revenge, all right. But he wouldn't understand being left.

There was really no way around that no matter how Harry tried to look at it. Draco wouldn't understand why Harry had to go away or why he had to go away alone. He'd be horribly hurt. He'd feel betrayed and abandoned. He would hate Harry. And that was the worst thought of all somehow: that Draco would hate him. Hermione wouldn't hate him for this. She'd known him too long and been through this too many times. She'd always known that at some point he would face the ultimate last danger alone because however much she tried, she'd never been able to go to the end with him. At the end of everything, he'd always been alone.

But Draco. Draco would have thought they would go to the end together. He would not have been able to comprehend separation and that Harry would be the artist of that separation would not be something he would have imagined or could understand. Harry knew this. With a terrible compassionate clarity, he knew it. He'd promised not to leave Draco while he was dying and no, he wasn't doing that. That he couldn't have done if he'd wanted to. Some things were beyond any act of will. And yes, he was glad about the antidote. So glad that every so often while packing he'd had to stop and sit down on the bed and let the violent shudders of relief run their course. So he was grateful to Snape. But he also hated him for what he had said. And more because it was true.

I promised to go, he thought, still staring at himself in the mirror. I promised to leave and not to let myself be found. But I didn't promise not to say goodbye.

He turned away from the mirror and went over to his trunk. From it he drew his quill and some parchment. Warily settling himself on the edge of the bed, he began to write.

He'd never been very good at writing letters. In fact, he'd always been terrible at it. But this time it seemed easier, maybe because he wanted so very badly to say what he was saying now. Maybe some of what was inside him now, some of what was Draco, lent him Draco's casual eloquence. Or maybe it was just that he was too tired to dissemble or to try to sound as if he cared less than he did. Eventually he was done, and he set down the quill and looked tiredly at the two short letters he'd written. One for

Draco. One for Hermione. He folded each in half and laid them carefully on his pillow.

There was one last thing to do now, one last thing before he could leave. Shutting his eyes, he reached up and undid the clasp at the back of his neck that fastened the slender gold chain around his throat. It had become slightly tangled in his hair. He pulled it free and the chain and the charm it supported slid into his cupped hand. He held the Epicyclical Charm for a moment, gently. Then he laid it down on top of the letters. When they came to look for him in the morning, they would find it here.

He stood up then, and slung the knapsack over his shoulder. He walked out the door.

Hermione, sitting beside Draco in the infirmary, wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. Heading to the infirmary to say goodnight, she had discovered Snape and Dumbledore leaving, and they had, with some reluctance on Snape's part, explained to her that Snape had identified every ingredient in the poison but one, and had constructed from that blueprint an imperfect antidote. An antidote that would slow the effects of the poison without counteracting it. "A treatment, then," she had said to Snape, "but not a cure."

Muggle terms, she realized. He had blinked at her, nodded sourly. Dumbledore had rested a hand on her shoulder, asked her if she would prefer explaining this to Harry, or should he?

She'd said she would do it. And, not knowing where Harry was, she had come into the infirmary to wait for him. She was sure he'd be here eventually. Which was good, because she ached to see him. She wondered how he'd react -- she wondered if he'd be glad at the extension of life offered to Draco, or simply enraged that it wasn't a proper cure, that all their troubles weren't behind them. Harry was an absolutist and was not one for understanding gradations.

She turned her gaze back to Draco, then, wondering how they were going to explain it to *him*. Thank God she would have Harry with her for that. Draco had managed to wriggle his way out of the blankets again and lay on his back with his arms over his face, his sleeves pulled up, showing the

dark bruises along his wrist where they had taken his blood for the antidote tests. Without warning his eyes flew open, and Hermione jumped back, frightened, as he sat up suddenly as if propelled by some invisible force, knocking the pillow off the bed and onto the floor.

She reached for him. "Draco --"

He turned to look at her. His eyes were dizzy, full of dreams and confusion. "Hermione -- what happened?"

"Nothing happened." She put her hand on his shoulder. He was warm from sleep; she could feel the bones of his shoulder through the material of his shirt. "You had a nightmare?"

"No." He shook his head. "I *felt* something. Something's wrong."

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know." His voice was exhausted, almost fretful in its weariness. "Maybe it was a dream. I felt like -- I had lost something, but I don't know what." His eyelids fluttered closed, the potion pulling him back down into sleep. "Something important."

"It's the sleeping potion." Hermione pushed gently on his shoulder, indicating he should lie back down. "It gives you strange dreams."

"Maybe." He lay back, and she put her hand over his. "Where's Harry?"

"He's coming," she said. She waited for him to ask something else, but he did not; he was already asleep again. She sat with him, her hand on his, waiting for Harry to come back. It turned out to be a longer wait than she had expected.

The fire in the common room fireplace was as high as spells and liberal applications of the poker could make it, but still Ginny could not get warm.

She opened her hands in her lap and stared at them. They were red and blue with her own bruises where her nails had dug in. They were black in

other places where ink from the torn diary had stained them. She did not remember dropping the shreds of the diary or stumbling out of Ron's old room. She remembered, what seemed like aeons later, being in the girl's bathroom, scrubbing at the ink on her hands with harsh soap and cleansing spells. Nothing had worked. The ink would not be removed.

Eventually she took a shower, scrubbing her whole body. It didn't budge the ink but she felt slightly better, less shaken and unstable. She put on her nightgown, wrapped a robe around herself, and went down to the common room to wait for Hermione. She was determined to tell her everything that had happened. Hermione would know what to do. And even if she didn't, Ginny didn't think she could go one more second without telling someone.

It had been a long time now, though, and Hermione had not come back to Gryffindor Tower. Ginny herself was beginning to wonder if she should go along to the infirmary, although she dreaded seeing Draco, for reasons she could not quite define. And she was so cold, and so tired. She shivered again, and wrapped her arms around herself.

I should have known better than to try to fight you, Tom. You always win.

She heard his soft voice in the whisper of the wind against the window pane, the crackle of the fire. Destroying the book had not destroyed the Tom in her mind; he would never leave her.

Thee to me.

The faint creaking noise of feet on the tower stairs made her lift her head. She straightened up, eyes widening, hopeful - but it was not Hermione. Ginny sank back against the couch, biting her lip. Of all the people she had *not* wanted to see right now...

"Seamus," she said. "I thought you were going to go home tonight...?"

He said nothing, just at the foot of the boys' dormitory stairs, looking at her. He had his hands in his pockets again. His navy coat was gone, though, and there was a rip in the shoulder of his shirt. She wondered if he'd had a punch-up with Draco.

"Did something happen with Draco? Your shirt's torn."

He did not reply. But now he smiled. She had never seen him smile like that. It was a sharp, bright smile like the edge of a knife. It went oddly with the fair hair, the angel face.

Unnerved without being able to explain why, she drew her robe closer about her shoulders, and shivered. "Seamus," she said. "You're scaring me. Is something wrong?"

He appeared not to hear her. He took the last step down from the stairs, still smiling. In the faint firelight his expression was hard to read; his eyes looked blue-black, the color of pansies, so dark the irises seemed to meld with the pupil, giving him a look of almost blindness.

"Ginny," he said at last, and she shivered again at the sound of his voice: so familiar, so caressing with its soft Irish lilt, and yet suddenly not familiar at all. "Ginny, it's good to see you again..."

Author notes: The first time he had seen the room he had not noticed the beauty of it: The description of the room in which Ron and the Dark Lord play chess is taken from TS Eliot's poem A Game of Chess, part of The Waste Land.

Never again shall you return to tell this story: A passage from Dante Alighieri's Inferno (Canto 27, lines 61-66.)

"There are plenty of brands of decaffeinated coffee..." Real Genius.

"Department for putting things on top of other things" --Monty Python.

"We attack Voldemort with cheese" "callous and strange" "Sanity Fair" --Buffy.

Draco Veritas Chapter Eleven: The Hostility of Dreams

*Young men late in the night
Toss on their beds,
Their pillows do not comfort
Their uneasy heads,
The lot that decides their fate
Is cast to-morrow,
One must depart and face
Danger and sorrow.*

*Clouds and lions stand
Before him dangerous,
And the hostility of dreams.
Then let him honor us,
Lest he should be ashamed
In the hour of crisis:
In the valley of corrosion
Tarnish his brightness.*

-WH Auden.

Oh, it was strange to be alive again, and in possession of all those accoutrements of physical existence -- eyes and mouth and limbs that moved, a heart that beat and veins that coursed with blood. When he first tried to stand up, amid the torn bits of paper, the smell of electrical energy as strong in the room as smoke after a fire, his legs buckled under him. The second time, however, they worked fine. He stood up, and went over to the mirror.

Tom saw himself, and was pleased. He had not expected the opportunity to take this body, but when it had presented itself his decision had been immediate. He did not regret it now. It was a fine body, in excellent shape, well-made and elegantly put together. It would do for as long as he needed it.

He glanced around the room curiously. The diary was ruined. This did not bother him. Having been released from it, he had no more use for it. Blood and tears had brought him out of its ruined pages. Blood and tears and something else. He faintly remembered a voice, whispering to him, *I hate you Tom, I hate you, I hate you.*

Tom did not mind being hated. Hatred was a useful emotion, as strong as love in its way, and as powerful a force.

Tom looked more closely at himself in the mirror. A slender, strong body, not unlike the body he'd had himself at seventeen. Arms lightly downed with gold, wheat-flax hair, a choirboy face, blue eyes like bits torn out of a midsummer sky. Something glittered around his throat -- Seamus' skin was pale from winter, but in the summer it would tan, a shade only slightly paler gold than his hair, although if he was not careful it would burn.

Tom knew this, and his mouth curled: he could not have said how he knew it, but he did. It was not his own memory, not organic to himself. It was Seamus'. He knew it the way he knew that Seamus Finnigan was seventeen years old, that he came from a small Irish town called Glyn Caryn, that he loved his parents, that he was a Gryffindor seventh year student with a sweet open nature and an uncomplicated mind. Tom loathed him immediately. Riffing through his thoughts was like wading through syrup. *Boring* syrup. Seamus liked Quidditch. He was fond of Herbology class. He kept a stack of comic books on the table next to his bed. He didn't like lending them out, unless it was to Harry, who always took good care of things...

Tom saw his own eyes flash in the mirror. Now *this* was interesting. He tapped harder at Seamus' memories, trying to pull up what he knew of Harry Potter. Tom's own memories were incomplete, confusing. He remembered a small boy with tangled black hair facing him over Ginny Weasley's crumpled body. He remembered his basilisk's hiss and the same boy covered in blood, crumpled and dying at the foot of the Chamber wall. And Tom knew that the boy had not died after all, and that he hated him, but not precisely why.

Tom turned away from the mirror, still concentrating. Seamus' thoughts were like a stack of randomly arranged photographs that fluttered by

quickly -- images would appear and disappear, with no apparent importance attached to their order or progress.

Tom left the room, and stood for a moment in the hallway outside, looking it up and down. It was not unfamiliar. He knew Gryffindor Tower well, it seemed. One of the paintings on the wall was chattering at him. He ignored it, following the curve of the hall around to the dormitories. Each had a brass number on the door, but even had they not been marked, he would have known which one was Seamus'. He pushed the door open and went in.

Everything inside was red.

He stood for a moment, blinking at the light that streamed in across the vermilion rugs thrown over the floor, and there were the four-poster beds with their scarlet hangings like bloated red flowers. Typical of Gryffindors to be so attached to their colors of blood and fire. How Tom loathed red.

Seamus' memories directed him to his bed, and the trunk at the foot of it.

Unsurprisingly, a swift search yielded nothing interesting, as Seamus owned nothing interesting. The trunk was packed, as if Seamus were preparing to leave. Tom dropped a folded jumper back on the bed and turned, and the glint of light reflecting off something gold caught his eye.

He paused and stared; the source of the flash of light was the bed opposite him. According to Seamus, it was Harry Potter's bed.

Tom went quickly across the room. His hands were shaking with some suppressed excitement: suppressed because he did not quite understand its source yet. He knew there was some strong emotion attached to the name Harry Potter. He knew he disliked this person intensely (although Seamus, apparently, was perfectly friendly with him). He was not, however, sure exactly why. His hands pushed the coverlet down, the pillows back, and there on the bed were two folded pieces of paper under what looked like a gold charm on a slender chain.

He looked briefly at the necklace and pushed it aside, uninterested in what looked like ordinary jewelry, and cheap-looking jewelry at that. His gaze went next to the letters. He picked them up, sharply curious -- why was Harry Potter leaving letters addressed to friends on his own bed? He

combed through Seamus' murky memories, but could find nothing that lent any comprehension to the situation.

The first letter was addressed to *Hermione*. This name meant nothing whatsoever to Tom. It meant something to Seamus, but nothing terribly interesting. The name across the top of the second letter, however, was Draco Malfoy, the full name, written out, and *that* meant something to Tom.

Malfoy.

A burst of searing hate exploded through Tom's chest. Not his hatred, but Seamus'. A metallic emotion, in equal parts resentment, loathing, and fear. There was something else there, too, threaded in with the other emotions. Tom could not identify it, although someone who was not Tom would have been able to recognize it as pity.

Tom's mind, however, was already ticking over his own memories and knowledge.

Draco Malfoy.

A Malfoy.

Lucius' son?

Why is Lucius' son getting letters from a Gryffindor?

With a swift nail, Tom slit open the first letter, the one to Hermione, and read it through. His heart began to pound. There was his own name -- not his birth name, but the name he had given himself -- woven through the letter -- there was a history here, a history between himself and Harry Potter -- In fact, if Potter could be believed...but no, that wasn't possible, was it? Surely there was some mistake. He reached for Seamus' memories, but so great was his agitation that they slipped away from him like murky water.

With a bitter oath, Tom crumpled the parchment in his fist and flung it into the fire. It caught and went up at once, bursting into ashes.

He took a moment, then, to breathe. To force calm on himself. Very slowly, he opened the second letter, and read it over. This time he took note of the handwriting, the looping, childish script that seemed to spill over itself as if the writer could barely contain everything he had to say.

Draco -- It feels weird to be writing you a letter, I've never written a letter to you before. You always know what I'm thinking so there never seemed to be any point. But you're asleep now and I think I should do this before you wake up. I know Snape has found an antidote for you -- I heard him say so to Dumbledore -- and I know what I promised -- I meant it, too. There are other things I thought you should know, things I've never told you, not properly anyway--

There was an ink blotch there, as if the writer of the letter had pressed down so hard with his quill that it had snapped. Tom's eyes narrowed as he scanned the rest of the letter quickly. What was this about? Here, again, Seamus was no help. Through his rage and confusion, Tom could dimly access thoughts of a friendship between the two boys -- *Lucius' son and one of my enemies?* -- and some wild intensity of emotion, but he could not separate out the threads of Seamus' hatred of Lucius' son from his thoughts about Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy grouped together. Tom's hand closed on the letter, meaning to crush it --

And paused.

His fury urged him to destroy this letter, in which Harry Potter mocked him, mocked Voldemort, swore vengeance against him, and seemed to think that he himself, a mere child, a foolish boy --

Tom took a shuddering breath. He wanted to rip the letter in half. But was it the wisest course? The letters had obviously been written with passion and care, and they were alive with a certain vivid pain that Tom could appreciate, being something of an artist in the area of inflicting pain himself. He had no part of emotion, wanted no part of it, but his very distance from it made him a useful student of human behavior. Destroying this letter would hurt the sender, that was true, but there were better ways to assure that Harry Potter's friends did not receive this last message. That they would not follow him where he had gone, on his quest of vengeance. This would cause chaos and confusion, and chaos and confusion were useful allies.

He read the letter again. It would, he decided, not be difficult at all to mimic Harry Potter's voice: the vividness of the letter came from its simplicity and the blunt sincerity of the statements. Tom could see that it was quite a moving letter, really, or would certainly be considered so by the recipient if the tone of the letter was any indication. This was good: an emotional letter was so much easier to twist and alter.

He passed a hand over the surface of the letter. A surge of magical energy rocketed up his arm and through his hand, almost painful in its intensity. It had been so long...

He whispered a word, and the paper trembled in his grasp. Slowly the ink on the page began to writhe as if the letters were tiny slithering snakes. They curled and uncurled, wound around each other and formed new words. New sentences. *Draco, it feels weird to be writing you a letter, but I thought if I didn't there'd be more of a chance that you would follow me, and I don't want you to follow me. I know you'll want to and you always think you can help me, but you can't help me now. I know I said that I would wait but I think that it's better if I don't wait -- I know what I promised, but there are things you don't know...things you won't understand...*

The letter went on for several paragraphs. Tom gave it a last scan, and felt proud of himself. It was a cruel letter, without being overtly so at all. The cruelty lay mainly in its subtlety, and in what it did not say, Tom having removed much of the original text. He greatly regretting having destroyed the first letter, the one to Potter's girlfriend. He could have created quite a work of art out of that one. Ah, well. No use grieving over lost opportunities. He placed the letter, folded, back on Harry's bed, with the gold charm necklace on top of it. Then he straightened up.

He was still angry. Long ago Tom had taught himself to focus his rage, to channel it. To wait for a time and place in which he could spend it. And now, lost and bewildered and furious, he stood and tried to make sense of the chaotic whirl of thoughts and memories that vied for attention inside his overcrowded brain. Names and faces came and went behind his eyes -- Black-haired Harry Potter, whom he hated. Draco Malfoy, who looked like a more perfect version of his father in childhood, a miniature done in ivory and silver gilt. And Ginny Weasley, her rosy sunflower face crowned by all that brash, bright hair -- oh, Ginny he remembered. Ginny he knew.

Ginny who he recollected by the crack of her bones beneath his gripping hand, her body squirming under his as she tried to get away from him, the scent of salty tears and her own terror.

He had always known he would find her again, somehow.

Even more interestingly, Seamus loved her, it seemed. Tom felt the sickly adoration as a pain beneath his ribs and grinned at it, a wolf grin that split his angel face in half. Oh, yes, Seamus loved her. Loved her oh so very much that he had given her a charm bracelet so that he would never lose her. So that he could find her wherever she was and race instantly to her side. How he must have loved her, to have done something like that.

Still grinning, Tom reached down into his shirt, and drew out the small gold arrow charm on its chain. He knew by the tingle of it beneath his fingertips that she was nearby; she was not far away. Still grinning, he closed his hand around the charm.

He had found something to spend his rage on, after all.

Draco had always told her that if she had been born a boy she would have been just like him and if he had been a girl he would have been exactly like her.

Blaise suspected that this, like most things Draco had said to her, seemed true because she wanted it to be true.

Still. If Draco had been at Pansy's Christmas party -- which she had gone to because she'd hoped he'd be there, but he had not come -- he would, just as she had, have spent three hours getting ready despite not really wanting to go. Hours spent knotting small silver flowers into her apricot hair, charming the circles out from under her eyes. Selecting just the right dress. Green, with pale embroidery along the hem. Now, perched on the sink in Pansy's bathroom, she made several minute and delicate adjustments to her cosmetic charms, and looked at herself in the mirror. Like everything else in the Parkinson home, the sink was immensely tacky, with bronze spigots in the shape of spitting dolphins.

Draco had once scornfully called the Parkinsons the kind of family that bought their own furniture.

This had struck Blaise as both amusing and accurate, although it said more about Draco than it did about Pansy.

She wished, again, with a dull sort of anxiety, that he had come. He had been invited, of course. Most of the Slytherins were here, even some of those who had graduated -- and, in the case of Goyle and Crabbe, even those deemed not bright enough to graduate. It was the party of the season, especially since Pansy's parents were at a days-long Ministry summit and essentially they could do whatever they wanted. And Draco had always loved parties.

But then, that had been the old Draco. The one Blaise had grown up with. Not this new version of Draco, whom she felt she did not know.

She remembered the night in August when he had come to her house. It had been a humid summer night, the kind of night where even blinking made you sweat. When the charms had rung she'd come reluctantly to get the door, trailed by a score of tiny levitating fans, all spinning madly in a vain attempt to cool the air. Opening the door to find Draco Malfoy on her doorstep had left her speechless.

How many Hogwarts girls had dreamed of this exact circumstance? There was Draco Malfoy on her front steps, in jeans and a white cotton t-shirt that clung to his slenderly muscled torso, the moonlight striking sparks from his pale silver eyes. On top of that, he was holding a bunch of flowers tied with ribbon. Roses, with pale yellow petals, the color of new Galleons.

Blaise pushed her damp hair back behind her ears, and stared. A number of potential witticisms spun through her head. She picked one at random. "If you were looking for Goyle's house, it's farther down the road. Second after the turn."

Draco looked unperturbed. "The last time I gave Goyle flowers he ate them."

"Then what are you doing here, Draco?"

He smiled at her. That smile that was like a punch to the stomach, half angelic wickedness and half carnal mischief. A smile that promised unspeakable things involving silk scarves and toffee and long sweaty nights.

"I came to give you money," he said.

He held out the flowers, and she took them. Instantly the petals dropped from them, a shower of gold -- and it *was* gold. When they hit the floor, they turned into Galleons, which rolled around her feet.

Blaise held the denuded flower stems delicately between her fingers. "What's this about, Draco?"

"I have a proposition for you," he said. "Can I come in?"

She stood aside to let him pass into the foyer. He brushed by her as he went, unnecessarily. One inside, he made an amused face and looked down at his shirt, gone half-transparent with sweat. Blaise blessed the hot evening but said nothing. "It's a little warm in here," he observed.

"We can't afford the Cooling Charms," she said, bluntly.

"Well," said Draco, his mouth curled into a cat's smile. "That shouldn't be a problem for you from now on."

He had seemed very much himself that night, provoking her and enjoying it. They had gossiped wickedly about the other Slytherins, mocked the Gryffindors, sealed their bargain with a handshake. Later he had kissed her in the front garden, among the dead rose bushes. She had stored it away as an important memory. Kisses from Draco Malfoy did not come along every day.

In fact, in no part of their agreement was it stipulated that he had to kiss her at all. He did, sometimes, anyway. Once the school term started, they spent long hours in his room together to make things look "convincing." Mostly he did schoolwork and she watched him. He was an apt, absorbed, careful student, filling sheets of parchment with exquisitely lovely handwriting, doing extra research he didn't need to do simply because it interested him. Generally he didn't seem to notice she was there, but when he did notice, he was coolly agreeable towards her, if never very

affectionate. She would stretch out along his bed and watch him as he wrote or looked out the window or ordered clothes from shops in Diagon Alley. Sometimes he would try on the clothes and she would tell him what looked good and what didn't. Very little didn't look good on him, and the small task filled her with satisfaction; it seemed intimate in a way and surely he wouldn't take her advice if her opinion didn't matter to him.

It was a little while before she realized that he never actually did take her advice. He kept what he liked and sent back what he didn't and he smiled at her suggestions but did not in fact listen to them.

Sometimes they did do other things. Long hours in his room, just the two of them, something was bound to happen, and sometimes things did. He was cooperative, if not overly enthusiastic. She grew to know the lines and curves of his body, memorized the pale skin flawed in such a few places by its scars -- one under his eye, like a crescent moon, the jagged bolt along his left palm, the slightly silvery sheen along his forearm as if something had been burned there. She knew the graceful planes of his collarbones, his temples where the feathery hair drifted, the vulnerable spots on the insides of his wrists. She knew how the pulse in his throat beat when he kissed her, and that when his eyelashes fluttered shut over closing eyes it meant he liked whatever she was doing to him. Sometimes while she was doing it he would put his hand over his face, fingers splayed to cover his eyes, and then she would stop, and say, *Look at me, Draco*, and he would take his hand away and sit up and that would be the end of that, usually.

He never pushed her for any kind of physical favors and when she stopped giving them he did not seem to notice that either. She had a feeling that he was slightly relieved that she had never really offered herself to him entirely as it would have been awkward for him to turn her down and Draco hated awkwardness. And it bewildered her, because it was not as if he didn't like girls -- his body seemed to like her just fine, reacted instantly when she put her hands on him, like any seventeen-year-old boy; it was his mind that was, always, elsewhere.

And that was it. He was elsewhere. Always elsewhere. It was around this time that she began to really notice the difference in him, that it was constant and ongoing. The other Slytherins had noticed it as well, but she, with more time to study him, noticed it more sharply. He had changed. He

was still arrogant, as he always had been, still charming and quick-witted and beautifully malicious, but that malice had lost some of its bite and edge, his wit was less brittle. He was less a glass dagger, and more a silver knife.

It was another few weeks before she was able to tie this change in him to its cause.

In October, Draco had been given detention. By Flitwick, if she recollected correctly, for casting an illicit *Vestatum Transparens* charm on Neville Longbottom during class. Everyone had seen a great deal more of Longbottom than was necessary. Draco had been given a week's detention and assigned to cleaning the blackboards in the classroom during dinner hour.

She had thought that it would be a good idea for her to sneak him some food. It would be the act of a concerned girlfriend. It would assist their deception. Or so she told herself, as she wrapped some sandwiches in a napkin and headed upstairs to the second floor classroom where Charms was held.

She never knew what made her pause and glance through the grilled window set in the door before she went in. Perhaps simply her knowledge that Draco did not appreciate surprises in general, and surprises from her in particular. But it was Blaise who was surprised.

Draco was in the classroom, and he was indeed cleaning one of the blackboards -- in a bored, lazy, methodical manner, standing well away as if he did not want to get chalk dust on his expensive green shirt. But he was not alone. Harry Potter was sitting on one of the desks behind him. He was talking, gesticulating, his face animated and lively, and as he gestured he was smiling. It was bizarre. Blaise barely had to think in confusion that she didn't remember Flitwick giving Potter detention as well, when he leaped off the desk, went around Draco, and poked him in the chest with his index finger.

It was not a hostile gesture. It was, very plainly, a teasing gesture that said, *You're not paying attention to me.*

Draco brushed the hand away, but with a shrug and a smile that nearly buckled Blaise's knees. It was a smile without any edge of malice or

cruelty or secret amusement. She would not have thought Draco Malfoy had a smile like that in him. Then he'd lifted the rag he'd been using to clean the boards, and threw it at Harry's head.

Blaise tore herself away after a few more minutes of silent staring, and crept, shattered, back to the Slytherin dorms. She was the daughter of Death Eaters. In her sixteen years of life, she had seen many disturbing things. But nothing had disturbed her as much as the fact that she had just watched Harry Potter write *Kiss Me, I'm Rich* on the back of Draco Malfoy's brand new green shirt with a piece of chalk and that Draco, when he had noticed, had not shoved his wand through Potter's throat, but instead had laughed as if he thought this behavior was genuinely funny.

As far as Blaise was concerned, this could mean only one thing. They *had* to be having sex with each other.

Blaise was a worldly girl. She had read books. She Knew Things. This would certainly explain why Draco, the most-wanted boy in school, would pay a girl to pretend to date him. She supposed it would also explain why Harry Potter was seeing a girl everyone had long supposed to be Just His Friend. It was all a ruse to cover up their passionate affair.

After lying stunned on her bed for several hours, Blaise decided that out of all possible outcomes, this was hardly the worst. After all, this was an amazing piece of scurrilous gossip. Nobody had heard gossip like this since Headmaster Dippet had been removed from his position by the Ministry after rumors flew that he was carrying on an illicit affair with the giant squid in the lake. The squid had been allowed to keep its job; nobody wanted to fire a fifty-foot squid.

But this was even better. Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy! And, she supposed, it made some sort of sense: Potter was an idiot, a revolting Gryffindor Mudblood-lover, but he wasn't exactly ugly. He had all that tousled dark hair and that wiry-slim body and those lynx-colored eyes that could shoot cold green glances or blaze up like leaves burning when he was angry. The corduroy trousers he'd worn to play Quidditch in for the past two years were worn to parchment thinness and had holes in all sorts of interesting places. They did a great deal to keep the interest of the female population of the school riveted during especially dull games.

Of course, she had always thought Harry Potter looked like someone who'd never had sex in his life, but then appearances were deceiving.

After that, Blaise borrowed Pansy's Invisibility Cloak and began following Draco around in earnest. A terrible perverse curiosity had seized her. Draco would kill her if he knew she was following him, of course, but in her feverish state that hardly mattered; she had to know, to be sure. She crept after him when he went down to Quidditch practice, when he studied in the library at night, when he climbed to the top of the Astronomy Tower --

And looked at the stars, and went back downstairs alone.

For that was the most peculiar part. Her spying was not entirely fruitless -- there was definitely something going on between Draco and Potter. They met up with each other whenever they seemed to have any spare moments. They studied together. They practiced fencing. When Draco got a hundred and ten percent on his Potions exam, he showed the results to Harry, looking superior. Harry said something snarky. Draco kicked him in the shin. When Harry got his broom upgraded, he went and showed it to Draco. Draco said something snarky. Harry took a handful of the packaging paper that had come with the broom and shoved it into Draco's shirt pocket. Whereupon Draco had taken the broom and thrown it out the window. It had fallen several stories and landed on Mrs. Norris, who had set up a plaintive yowl. Draco had burst out laughing and Harry had dragged him away from the window.

It was at this point that Blaise learned that Harry Potter was also in possession of an Invisibility Cloak.

But they never touched each other. At least, not in any significant way. They were easy around each other, comfortable in a way Blaise had noted boys rarely were. When Harry fell asleep in the library one night while studying, Draco had taken his quill and, with a look of fiendish glee, had scribbled small obscene messages up and down Harry's forearm. When Harry wanted Draco to be quiet, he'd clap a hand over his mouth. So yes, they touched each other. They pushed each other, tugged on the back of each other's shirts, stole each other's notes, ate off the same plate. But as for behavior that could contribute to some kind of scurrilous gossip, there was none.

This was upsetting to Blaise. If she could not categorize their relationship, she could not understand it. If she could not understand it, then she could not understand Draco. If he had been sleeping with Harry Potter, that would have been one thing. Weird, perhaps, but understandable: Harry was gorgeous, and boys were stupid and largely driven by their hormones. But since that did not appear to be what was going on, then there was more to it. And if there was more to it, it stopped looking like some foolish mistake on Draco's part and a great deal more like a calculated decision.

It started to look like betrayal.

In her obsession, now, to understand what was going on, Blaise began watching both boys even in public. Their social faces were almost unshakable: they were single-minded in their brutality towards each other. It seemed odd to her, this public hostility, a travesty of some kind, like watching someone scribble ugly graffiti on a beautiful painting. She wondered how they could stand to keep it up.

One afternoon she had glanced at Draco in Potions class and had seen him suddenly smile down at his desk, as if he had thought of something amusing. Driven by habit now, she looked immediately at Harry, seated all the way across the room. And she had seen him smile, too, at the same instant, the exact same way. Neither Draco nor Harry was looking at each other and there was no obvious cause for their mirth. Over the next few days she caught this happening more and more. They would react, simultaneously, to some invisible stimulus, and if she had not known it was impossible she would have thought that somehow they could read each other's minds.

She began to wonder if she was losing her own mind. It was hard to be the solitary custodian of such an enormous secret. Perhaps she ought to tell Draco she knew. Of course, he might well break her neck for her troubles. Nevertheless, she had nearly made up her mind to tell him when she realized in fact that she was not the only one who knew, after all.

Charms class had just begun, and everyone was filing into the classroom and taking their seats. In the confusion, Colin Creevey had slipped into the room, and had announced in a loud whisper to Professor Flitwick that Harry Potter would not be coming to class that day because he had been injured during Quidditch practice and was in the infirmary.

Two things immediately happened. First, Blaise's gaze flew to Draco. Sprawled behind his desk, he hardly moved, only she saw him whiten, and he brought his hand down hard on the point of his quill, so that it dug into his palm. Secondly, she saw that someone else had turned to look where she did -- Ron Weasley had whipped around in his seat to stare at Draco. Draco shot him a furious glare, and shook his head almost imperceptibly, and Ron turned back to face the front of the room, biting his lip.

Blaise barely had time to wonder what that meant when the classroom door opened and Hermione Granger came in. She said something a low voice to Professor Binns, and then moved to take her seat next to Ron. As she went, she passed Draco. Her bookbag struck against the side of his desk and knocked his Charms book to the floor.

"Clumsy Mudblood," Draco hissed at her.

Hermione glared at him. "Inbred moron," she said, retrieved the book, and hurled it on his desk with a loud thump. She walked away, tossing her hair. Only someone who had been observing this interaction very closely would have noticed, as Blaise did, that when Hermione dropped the book back on Draco's desk there was a folded bit of parchment stuck between the pages that had not been there before.

Later she would go into Draco's bookbag and find the note. It said, *Harry's all right, he just broke his wrist doing silly stunts. Don't go by the infirmary, there are too many people there. And you were wrong about page eleven in the DaDA textbook, it was page fourteen. You owe me a butterbeer. --Love, Hermione*

Love, Hermione?

It was at this point that Blaise's confusion turned into a seething bitterness. Watching Draco and Hermione now, she saw how they looked at each other, and even how he looked at that repellent Weasley boy's little sister, and she realized that this was much more than she had imagined, it was an awful, gigantic Gryffindor conspiracy. As if it wasn't enough that they had to win the House Cup six years running, they had somehow conspired to steal Draco Malfoy away from his house. Draco, the best of all of them, the brightest and the most beautiful, who gave Slytherin something to be proud of even though they were always losing

the bloody Quidditch Cup to Gryffindor. It was hateful, it was beyond bearing. And, curled on her bed alone at night, she realized it was more than the disgrace to the House, more than her terror of what would happen to Draco when the other Slytherins found out. More than outraged Death Eater loyalty.

It was the gentleness that had come to Draco in these past months, that would not have been gentleness in anyone else but that was a dulling of his cutting edge truly startling to anyone who really knew him. It was the faint dreaming distance behind his eyes and the cruelty that had gone from his smile and the blade that had gone from his voice. It was that he loved them. Draco Malfoy, who had never loved anything, person or place or object, and now he did, and it was not her. It had been one thing when she had been able to tell herself that he was incapable of love. But now she knew he was not. They had flawed him with their own humanity, her beautiful ice prince, and now he was just like them and just like everyone else. And still he did not want her and it didn't matter because she had lost her faith in him and in her House and in everything that had ever been important.

The foundations of her beliefs crumbled around her and blew away like dust, and in her mind the dust was pale green, the color of Potter's eyes.

Blaise half-closed her own eyes, remembering, but her reverie did not last. Someone was banging on the bathroom door and yelling. She stood up straight, tucked her hair behind her ears, and yanked the door open.

Millicent Bulstrode, clad in a hula skirt and a coconut bra and clutching an empty bottle of Archenland wine, collapsed through the door. "Blaise," she moaned, rolling over on the cold marble floor. "I think I'm going to be sick."

Blaise thinned her glossed lips into a cool sneer. "Go ahead, Millicent," she said. "It could only improve the décor in this ghastly bathroom."

And with that, she stepped over the other girl and went out to the party to rejoin the other Slytherins.

"Ginny," Seamus said at last, and she shivered again at the sound of his voice: so familiar, so caressing with its soft Irish lilt, and yet suddenly not familiar at all. "Ginny, it's good to see you again..."

Instinctively, Ginny drew back, her hand rising to nervously touch the charm bracelet at her other wrist. "Seamus, you saw me this afternoon."

"Did I?" The edged smile widened with a deadly sort of amusement. "It feels like fifty years."

He began to walk across the room towards her. Ginny stared at him, her mind awhirl. Was he angry at her? Was he *drunk*? She couldn't imagine Seamus drunk. "I thought you said you were going to go home tonight...won't you have missed your train?"

"Anxious to get rid of me?" He was standing directly in front of her now; she craned her head to look up at him, but with an alarming suddenness, he had dropped to his knees and was kneeling opposite her, their eyes on a level. "Not that it matters much now."

"Seamus...?" She heard the uncertainty in her own voice. The fine hairs along her arms and the back of her neck were prickling sharply.

"It's all right," he said. There was an odd tenderness in his voice -- it was like tenderness, but then again not quite. There was a familiarity about that tone that she couldn't place. He reached out and lightly touched the edge of her hair, just at her temple.

At the light touch, her skin exploded into goosebumps. She felt her eyes fly wide with astonishment -- she never reacted like this when Seamus touched her. Never.

"It's all right," he said again, in the same odd tone. And at the same time that he touched her, she saw the corner of his mouth curl in a disdainful smirk. "I just wanted to say goodbye. You wouldn't grudge me a goodbye, would you, Ginny?"

His hand was cool against the side of her face. "Why," she said, "do you keep saying my name?"

He dropped his hand from her face, skated his fingers along the edge of her shoulder. "Perhaps, Ginny darling," he said gently, "perhaps you haven't been as sensible as you should have been." His fingers encircled her arm. "Come here," he said, and pulled her sharply towards him.

The suddenness of the movement caught her off guard and she half-fell against him. He seemed to expect this, taking her weight easily, his arms sliding around her. They were wrapped together now like passionate lovers, but there was no passion in his voice when he spoke, only a cold and deadly certainty. "You came looking for me," he said against her ear. "All those years I remembered you. You got away from me. You were the only one who ever did." He jerked her hard against him and nipped at the corner of her mouth -- not a kiss but a bite, and it *hurt*. Ginny tasted a metallic tang in her mouth. But she didn't pull away. "I swore to myself I'd spill your blood and know what it tasted like," he hissed into her ear, licking her blood off his own mouth. "Your *pure*, wizarding blood."

Ginny still didn't move. There was a humming in her ears like static electricity and part of her wanted to faint. Part of her was terrified. But that part seemed closed away behind a glass wall and there was only this here, this moment, and his hard grip on her shoulders and his heartbeat against her. "Tom," she said. "You're *Tom*."

"And who else would I be?" he said, and it almost made sense, never mind the insanity of the situation.

"Are you going to kill me," she said. There wasn't enough emotion in her voice for it to be a question.

For a moment he did not move. He felt like Seamus against her, the same lightly muscled shoulders and arms, the same cornsilk hair that smelled like soap and boy. But the voice, under the accent and the softness, was Tom's voice, and his eyes were Tom's eyes. Eyes that opened onto a mind like a cauldron of writhing snakes. "Yes," he said. "You wouldn't deny me that, would you, not when I've waited so long?"

"No," she said. "No, I wouldn't deny you that, Tom."

She felt him smile against her cheek. "Good," he said, and, gripping her wrist, bent her back until she was lying on the floor and he was crouching over her and the floor was hard under her slim body cushioned only by

the material of her thin nightgown. He had her left wrist gripped in his hand, the charms on her bracelet cutting painfully into her skin. He was left-handed. Seamus had not been. And, looking up at him, it was as if she could see through Seamus' face to Tom's: eyes like blue ink, narrow mouth like a razor cut. And the mind behind those ink-blue eyes was Tom's mind, that clever brain fermenting into poison, a consciousness as slippery as a wall of black glass, and that one chink in it, that one weakness, which was his arrogance. His willingness to believe that she would lie down and die for him because he asked her to, because he was Tom, and everyone always did whatever he wanted.

"The fire," she said. "It burns. We're too close to it."

"You won't mind it for very long," he said, and smiled with Seamus' mouth. The gold hair fell into his eyes as he leaned over her. He brushed the knuckles of his right hand along her collarbone, along the edge of the neck of her gown. The way he might admiringly stroke a glass figurine he was about to smash. "You're quite cooperative," he said. "I might kill you a little quicker, for that."

"How did you get here, Tom?" she said. "Did you come here for me?"

"You brought me back," he murmured, hands stroking her possessively. "Your tears, my blood. Sympathetic magic, you remember? You heard me talk about it when you spied on me all those years ago. You must have missed me badly, Ginny. You must have *wanted* me back," and as he spoke his hand slid down into the bodice of her nightgown and Ginny fought down the violent urge to jerk herself away, fought it down so hard that she bit her lip savagely. "Didn't you?" he hissed.

"Always," she said.

"You used to tell me you'd never kissed a boy," he said, a lazy smile coursing across his face. "Is that still true?"

"Never -- anyone that mattered. Tom --"

But he was leaning forward, his mouth brushing over her cheek, her jaw, her lips. Like the brush of a burning butterfly's wing, his touch was light, and scorched her. When his mouth touched hers she tasted her own blood on his lips. She arched up against him, her shoulders dropping back, her

throat bared, and he seemed to recognize this as a gesture of submission, because his eyes went heavy and dark with amusement.

He drew back, releasing her wrist, moving his hand to her shoulder to pull her into a better position, and as he did, she threw out her arm, thrusting her hand into the center of the blazing fire, and the pain coursed up her arm like a shriek but it didn't matter because what mattered was that the charm bracelet around her wrist had caught on fire and every charm on it was activating all at once.

It was like an explosion. Like several explosions. The force of so many powerful spells activating simultaneously knocked them both sideways, knocked Tom off of her, and Ginny rolled to the side and curled herself into a ball. Brightly hued lights burst out of the fire, lighting the room in carnival colors. Jangling, discordant music poured into the room, half-deafening her, and then the air was full of flying objects -- birds and silver arrows and dinner plates and furniture and through the teeming air Ginny saw Tom trying to struggle to his feet, and she tried to scramble away but the pain in her hand was too bad and then something dark came hurtling at her out of the fireplace and there was a bright pain behind her eyes and then there was blackness.

"It smells like mud," said Draco, looking glumly down at the glass of murky fluid Madam Pomfrey had set on his bedside table. The morning sunlight poured through the half-open window like a benediction and laid a sheer gilded varnish over his bright hair and light eyes and even made the glass on the table sparkle, although anything would have looked good to Hermione on this particular morning.

She yawned and scrubbed the back of her hand across her eyes. "That's too bad. Drink it."

Draco took the glass and sighed. "I suppose it would be a bit much to hope for an antidote that tastes like a 1982 Chateau Haute Brion."

"You are so spoiled," said Hermione succinctly, "that it is either a thing of wonder or a thing of horror. I am not entirely sure which."

"You know," said Draco, raising his eyes from the glass, "I think Madam Pomfrey has designs on me."

Hermione gaped at him. "What?"

"Yes, indeed. She keeps offering to bandage me up in places that don't need bandaging. The poor woman is mad with lust. Not that one could blame her..."

"Draco, this is a transparent attempt to distract me. Drink your antidote."

"But it tastes bad," he said in a small, pitiful voice, hunching his shoulders inside his pajamas.

"You haven't even tried it."

"It smells funny and it looks like mud."

Hermione got to her feet. "Draco Malfoy," she said, in a dangerously quiet voice. "I have been up since three o'clock this morning with Professor Snape, talking about your antidote. I know exactly how often you have to take it, and exactly what will happen to you if you don't. I am also extremely tired and irritable. And if you do not take your antidote *right now*, I will SNEAK UP BEHIND YOU WITH A RAZOR BLADE AND SHAVE OFF ALL OF YOUR HAIR. AND I MEAN IT!"

Hermione finished on a gasp, and crossed her arms furiously across her chest.

To her great annoyance, Draco was laughing at her. "You're cute when you're hacked off."

"Flirt with me, Malfoy, and I'll pour a bottle of Skele-Gro on your head. Let's see how cute you think you are when your head's swelled up to the size of a beach ball."

"There are many who would say my head is swollen already," Draco pointed out, lifting the glass to his mouth.

Hermione felt a smile building behind her eyes. She quashed it. "Be quiet," she said. "And drink your antidote - now, please."

To her surprise, he drank it, then dropped the glass with a shudder and pressed his hands to his stomach. "Ugh," he groaned.

Hermione leaned forward to retrieve the glass, and gave his hair a sympathetic gentle tug as she did so. It was so fine and silky, it clung to her fingers. She drew her hand back and picked up the glass. "Was it awful?"

He straightened up, wincing. His mouth was drawn as in pain, but his voice was light when he replied. "Tasted a bit like cinnamon and sugar. If you took cinnamon and sugar and sprinkled them on an old shoe, then dumped a vat of Bubotuber pus on it. How often do I have to take this stuff?"

"Three times a day."

Draco moaned, and sprawled tragically backward onto the pillows. Hermione decidedly did not notice that when he leaned back, his shirt rode up, showing the smooth pale skin of his torso, the elegant curve of his ribs. He had lost weight, and his pajama bottoms were loose around his narrow hipbones. She hoped that the antidote, temporary though it might be, would keep him from losing any more weight after this, at least until a more permanent antidote was found.

"It burns," he said, fretfully, and looked at her, wide-eyed. "I have a very low pain threshold, really. Hardly a threshold at all. More like a small but tastefully decorated foyer."

Hermione, knowing this to be patently untrue, made a face at him. "If it makes you feel better to writhe about and complain, then writhe about and complain. But if I catch you not taking your antidote, I'll kill you."

Draco rolled over onto his stomach and grinned up at her disarmingly. "That reasoning represents a logical fallacy," he said.

"I can live with that," she said. "And stop batting your eyelashes at me. That pitiful-puppy business might work on Harry, but it will *not* work on me. Snape says you should get up, and get up you shall. On your feet, Malfoy."

"I thought you were here to lend a bit of delicate feminine presence to the proceedings," Draco complained woefully. "Soothing my fevered brow, patting me with damp washcloths..."

"Snape said the antidote will work faster if you move about a bit and get the blood going through your veins," Hermione pointed out. "So either get up, Draco, or my delicate feminine boot will make contact with your --"

"Squabbling as usual, I see," said Snape, appearing suddenly and almost noiselessly at the foot of the bed. "Miss Granger, has he taken his antidote?"

"Yes," said Hermione, wondering momentarily at the bizarreness of a situation which found her allied with Snape. "He complained a lot, but he took it."

"Sit up, Draco," said Snape. "Let me look at you."

Looking mildly surprised, Draco sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. Hermione looked closely at him -- did he look any better? She was forced to admit to herself that she could see no real difference, except perhaps a bit more color in his cheeks, but that could be a number of things.

Snape peered down at Draco as if he were staring at something growing in a petrie dish. Then he folded his arms, apparently satisfied. "There will be side effects," he announced.

"I don't suppose these are side effects along the lines of 'fortuitous ability to conduct a light opera in French'?" Draco asked, somewhat wistfully.

"No," said Snape flatly. Hermione wondered why Draco bothered. Snape had less of a sense of humor than Voldemort, who at least, according to reports, was prone to cackling evilly. "You must be cautious, Draco. While I encourage you to take part in physical activity, you must be very careful with your psychic strength. Please keep your performance of magic to a minimum. This antidote *will* interfere with your abilities, especially your Magid gifts. I would prefer if you avoided wandless magic entirely; your telepathy --"

At that, Draco's head snapped up. "I couldn't reach Harry last night," he said. "I was trying..."

"Well, stop trying," said Snape, but something flickered behind his eyes, and Hermione, for no reason she could explain, felt a sudden twinge of cold panic. "I see no reason for you to waste your energy attempting to contact Potter, who is doubtless still asleep in his dormitory. You should concentrate on conserving your energy."

"Thank you, Professor," said Draco. "I appreciate it."

"And go outside," said Snape. "It is a very pleasant morning."

Both Hermione and Draco stared at him. Hermione had never heard Snape use the word "pleasant" before. She wondered if something was going on with him. He seemed to be trying to distract Draco, although from what, she couldn't imagine.

"Hmph," said Snape, interrupting her pondering, and left in a swirl of dark robes.

Draco was on his feet. "Pull the curtains shut, will you?" he requested, shrugging off his pajama top.

"Oh!" said Hermione, and stepped outside the curtains, hastily tugging them shut behind her, although not before the image of Draco, shirtless, unknotting the tie at the waistband of his pajama bottoms, branded itself against the back of her eyes. He was *ill*, she reminded herself sharply. Doubtless this was just her concern and the urge to take care of him mixing itself up in her brain and sending her all the wrong sorts of signals.

Draco emerged from behind the curtains, tugging a long-sleeved white cotton jumper down over charcoal trousers. "I need my hairbrush," he muttered. "I can't find it."

"We're going to wake up Harry, aren't we? You can borrow his."

"Harry owns a hairbrush?"

Hermione stuck out her tongue. "I think your hair looks nice," she said. It did look nice, she thought, it was too fine to tangle properly and so simply looked slightly ruffled. She was sure its disarray was driving Draco to distraction. "Do you want to tell Harry, or should I? He'll be so happy."

"That you think my hair looks nice? Oh, he'll be dead chuffed, I'm sure."

"About the antidote, idiot!" Hermione squeezed her hands together. "Or did you, you know..." She tapped the side of her head. "Tell him already?"

"No." Draco shook his head, faint concern wavering behind his eyes. "I haven't been able to find him since I woke up...I guess maybe he's asleep. I thought I remembered him being here last night. Did you see him?"

Hermione shook her head. "No. I thought he was off helping Snape."

"Maybe I dreamed it." Draco shrugged. "Anyway. Yeah. I guess he'd want to know, so we should tell him." He smiled then, almost as if he couldn't *not* smile, a real, genuine smile that flickered fast across his face and was gone as soon as he could hide it. "He'll be happy, right?"

Later, Hermione would remember that smile, and wonder if she would ever see him smile like that again.

"Of course he'll be happy," she said. "You complete idiot."

"Watch who you're calling an idiot, Granger."

"Come on, Malfoy. Let's go."

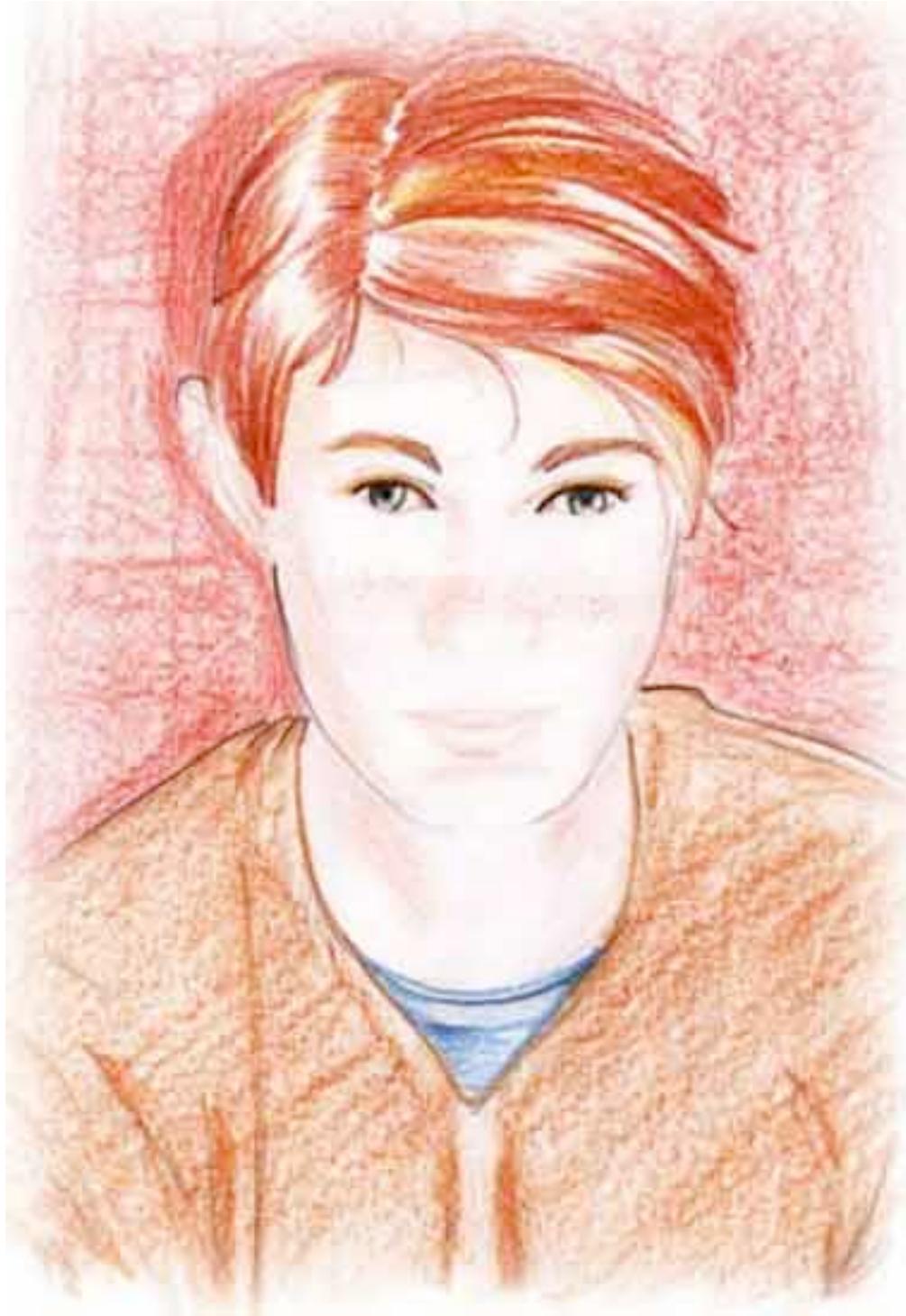
Outside the train window, the scenery slid by peacefully. Mountains had given way to hills, hills to flat country dotted with trees and small towns. The snow had melted away, though ice still sparkled in nets against the windows of passing houses and between the branches of trees.

Harry sat and looked out the window of the express train from Hogsmeade and tried not to think.

He was surprised he had managed to stay awake so long. He had lain down on the stiffly padded seats, his bag under his head, and tried to

sleep, but had found himself, after a time, drawn to staring out the window instead. Perhaps it was that it was so cold in the compartment, and the scar on his hand was bothering him. It was raw with pain as if it had been newly made. He almost expected, when he glanced down, to see blood on his palm, but his bare hand was pink and clean and looked as it always had. The silvery scar bisecting the familiar whorls and scrolls ... too bad he had never paid attention to Palmistry during Divination class...

The door to his compartment slid open. Harry looked up, expecting the conductor or the snack cart witch, but it was Ron.



How awkward, he thought.

Ron slid the door shut and came to sit across from Harry. He sat down and they looked at each other, as boys do, somewhat guardedly. He was as Harry had remembered him. A little thinner, perhaps. His blue eyes had

blue shadows under them. He wore a gray cableknit crewneck jumper and corduroy trousers. He said, "I was just thinking that you've never taken a train without me before. Have you?"

Harry shook his head. "No."

"How is it?"

Harry looked back out the window. The sky outside was darkening and the window gave him back his own reflection. Pale skin, green eyes, hair like tangled black thread. No scar. No glasses -- he'd spelled his eyes back at the train station in Hogsmeade. "It's lonely," he said.

"It's funny," Ron said, conversationally. "I never thought about you as being lonely. You always seemed to have everything so well in hand. Everyone always wanting to be with you. Everyone always watching you. I didn't see how you could be lonely, with all that attention. I mean, heroes don't get lonely. Or if they do, you never hear about it."

"I think it doesn't make for good stories," said Harry. "But I do get lonely. That time you stopped speaking to me fourth year, half the time I was so lonely I wished I could die. The rest of the time I wished I could kill *you*. But nobody wants to hear about that. Reporters don't ask about that. They want to know about my dead parents and who I'm dating and where I get my clothes and how I plan on offing Voldemort --"

"I notice you don't deny it," said Ron.

"Don't deny what?"

"I called you a hero," said Ron. "And you didn't say *'No, I'm not.'*"

"Well, this is my dream," Harry said. "I guess I can say what I like in it."

Ron leaned back against the seat. His hands were open on his knees. In reality, perhaps, they would have been full of Chocolate Frogs, Exploding Snap cards, half a bag of sherbet lemons, and the other half spilled out over Harry's lap. Now they were empty. "It's because of Malfoy," he said. "Ironic that he turned out to be the one to teach you what you really are."

Harry remembered Draco up on the tower, saying *This is a hero's choice. Your friends, or everything else.* And he had not argued or denied it. "Ron," he said. "Why are you here? Not that I'm not glad to see you. I mean, I miss you. But if I'm dreaming you up there must be some reason beyond that. Especially since we're not really friends right now."

"Maybe your mind thought you'd be likely to listen to me," Ron said. "I don't know why. You never listen to anyone. You don't think you need anyone, Harry, that's your trouble, because you don't trust anyone, not really. Remember the Second Task? You thought you had to save everyone under that lake because you couldn't even trust that *Dumbledore* wouldn't let a load of students drown during a school event. I said you were thick, but it's more than that. You're not thick. You just don't trust anyone."

"Well, why should I? I trusted you, and look what you did."

"You never trusted me. And you never trusted Hermione, either, not really. Look how you shut her out. I thought you trusted Malfoy, but I guess you don't. Not that I much care. It'll half-kill him, what you've done, and I say just as well. Hermione's strong. She can take it. But not Malfoy."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "So now you're my guilty conscience," he said. "I didn't know my conscience was so...Victorian-sounding. Look, I know I did the right thing. That doesn't mean I don't have doubts. Everyone questions the things they've done...but they'll both be fine without me."

Ron shook his head. "Haven't you ever wondered how you've managed to make yourself so necessary to so many people?"

Harry rubbed the back of his hand wearily across his eyes. "No," he said. "No, I haven't wondered that."

Ron smiled. It was a bright and cheeky smile, so familiar and so very much like *Ron*. He leaned forward and tugged on a lock of Harry's hair -- an oddly gentle gesture. "Just remember," he said. "You were mine first."

"I'm doing this for *you*," Harry said in a half-whisper, but Ron had already begun to fade, the seat back becoming visible through his face and hair, and then it all began to dissolve -- the compartment, the darkening sky, the window, Ron himself -- like parchment burning up in a fire. There was

a loud shrieking noise in Harry's ears and as he blinked himself awake, struggling into a sitting position, he realized that it was the Sounding Charms announcing the train's arrival at King's Cross Station.

He was in London.

Nothing could have prepared Hermione for the sight that greeted her and Draco when they stepped through the portrait hole and into the Gryffindor common room that morning.

It was in shambles. The furniture was knocked over. The floor was covered with a bizarre array of objects, from decorative ornaments to shattered dinner plates to pulverized glass. The floor was covered in black ash. And the east window was smashed open. The air in the room was freezing cold.

And by the fireplace, sprawled in a crumpled heap, was Ginny. She lay on a bed of her own torn clothes, her arms flung wide, her bright hair over her face.

Hermione almost dropped her wand in shock. "Ginny --"

But Draco had already gone across the room and was kneeling down next to Ginny. With a surprising sudden gentleness he brushed the hair out of her face, touched his fingers to her throat. "She's breathing," he said, still looking down at her. "We'd better get her to the infirmary. Come help me lift her, Hermione --"

But Ginny's eyelids were fluttering. She coughed and her eyes flew wide. "No," she whispered. "No infirmary..."

Hermione took a few steps closer. She could see that Ginny's hair was matted with blood at her temple. "She's injured," she said. "Ginny -- what happened?"

Draco glanced up at the broken window, his expression frankly puzzled. "Did someone get in here? How?"

"No," Ginny said in the same faint whisper. "Seamus -- he got out."

"*Seamus?*" Hermione was flabbergasted. "He did this?"

Draco's mouth set in a thin line. "That rotten bastard --"

Ginny reached out a hand and caught at his sleeve. "Not Seamus," she said. "Tom."

Draco's eyes met Hermione's over Ginny's head. He looked as puzzled as she felt. "What?"

"*Tom*," said Ginny, and coughed again. "My hand hurts," she said almost inaudibly. "I burned it --"

"She's delirious," Hermione said to Draco, quickly. "Probably concussed. Let's get her to Madam Pomfrey as fast as we can."

Draco nodded. "I'm going to carry you," he said to Ginny. "Can you hold on to me?"

"I can hold on to you," she said, and closed her eyes. She put her arms around his neck and let him lift her up, only crying out a little in pain from her burned hand. "But Tom," she whispered, "what about Tom --"

"Ginny," Draco said, with a rather astonishing amount of patience (it astonished Hermione, anyway) "there's no one else in here."

"Oh," Ginny said, and there was a world of despair in that one word. She shut her eyes, and did not say another word until the three of them reached the infirmary.

It was well into the morning and Pansy's party was showing no signs of stopping. Blaise wandered listlessly through the cavernous solarium, looking for Pansy. Most of the students were gathered around the gigantic silver vats of *Dementor's Kiss*, the most powerful cocktail in wizarding creation. It was a turquoise-orange color, and smoked. Blaise thought it smelled like mountain troll and tasted worse.

Malcolm Baddock detached himself from the rest of the crowd and began to make his way towards her, shooting seductive glances from beneath lowered eyelashes. Blaise fought down an exasperated sigh. Any interest she'd ever had in Malcolm had evaporated when she realized that her liason with him was not annoying Draco the way she had hoped it would. "Blaise, darling," he said, and handed her a glass of smoking turquoisish fluid. "Pansy was looking for you."

"Was she?" Blaise took the glass, but did not attempt to drink the contents. "Did she say what she wanted?"

Malcolm shrugged. "No. I think she got distracted when Crabbe and Goyle started pole-dancing round the pillars."

Blaise had already noticed this. It was not an attractive sight. "Well, where is she now?" she asked, and surreptitiously poured her *Dementor's Kiss* into the pot of a nearby fern. It promptly curled up and died.

"No idea," said Malcolm. "Say, Blaise, I was thinking that maybe you and I could go somewhere and have some sex."

Blaise frowned. "What is this, laziness?" she demanded. "Whatever happened to the clever double entendre? That wasn't even a single entendre. It was a half entendre. You might as well stand in the middle of the room and shout 'Shag me, I'm desperate' at the top of your lungs."

"Would it help?"

"No," said Blaise.

Malcolm did not answer because at that moment Terence Higgs shot through the room at amazing speed, flailing his arms and shrieking at the top of his lungs, "Somebody stop me! For the love of God and all things holy, *somebody stop me!*"

He vanished through the French doors at the end of the hall as swiftly as he had come, pursued by a house-elf.

Blaise raised her eyebrows.

"Enchanted roller skates," said Malcolm.

"Oh," she said.

Across the room, Adrian Pucey had turned into a badger. The other students shoved him into a pink silk pillowcase.

"This party is awful," said Blaise.

Inside the pillowcase, Adrian had reverted to his normal shape. The pillowcase bulged and ripped. Bits of pink silk flew everywhere. Adrian staggered to his feet and was sick into a punch bowl.

"You're just upset that Malfoy didn't show," said Malcolm, a sudden razor edge to his voice. He lowered his dark eyes and glanced meditatively at his drink as he sipped it. "As if he would. He's got better things to do than hang around with us, apparently."

"Malfoy?" Blaise echoed. "Last week you were calling him Draco."

"That was before I knew he was a smarmy Gryffindor-lover." Malcolm's nostrils flared. "Apparently he's as cowardly as he is arrogant. I'm not surprised he didn't come tonight -- he knows he'll be up against the wall with the other traitors soon enough."

"Malcolm, I find your fascist tendencies deeply erotic," said Blaise. "I hope you know that."

Malcolm looked as if he had no idea how to respond to this. "Well, he *isn't* anything special," he insisted.

"Right," said Blaise.

"I mean, just because someone has wavy white-blond hair and sculpted cheekbones this really cute way of sucking on a quill when they're bored, doesn't mean that they're entitled to special treatment," Malcolm sulked.

Blaise raised her right eyebrow a fraction. "You know, this casts your desire to see Draco up against a wall into an entirely new light."

Malcolm sniffled. "Does this mean you aren't going to sleep with me?"

"No. Try Pansy."

"Pansy? She's been passed around by more guys than a Quaffle. Forget it."

"Sexist," snapped Blaise. "If she were a boy you'd just say he was lucky."

"If she was a boy, I would --"

"Don't finish that sentence, Malcolm, you'll regret it. Look-- I'm off to find Pansy. Have a nice evening. Oh, and if you're really lonely you can go knock Millicent's coconuts together in the bathroom."

"What...?"

"Have a nice night, Malcolm," said Blaise, and sashayed away.

"We need Harry."

Draco was tight-lipped, leaning back against the corridor wall outside the infirmary from Madam Pomfrey had banished them both. Hermione looked at him wearily. There was blood on his white shirt where Ginny's head had rested against his shoulder.

"What for?" she asked.

Draco looked at her in utter disbelief, as if she'd announced that she couldn't see why everyone was so bothered about Voldemort as he seemed a nice enough fellow to her. "Because of his world-famous recipe for raspberry trifle," he said. "What do you think we need him for? Look, there's obviously something going on here. I don't believe what Ginny said to Pomfrey at all."

Hermione sighed. Once in the infirmary, Ginny had revived enough to tell Madam Pomfrey that she'd dropped her charm bracelet into the fireplace and had burned herself trying to retrieve it. The destruction of the room, she'd claimed, was due to the charms on the bracelet all activating at once. She had not repeated her claims against Seamus, and she had not, thankfully, mentioned Tom.

"I don't believe her, either," she said. "I just don't know what you expect Harry to do about it."

"Maybe he can...I don't know, talk to her. I don't think she'll talk to me, especially not after yesterday."

"You mean after your little display of pointless cruelty in the common room?"

"That's your interpretation," shrugged Draco. "I assure you that I am never pointlessly cruel."

"But you *were* cruel."

"Not without a reason."

Hermione scoffed. "*Honestly*, Draco..."

"Are you scoffing at me?" Draco was grinning at her, that crooked, disarming grin that made her forget what it was she had wanted to say. "I'm impressed. It's hard to work up a good scoff these days."

Hermione felt herself redden, then set her mouth. "Don't change the subject."

Draco raised an eyebrow, splashed his cool ice-water gaze over her, and then shrugged. "This is all very unfair," he remarked. "We hardly need another crisis. I feel that my crisis schedule is already full."

"I'm not sure that Ginny would talk to Harry, anyway," Hermione said. "Yesterday she called him an oblivious moron pig."

Draco burst out laughing. "*Did* she? Oh, that's rich. I'm sorry I missed it. I would have liked to have seen his face." He glanced down then at his watch. Hermione tried not to notice that the band was slightly loose around his wrist. "Look, he has to be up by now. Is there some reason you don't want me to go and get him?"

"No. Well. Maybe. I don't know..." Hermione drew upon her mastery of the English language and found herself at a loss for words. There was no way to explain the sourceless foreboding that had gripped her earlier when Snape had been in the infirmary. Not that she felt as if something had happened to Harry -- she didn't. It was something else entirely. Something that had to do with Draco. Somehow, she felt that if she let him go away

from her now, she would never see him again. Probably it was just panic over his health. Intellectually, she knew that. Not that it helped.

He looked at her, silver eyes lit to a curious opacity. Harry's eyes were always the same color, but Draco's eyes were a changeable gray, like ice and sleet and frost and all cold and mutable things. They could be as bright as the glancing blow of sunlight striking against an icicle, as dark as clouds weighted with snow. Right now they gave away little, but she knew enough to read his posture -- it was politely hesitant. He was waiting for her to tell him to go to Harry, but if she did not give the word, he would go anyway.

"Go," she said.

"I'll be right back." He touched her shoulder, lightly, and turned to go. She watched him walk away. As he receded into the distance, she felt the sudden urge to call after him -- that feeling that if she let him go now, she'd never get him back again had returned, stronger than ever.

As it turned out later, the feeling was not entirely unjustified. But Hermione did not know that. She did, however, look away so that she would not see him round the corner at the end of the corridor. When she turned back at last, he was gone.

Ron had slept, on the floor, surrounded by smashed chess pieces, and now it was another day, and the Dark Lord did not want to play chess. He wanted to play with dice. Ron did not want to play dice. It was a stalemate.

"No," said Ron, sitting with his back against the empty fireplace under the carved angels with their hidden eyes. There was a stained glass window above him, and the sunlight came down through it. The red panes of the window bled on him, and the blue panes wept, and the green panes bathed everything in a poisonous light. "No. I won't play."

"Then I will break all your fingers," said Voldemort. "I will flay the skin from your hands and your feet and you will crawl to me on your knees."

"I don't even know how to play dice," pointed out Ron.

"That is irrelevant," said the Dark Lord. He held a pair of amethyst dice in his bone-white hand. The dots upon it were small black rayed suns. "I wish to see what numbers you throw."

"I want to go outside," said Ron. "It's been days, I haven't seen the sun. Let me go out."

Rhysenn, in her gold cage, chuckled and hit the bars with the flat of her hand. She was naked again. Ron tried not to look at her. "The boy wants to go out," she giggled. "He actually wants to go *out*."

"You do know she's completely off her head," Ron said to Voldemort.

Voldemort, in a thoughtful manner, licked one of the dice with a narrow blackish tongue.

"Of course, look who I'm talking to," Ron observed, to nobody in particular.

The double doors at the end of the room opened. Lucius came in. Ron was not surprised to see him. Whenever anyone came in, it was either Lucius or Wormtail. Lucius was wearing a long dark green travelling cloak fastened with what looked like a long pin made of bone. "Master," he said, and bowed to Voldemort. He turned his pewter gaze on Ron next, and smiled a thin smile. "And you, boy," he said. "How are you finding your accommodations?"

"Despite all the gambling and the widespread nudity," said Ron, "I'm fairly bored. Thanks for asking."

"Lucius," said Voldemort. He had looked up from the dice in his hand. "What is this I hear you have been doing behind my back?"

Lucius blushed -- his version of a blush, a bloodless rush of further pallor. "My Lord. What do you mean?"

"Your son." Voldemort set the die down on the table and stood. He was a head taller than Lucius, who was not a small man. "You poisoned him, I hear. I don't recollect telling you to do that."

"Ah," said Lucius, with admirable poise. "That."

Ron pricked up his ears. He had not known anything about this. Draco, poisoned? Harry would be beside himself, so would the rest of them. He was not sure how he felt about it himself.

"Yes," said Voldemort. "That. Must I remind you, Lucius, that boy is mine and not yours. I did not make him to be spoiled with toxins."

"It was a regrettable accident, my Lord," said Lucius. "He smashed the vial of antidote I provided. A most unforeseen outcome."

"I would have foreseen it," replied Voldemort coldly. "He hates you and wants nothing of yours. You must come at people through what they love and not what they hate. I have told you that many times, Lucius."

"Harry Potter has left Hogwarts," said Lucius, apropos of nothing, or so it seemed to Ron.

"I know," said Voldemort. "We will find him out. It is only a matter of time."

"I can make more antidote," Lucius said.

"Can you?" Voldemort's voice was lazy, curious. "Such a powerful poison you used, so rare and ancient. *I am the assassin against whom no lock can hold.*" He chuckled dryly. "You must be very afraid of your son."

Lucius ignored this. "The antidote is simple. Save for one ingredient, which presents something of a conundrum."

"And why is that?"

For a bare fraction of a second, Lucius hesitated. "Because it doesn't exist," he said, at last.

Voldemort's scarlet eyes narrowed. He turned, and looked at Ron over his shoulder. "I do not think I want the boy listening to this," he said. He looked at Rhysenn, in her cage. "Take the boy upstairs," he said to her. "Take him to the roof."

"And what?" said Ron. "Throw me off?"

Voldemort smiled at him, a lipless smile that chilled Ron to the core. "You wanted to see the outside of this place," he said. "Now you will see it. And may you enjoy the sight."

It had probably been only a little more than thirty minutes, but it felt to Hermione that she had been waiting in the corridor outside the infirmary for hours before the door finally opened, and Madam Pomfrey came out.

"Oh! Madam Pomfrey. How is Ginny -- can I see her?"

"She needs to be left alone," said Madam Pomfrey firmly. She stood like a bulwark in front of the infirmary door, her arm stretched across it, keeping Hermione out. "She was badly burned. The skin on her hand needs to be regrown, and the process is painful. It is best if she remains unconscious through it." She narrowed her eyes at Hermione. "She also has bruises on her shoulders and a cut across her scalp. Do you know anything else about what happened to her -- is there anything you can tell me?"

Hermione shook her head, the words faltering on her lips. "No."

"That charm bracelet must have been important to her," observed Madam Pomfrey, rather dryly.

"Oh, it was. It was a Christmas present from Seamus."

Madam Pomfrey gave her a long look. "Ah, yes. Mister Finnigan. And where is he?"

"He went home," Hermione said. "Yesterday."

Silently, she prayed that this was true. What Ginny had said while reviving had been troubling. But then, people with head injuries often said things that made no sense. And Seamus has told Hermione yesterday that he was packing to leave. And Ginny had been babbling about Tom, and there was only one Tom that Hermione could think of that she might have meant...and that made no sense at all.

She glanced anxiously down the corridor. Where *was* Draco? If Harry had been in his dormitory room, they should both have been back already. And if he hadn't been there, Draco ought to have come back to tell her that. Maybe Harry had fuffed off to the Owlery to send a letter to Sirius or something. Either way, Draco ought to have returned by now.

"Madam Pomfrey," Hermione said. "The charm bracelet made a mess of the Gryffindor common room. I really ought to go and clean it up. If you could come and tell me when Ginny wakes up...I think she'd be a lot happier if one of us could come and be with her..."

Madam Pomfrey nodded, tight-lipped, as Hermione made her excuses. Hermione knew perfectly well that the older witch suspected that there was more to what was going on, but had decided not to make an issue of it. For which Hermione was profoundly grateful. She told herself she would thank Madam Pomfrey at a later date, and set off, half at a run, for Gryffindor Tower.

The common room was still a disaster. It looked as if Draco had cleared something of a path through the smashed plates and scattered flowers on his way upstairs, but had not exactly stopped to tidy up. Hermione paused at the foot of the boys' staircase, pricking her ears up, wondering if Harry and Draco were up there talking.

She heard only silence, the beat of her own blood in her ears.

Her uneasiness was growing inside her chest. The sense that something terrible had happened, was about to happen, seemed suddenly stifling, as if all the air had been sucked out of the room. Hermione half-closed her eyes. *Harry*, she thought. *Harry...please let nothing have happened to him, please.*

But surely she would know if something had. It was what she had dreaded every moment of every day, somewhere in the back of her mind, since she was eleven years old and he had sent her away, back through the fire, sent her back to safety and gone forward on his own. And she had known that it would always be like that, for as long as she loved him, this would be her life: a long series of corridors taking her away from him while he went forward towards a danger she could neither see nor protect him from.

There was no reason, now, for her to fear that something had happened to him. They were safe inside Hogwarts. He was safe. He had Draco and as long as Draco was alive, surely Harry would be alive too, because Draco would die to protect him. There was no reason for her to be afraid, but it didn't matter: sudden irrational terror gave her feet wings as she bolted upstairs, down the empty corridor, and flung open the door to the seventh year boys' dormitory.

It took her eyes a moment to adjust to the dimness inside the room. The first thing she saw when the darkness cleared was Draco sitting on Harry's bed. He had something white in his hand. It took her a moment to realize that it was a piece of parchment.

She stepped forward slowly, her heartbeat slowing to normal. If something had happened to Harry, there was no way Draco would be here like this, calmly reading a bit of parchment. Still, something about his posture -- the tenseness in his shoulders, the arms rigid at his sides -- forbade approach. "Draco...?" she whispered. "What's happened? What was that you were reading?"

He raised his head and looked at her. She had always liked torchlight better than Muggle electricity; it seemed to add color to things rather than bleach colors away. Under the torches, Draco looked blond rather than silver-haired and his eyes were the pale gold of coins rubbed to a tarnished sheen. He held the parchment out to her and said in a steady voice, "It's a letter from Harry." His voice was very calm. "Only I don't think he wrote it."

Hermione blinked at him. "But why..?"

"Because he wouldn't write this. He couldn't possibly have. Here -- read it," he said, and there was something odd in his voice, a slightly childish demanding tone that she'd rarely heard him use before, and then jokingly. She wasn't sure he was joking now. "You'll see what I mean."

She took the parchment from him and sat down on the bed to read it closer to the light. The handwriting leaped out at her first, it was absolutely Harry's, from the crooked t's to the inexpertly dotted i's. The handwriting of a boy who'd grown up writing in the dark, late at night, funny little journal entries he had never let her read, and as she scanned rapidly down the page she felt her mouth dry up and her heart quicken.

She read it over again, just to be sure, but the words on the page still said the same thing: *Draco, it feels weird to be writing you a letter, but I thought if I didn't there'd be more of a chance that you would follow me, and I don't want you to follow me--*

It went on. She finished the letter, feeling stunned, almost breathless with shock. She read it again, then tore her eyes from the page and stared at Draco. He was looking at her, wide-eyed, and there was an unguarded defenselessness in his expression that took her entirely by surprise. "You see what I mean?" he said. "He couldn't have written that. He wouldn't say those things. I think--"

"Is that," she interrupted, as calmly as she could, "all that there was?"

Something flickered behind his eyes. "No," he said, finally. "There was this..." and he took up something that had been lying beside him on the coverlet and held it out to her. The gold chain glittered like liquid fire under the torchlight and she could see the faint marks in the band of the Charm where Lucius had once scored it with his nails. "It was with the letter."

"Oh, God." Hermione heard the breathlessness in her own voice. "Oh, *Harry*." She reached out and took the Charm from Draco; he let her have it as if it was some casual trinket that didn't matter. "I can't believe he'd leave this behind...but then he said he didn't want to be followed..."

"Leave it behind?" Draco blinked at her. "You don't really think he wrote that letter and left this here on *purpose*, do you? I mean --"

"If he didn't write this, then who did?" Hermione bit her lip. "There are things in this letter that nobody could possibly know but Harry. This is his handwriting -- the way he crosses things out, even -- his way of wording things --" She broke off. "These are things nobody else could know but you two. I mean, Draco...are they true? Because I never knew that you went to visit his parents' graves. Did you?"

"Yes, we did, but -- but then someone forced him to write it!" Draco stood up suddenly, and paced away from the bed. She could see how thin his wrists were now, underneath the too-large cuffs of his jumper. "And took the Charm --"

"And did what with Harry? Killed him?"

Draco whirled and shot her a look of accusatory fury. "Don't even joke about that."

"I'm not joking." Her voice was even. "But I know Harry. And to get that Charm away from him you'd have to kill him. Unless he was willing to take it off voluntarily, it wouldn't come off. It's charmed that way, you know that, Draco."

His hands were clenching and unclenching into fists at his side as if he didn't know quite what to do with them. "You don't understand. Yesterday -- when we were talking -- he promised --"

"I know what he promised. It says it in the letter. Draco --" She yearned to reach out and touch him but held herself back. "People break promises. Even Harry breaks promises. If he thought it was for your good somehow --"

"But that's not what the letter says, does it?"

"I know." She looked at the piece of parchment in her lap. For a moment she wondered whether to point out the fact that Harry, apparently, hadn't left her any kind of message at all. But she doubted Draco would be very much moved by that -- better no letter than one like this. Some part of her own mind rebelled against the idea that Harry could have written something so carelessly cruel. "It's a horrible letter. I don't want to think Harry wrote it, either. But the alternatives are worse. Either he wrote this and went off voluntarily or he didn't write this and something awful has happened to him -- I'd rather think he did this than that he's dead --"

"*He's not dead.*" Draco's voice was the keen edge of an icicle. "I'd know."

"Can you..." She made her voice as soft as possible. "Can you reach him at all?"

Draco shook his head. His mouth was a thin tense line. "No. He's blocking me. But I can feel him. I know he's alive."

"Is he blocking you on purpose?"

Draco nodded grudgingly. "Yes."

"Well, then..." Hermione looked down at the parchment in her lap. For a moment there was only the crackling of the fire. She could feel Draco standing near her, vibrating with tension like a strung wire. She reached into her pocket and drew her wand out and touched the end to the letter, half-whispering the words of the spell, which she'd used before less than a fortnight ago....

Ink and parchment, quill and bone

Let this letter's truth be shown.

Quill and inkpot, seal and feather

Reveal the writer of this letter.

The parchment trembled. Then the words on the page rearranged themselves to form a single name: **HARRY JAMES POTTER.**

Hermione jerked her head up and looked at Draco. She was standing close enough to him that she saw his color go, like flame blown out in a lamp. But other than that, he was expressionless. "Draco..."

"All right, then," he said. His voice was expressionless, too, and careful. "If that's the way it is."

"It's better than if something had happened to him," she said, in a half-whisper.

"I know." He spoke stiffly. "I guess I hadn't thought about it that way. You're right, of course." He pushed a lock of bright hair out of his eyes. Eyes that were wide open but looked shut, the blank eyes of someone who had just died. "You're always right."

Hermione put the letter down. She stood up, reaching her hand out to him. He had turned his face away from her; she could not read his expression. She could see the rapid pulse beating at the base of his throat, where his shirt fell away from the fragile collarbone. There were words she wanted to say. Words she would have said to Harry if it had been some similar situation, love-words and endearments. But they dried up in

her throat. She couldn't imagine them as applied to Draco Malfoy, who didn't lie, didn't dance, didn't faint, didn't cry, and didn't, ever, show that he felt anything at all. Not even now.

"I think maybe he wanted you to be angry at him," she said. "So you wouldn't miss him when he was gone..."

"No." Draco's voice was flat. He reached out and took the Charm out of her outstretched hand, and she saw the gold flecks of the firelight reflected in his iron-colored eyes. He closed his fingers around the Charm and said, "He doesn't think like that or tell those kind of lies. He knows me well enough to know that it wouldn't be some kind of favor to me to let me die hating him --"

"You're not going to die!" Hermione exploded. "Don't say that! And you could never hate Harry! It isn't in you --"

"Oh, *God*," said Draco and there was a terrible almost-mirthful humorlessness in his voice. "Save me from you bloody Gryffindors! You're just like him! I wonder if that's why --" He broke off, shaking his head, and his hair flew around him like colorless starlight. "Don't tell me what I'm capable of," he said, his voice calmer now. "Or what bloody good reason Potter might have had for what he's done. Tell yourself whatever pretty stories you want, but leave me out of it. Understand?"

Hermione felt a prickle of despair at her heart. It had been a long time since Draco had called Harry by his surname when speaking about him. And she did understand, despite herself. Draco came from a line of highborn wizards who would rather throw themselves on the point of the sword than wait for the slow transfixion, and as much as he had defied his father he was still a Malfoy through and through. He did not lie to others unless he had to and telling himself lies would be the worst sin of all.

"I understand," she said, and meant it. "I do --but I'm not lying. I'm not."

But he was backing away from her now; he almost knocked into the small table by Seamus' bed and they both stiffened with the surprise -- she could not remember ever having seen Draco walk into anything before. "I should go," he said. "I should..."

"Where are you going?" she interrupted, trying to keep the frantic note out of her voice. "Don't leave me right now -- I need you."

He paused, his back against the door, feeling behind himself for the knob. "No," he said. "You don't," and he pushed the door open and went out, closing it behind him. Hermione sank back onto the bed, hearing his footsteps receding down the corridor outside.

The last time Tom had been in London, the sky had been burning. Now it was not.

The sky had never burned in Diagon Alley, of course. In Diagon Alley it had been dark all day and dark all night because of the Cloaking Charms the Ministry used to protect themselves against Grindelwald's aerial attacks, but the sky had not burned. Under the canopy of the charms, the still air had been hot and stifling, lit by torchlight; it smelled of smoke and burning things. Shops were shuttered, the windows empty. There was little to sell, with importing curtailed: no dragon's blood from Germany, no phoenix feathers from the East. Potions were trading at three times their cost on the black market, and wands were strictly rationed.

Not that Tom had ever needed a wand, not really.

He remembered the smoke, the darkness and the burning. And at the Muggle orphanage it had been no better. He had stood on the roof with the other children and in the distance had seen the cities burn. They had cried around him, saying it was the end of the world. Tom had smiled to himself, pitying them: they knew only one world. He knew more.

Once he had brushed up against a soldier home on leave, in a crowded Muggle street; he had murmured *Visificus* under his breath and the images of war and death had poured into his mind like water from a broken dam. He saw men dying. They died on the beaches and in holes in the ground and they fell from the air like burst flowers of fire. They died calling for their mothers and more often they died calling for water. They crawled in their own blood and tore at their own skin. And he had known then, with a cold uncompassionate clarity, that this would never happen to him: he would make sure of it. He would never die. Death was interesting to him, in a distant sort of way: the artistry of it, the

mechanics, the complex engines of life running down and stopping all in a single instant. But he wanted no part of it. It was too commonplace, too ordinary. Too human.

He looked around him now, at the few people hurrying back and forth along the alley under the bright winter sun. This was a weak generation, he thought. A generation unused to trial or hardship or horror, a generation which idealized as a hero a wisp of a boy whose greatest achievement had apparently been failing to die. They would be easy pickings. A small smile twisted the corner of Tom's mouth.

He turned and went back into the Leaky Cauldron. He paused inside the entryway and looked at himself in the mirror over the door. He wondered how long it would be before that reflected face no longer gave him a moment of startled pause. And what a face it was: tow-blond hair and all, an angel face if ever there was one. He fought down a ripple of mirth.

Inside the Leaky Cauldron, he ordered a mug of hot spiced butterbeer, asked for and received a quill and parchment, and took a seat by the fireplace, in a shadowed corner, where he would not be seen. He sat with his hood up, looking at the parchment and thinking. As he sat and thought, he wound what looked like a thin thread of copper wire slowly around his forefinger, over and over. He had found it stuck to the blood on his hands, later. Her hair.

He ceased the nervous gesture and began to think in earnest. It was imperative first of all, now that he was inhabiting the body of Seamus Finnegan, that the disguise hold as long as possible. That meant no one should come looking for Seamus. The brats at Hogwarts wouldn't dare, they'd be too keen on saving their own skins, and who would believe them anyway? But there was Seamus' family to contend with. Tom knew from his access to Seamus' memories, which was growing stronger by the moment, that Seamus did indeed have two parents, who loved him. They would be tedious and come looking for him if something wasn't done to forestall them.

He licked the nib of the quill -- he'd always liked the taste of ink, and this was good ink, not the cheap, rationed stuff -- and started writing.

Dear Mum and Dad,

Your son Seamus here. I know I said I'd be home for New Year's, but I'm afraid that just isn't going to happen. I've been in London the last few days, generally living the high life and catching up on my Oscar Wilde short stories (after all, he is one of the greatest authors of our little country, isn't he?) and in short, I've reached a decision. It's time to tell you that I fancy other men. Yes, it's the truth. I can no longer hide my true nature. I expect you will never want to see me again and have resigned myself to that fate. If you decide to disinherit me I'll understand.

Much love,

Seamus

Tom surveyed the letter with a critical eye. It sounded idiotic, which seemed appropriate, as in his considered opinion, Seamus was an idiot. If that didn't stymie the senior Finnigans, nothing would. He addressed the letter with a flourish, and went looking for an owl.

The heavy iron door of the Potions dungeon slammed closed behind Hermione. She strode into the center of the room. Snape, at work over his cauldrons, turned and looked at her with an expression of grim inquiry.

"Give me something to do," she said.

He turned away from his worktable and glanced at her. His eyes, under the overgrown black brows, were sharply hooded. He seemed expressionless as his gaze raked her; then he turned entirely towards her, looping his thin hands into the sleeves of his dark robes. "I do not require your assistance," he said.

"Please," she said. "I need something useful to do, or..."

Her voice trailed off.

"Or what, Miss Granger?"

"Or I'll go mad," she said. "I mean it. And I know you don't care --"

Snape slowly removed his thin white hands from the sleeves of his robe. "Potter is gone, then," he said. "He's left?"

Hermione checked herself. "Yes -- how did you know?"

Snape stood very still for a moment. Hermione looked at him and thought about how much she had hated this man once, the cruel things he had said to her, his viciousness towards Harry. That Dumbledore allowed this behavior had always made her question the Headmaster's judgement, although Harry had maintained that Dumbledore did it to prove the point that evil existed in the universe, however mysteriously permitted, and that one day they would all have to learn to cope with it.

She was not sure she had ever learned to cope with it, but somewhere along the line she had stopped hating Snape. For the past few days she had not even minded working alongside him -- of course she would have thrown in her lot with Satan himself if it would have gotten an antidote for Draco. But she would have minded. Working with Snape had been surprisingly painless. He was, if nothing else, brilliant at his craft, and Hermione respected that.

"I did not know," Snape said finally. "I had hoped that in the end Potter would do the correct and advisable thing -- I suggested it to him -- but I did not know."

"Correct? Advisable? To leave us like that --"

"Does Draco know?"

"Yes," Hermione said. "He found the letter."

Snape blinked his hooded eyes once, slowly. His expression was unreadable. Hermione wondered if he could see the image that her words conjured up so clearly in her mind: Draco on the bed, reading the letter, probably having read it a dozen times, several dozen times, as if somehow closer examination would transform the words on the page or make them mean something other than they did.

"That letter," Hermione said. "Did you also *suggest* to Harry that he ought to write those things?"

"Certainly not." Snape's tone was brisk. "As if I would interest myself in Potter's sentimental drivel."

"It wasn't sentimental. It was horrible."

Snape shrugged once, briefly. "That is as it may be," he said. "What is significant is that he is gone."

"But Draco --"

"He has greater worries than Potter's whereabouts. He has his antidote to take and his health should be of primary concern --"

"I've looked all over the castle for him. I can't even find him. I've been looking for him for *hours*." Her voice trembled. "What good is a bloody antidote when I can't find him to make sure he takes it?"

"His distress will be temporary," said Snape, still in the same brisk tone. "That bond he has with Potter will atrophy. Distance will erode it, just as proximity intensifies it. It is the nature of such an affinity. Its occult origins give it strength, but also they provide the key to breaking it."

"*I don't want it broken*," Hermione said, so fiercely that her chest hurt. "And I don't see why you do, either, or why you care, or why you'd want to meddle, either. I know you hate Harry --"

"This has very little to do with Potter," said Snape icily. "And you might wish to know that when I spoke of side effects to the antidote affecting Draco's Magid powers, I did not tell you all of them. Do keep in mind that as long as that bond between the two is open, as long as their thoughts and feelings and emotions flow unblocked between them, your precious Potter may well be physically vulnerable to both the antidote's side effects, and the corruption of the poison."

Hermione was stunned. It had never occurred to her that the mental bond between the two boys could have a *physical* effect on either of them. God damn Snape for bringing up Harry's health, the one issue that panicked her more than any other. "You can't be certain," she opined at last, but a great deal of the fervor had gone from her voice.

"No. But are you willing to take the risk? I would imagine that you would agree that Potter will need all his powers intact for what he will soon have to face."

"They can block each other," Hermione said. "They can control it. Draco could be useful to Harry even if they can't read each other's minds --"

"They cannot control it," Snape said. "And you're a fool if you think they can. They have learned to depend upon each other. Unconsciously, each will continue to reach out for the other, unless they are put in a position where neither is willing or able to do that. Imagine I told you that you could no longer use your right hand. You would refrain from using it for as long as you consciously recollected the prohibition. The moment you were distracted, instinct would triumph over instruction. Unless, of course, that hand was broken - impossible to use."

"I hate this," said Hermione intently. "I hate all of it. And you - and Dumbledore --" She swept Snape with a scornful gaze. "I always wondered if you were behind more of this than you've ever admitted to -- that Polyjuice potion --"

"Is this," Snape interrupted, in a low, serpentine voice, "what you meant by needing something to do, Miss Granger? I had thought perhaps that you wished to learn how Draco's antidote is made. But perhaps you would prefer to simply fling voluble, if unfounded, accusations at me. Which is less than interesting. You may continue, but do not expect me to pay attention. I have work that requires doing."

Hermione blinked at him. She had registered little beyond his offer regarding Draco's antidote. "You'd teach me how to make it?"

"There might come a time," he said, "when you might need to make it, and I might not be there. I cannot teach Draco to make it himself. Eventually he will be too ill for that. It would not be a fair expectation."

"No -- of course -- I mean, I want to know how to make it. I very much want to know."

"Are you sure?" The black eyes under the hooded lids held a latent somberness that was disconcerting. "The side effects are not pleasant. Nor is the taking of the potion itself. It can be painful, and will grow more so

the more he takes it. It is constructed to burn the poison out of his blood. As the poison grown stronger and its concentration in his blood increases, the process will be more painful. The more he has of that antidote, the more it will hurt him."

"I'll make him take it," she said, her voice grim.

"You may have to hold him down," said Snape.

"I'll make him take it."

"Even if you have to fight him on it every time?"

"Even then," Hermione said. She hardly recognized her own voice, the flat determination in it. "He needs it."

"People hate what they need," said Snape coolly.

Hermione raised her chin and looked at him. He was pale, severe-looking, eyes like black hollows in his gauntly tired face. But she knew that tiredness came from all the nights he had spent working to create this antidote, which, imperfect as it was, was all that they had. And she also knew that Snape himself probably expected that she and Draco would go after Harry eventually. That he knew they could not be kept back. And that he was giving her this knowledge, this antidote, so that if they did go, Draco would be as safe as he could be. So he did care about Draco, even if only a little. And they had that in common. She had never had anything in common with Snape before.

"I don't care if he hates me," she said. "I care if he *lives*."

Snape nodded, apparently satisfied. Then he walked around the table and picked up a vial of blackish fluid. "Extract of nightshade," he began, "must first be added to the powdered belladonna, in that order, for the combination to be effective. The subsequent addition of the asphodel is a delicate procedure..."

Blaise found herself taking something of a leisurely tour of the Parkinson estate before she finally discovered Pansy, who was dancing partly-dressed on top of a long oak table in the solarium.

Blaise stood next to the table and cleared her throat loudly. Pansy, however, appeared not to notice. She had her hands up over her head and was dancing slowly and drunkenly. Her red silk blouse had slipped down over her shoulders and Blaise could see that her girlish over-the-knee stockings had begun to roll down from the tops. She felt what she always felt around Pansy these days -- pity, mixed with exasperation and suspicion.

"Pansy," she said, and more loudly, "PANSY!"

She heard a chuckle at her elbow. It was Terence Higgs, having apparently rid himself of his roller skates. "Need a hand up on the table there, Blaise?"

She looked at him narrowly. Attracted to his sandy hair and big dark eyes, she had dated Terence briefly in fifth year before she had come to the weary realization that he was like most Quidditch players: far more interested in Bludgers, Quaffles, and squashing the Gryffindor team than he was in anything else.

"Not sure you'll have any luck talking to Pansy," he added conversationally. "She's had five Dementor's Kisses already. If I were you, I'd get her out of here before she passes out and Marcus or Gregory get their hands on her."

Blaise looked where he was indicating and saw Marcus Flint and Gregory Goyle in the doorway, watching Pansy with knowing smiles. "Ugh," she said. "Terence, help me up."

Terence helped himself to a generous feel of her thigh as he assisted her up onto the table. Blaise let him. A favor was a favor, after all. She got her footing, stepped away, and winked down at him.

"Go distract Greg and Marcus, there's a dear," she said to him, in that tone of voice she had learned, in fact, from Draco -- a tone that promised without promising. As she smiled down at Terence, it was Draco she saw suddenly in her mind's eye. The beginning of term, standing in the

sunshine outside the Quidditch changing rooms before their first game, waiting for her to come out, and when she did he'd held out his arms to her, his leather wristguards hanging loose and open. "Buckle me," he'd said, and she'd done it, staring into his eyes the entire time. He'd looked back at her, letting her watch him as if this was some gift he was giving her, and she'd stared at him despite her resentment of his arrogance because he was so beautiful: all that pale hair fired with sunlight, gray eyes bright as shards of glass against the lightly tanned skin. He had done no more than smile at her when she was done, drawing his hands back: "Thanks." And she'd wanted to do *something* to him, she wasn't sure what, kissing him didn't seem like enough, she'd almost wanted to bite the hand she was still holding by its fingers, hurt and startle him and make him jump, at least he'd be reacting to her then. He was so removed, behind that glass wall she could not penetrate, and she suspected that was why she wanted him so much. Because he was un-haveable.

Thinking about him now made her skin prickle. She turned away from Terence and walked across the table to Pansy, her high heels clicking on the polished wood surface. Reaching the other girl, she tapped her on the shoulder. "Pansy, I need to talk to --"

Pansy swung around drunkenly, saw Blaise, and nearly collapsed against her. Blaise struggled to stay upright with Pansy clinging to her like a limpet.

"Blaise....darling...dance with me," Pansy slurred, her little fox paw hands seizing onto Blaise's waist and pulling her close. She smelled of fever and alcohol, like an overheated dish of brandy. "Everyone will watch us...it'll be fun."

"Pansy, you're drunk. And even if you weren't, I've no inclination to put on a show for Goyle and Flint."

Pansy just giggled and continued to cling on. Flint and Goyle watched hopefully from the sidelines.

Blaise rolled her eyes. "You know, down at the Sleazy Weasel, they pay for performances like this."

Pansy frowned. "You're no fun."

"Because I don't want to engage in a table-dancing act for a bunch of gaping plebes? Just because you demean yourself, Pansy, doesn't mean I want to." She jerked on Pansy's arm. "Come on. I want to talk to you. Preferably before you ask Goyle to drink tonic water out of your bra and I have to beat him off with a stick."

"I would never ask Goyle to drink tonic water out of my bra." Pansy hiccuped. "Flint is much more fanciable."

"They're both revolting and if you could tell them apart in your state I'd be shocked. Come along, Pansy. Don't make me drag you."

It once again required the assistance of Terence to manhandle Pansy down off the table and set her on her feet. Blaise hopped down after her, not in the mood for more of Terence's pawings. Ignoring his leer, she pushed Pansy ahead of her, past Flint and Goyle, down the hall, and into a small side bedroom.

Closing the door behind them, Blaise took out her wand and pointed it at Pansy. "*Sobrietus!*"

Pansy collapsed backward onto the bed as if Blaise had pushed her, and covered her face with her hands.

Blaise slid her wand back into the top of her stocking and crossed her arms. "Sit up, Pansy."

Pansy sat up slowly. She was ruffled, her lipstick smeared, her hair in unsightly snarls. She was also, obviously, stone cold sober. "You *cow*," she said. "You didn't have to do that."

"Oh, but I think I did. I needed to talk to you, and that wasn't going to happen while you were determined to show your knickers to the entire Slytherin seventh year class."

Pansy smiled waspishly. "Not the entire class. Just the boys."

"I don't know, you were getting a bit too hands-on with me there for a while. Not that I blame you. You must be rather lonely, what with your little boyfriend having vanished off the face the earth."

Pansy blushed a violent shade of scarlet. "Ron Weasley is *not* my boyfriend."

"And there you're so right," Blaise agreed pleasantly. "Considering he wouldn't have laid a finger on you if he'd known who you really were."

Pansy sneered. "As opposed to all the fingers Draco laid on you? Like we didn't all know he was only going out with you so nobody would notice he was trying to get into that horrid Gryffindor's pants --"

Blaise burst out laughing.

Pansy winced and put a hand to her head. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing. Do go on, Pansy. Draco was in someone's pants, I believe."

Pansy shrugged. "I wouldn't have thought it of Draco, either. He was always so *proper*. So right about Mudbloods and Muggle-lovers, but I guess that's what some purebloods want, they want to roll around in the mud, they like whatever's dirty and sickening..."

Blaise leaned back against the door. "And what about Ron Weasley? Did he make you sick, was that what that was?"

Pansy raised her chin. "He's a pureblood," she said. "His blood's as blue as Draco's is. The Weasleys are just poor, is all. Which you ought to know about, Blaise."

Blaise curved her lips into a smile. "You're in love with him."

Pansy looked quickly down at her hands. "I'm not."

"Oh, yes. You are." Blaise detached herself from the door and crossed the room to stand by Pansy. She was looking down at the top of the other girl's head now, where her tangled brown hair had escaped its glittering pins. "What did you give him, Pansy?" she asked softly. "There weren't enough protection spells for all of us, and you wouldn't have let him go on unarmed like that, not if you were in love with him. What did you do to protect him?"

"It needn't concern you," Pansy said, flatly.

"Oh, but it does. I remember you asking me for one of my extra barrettes, and how hacked off you were when I wouldn't give it to you. But you know the strictures against giving out our protections to those outside the circle. I'm guessing you made your own. Does Weasley even know what it was you gave him?"

Pansy's lips twitched. She looked as if she were about to break into one of those vindictive sobbing fits she was so prone to. But Blaise took almost no notice: her mind was ticking back, bits and pieces of half-forgotten events clicking into place like bits of a puzzle being fitted together. She remembered Ginny Weasley tumbling precipitately off her broom after flying near her brother during that last Quidditch match, remembered Neville Longbottom trying to enlist the help of the school prefects to find his missing toad. Remembered sitting by Malcolm's bed in the hospital wing as he tried to recollect the last thing he had seen before he'd been knocked out, remembered him telling her he'd been on his way to the *prefects' meeting room....*

"Bloody hell, Pansy," she said. "That was risky. And at school, too. Did you kill it yourself? How'd you get rid of it?"

Pansy's head jerked up, her lips curling back over her small, pointed teeth. "Shut up, Blaise," she hissed. "You don't know anything --"

"I know enough!" Blaise snapped at Pansy furiously.

"And so do I!" Pansy was on her feet, her small hands gripped into fists at her side. "I notice you're not wearing your barrettes, Blaise *darling*," she hissed. "I wonder where they are? If I had to guess, I'd say you gave them to Draco, your darling *Draco*, that traitorous Mudblood-loving rat. You know perfectly well why he wasn't meant to have any. *He's not one of us anymore*. You talk about me being in love -- I've seen you looking at him when you think he doesn't see you. Maybe he paid you off, but it was real for you, wasn't it, Blaise? Mock me all you want -- at least I got to have Ron -- at least he wanted to be with me --"

"He didn't even know who you were!"

"At least what I gave him will protect him!" Pansy raged, her pale little face distended with fury. "You can't protect Draco -- he's not to be let live -- I heard my father say so -- he'll die and there's nothing you can do

about it -- and I'm glad! You always got every boy you ever wanted, Blaise, every boy you ever looked at. All you had to do was smile at them and they'd fall over themselves and you never wanted any of them. But you wanted *him*. And you couldn't have him -- he never wanted you back -- you saw him looking over at the Gryffindor table, just like I did -- and now he'll die, and you'll never have him, and I hope it hurts you, I hope it breaks your heart, if you even have one --"

Gasping, Pansy cut herself off. Tears were pouring down her flushed cheeks. Her hands were still fisted at her sides.

Blaise looked at her. "What do you mean?" she said, in a deadly quiet tone. "About Draco. Is something going to happen to him?"

Pansy raised her damp face. Her small mouth was set in a hard little line. "Don't you get it?" she said. "It's *already happened*."

Blaise stared at her.

"You can't help him," Pansy said. "You can't even help yourself," and with that, she pushed past Blaise, flounced to the door, and stalked out, slamming it hard behind her.

In the ancient days of the wizarding world, and even now sometimes among the upper classes and the more traditional families, one could often tell the content of a letter by the color of the bird chosen to deliver it. A white bird meant a message of peace or friendship, red was for love, black for vengeance, brown for a peace offering, blue meant victory and gray meant death or defeat.

The bird that swooped in the window of the castle that afternoon was a brown barn owl, its throat ringed with a collar of metal. It was pleased to find the inside of the castle warm, and rode the gentle currents of air with slight motions of its wings, sailing down corridors and up staircases until it found the small room with the boy it was looking for inside it.

The boy sat against the wall with his legs drawn up, his pale-blond head on his knees and his slender arms wrapped around himself, and silvery light pooled around him on the floor, or perhaps it was not light at all.

The owl landed by Draco Malfoy's left foot, and hooted softly.

Very slowly, Draco raised his head from his arms and looked at the bird. He had been sitting in this one position for so long that even raising his head sent a shock of pain down through his cramped muscles.

He wondered vaguely at the fact that the bird had managed to find him. He would not have expected anyone to be able to find him where he had gone, but then this was one of his father's owls, bred to his own blood, and besides, they were the best owls money could buy.

What he had been holding in his hand dropped to the ground with a metallic clang as he reached to take the letter strapped to the bird's leg. His hand hurt badly, and it took several tries before he was able to unfasten the letter and open it. Only later did it occur to him that perhaps he should have used his other hand for the task.

The light coming through the narrow window above him had begun to dim. Late afternoon, then. Draco stretched his legs out along the stone floor, ignoring the shrieks of protest from his cramped joints, and read the letter he had spread out on his lap.

Draco,

He has left you then, as I expected he would. I told you once you were wasting your time to barter your destiny for the friendship of a boy who would never like you; you have gone one better than that, and thrown away your life. You never did know when enough was enough.

That aside, I am not writing to merely to upbraid you. Severus will not find the antidote he seeks for you. I can tell you that with utter honesty. Your only hope for survival, indeed, for salvation, rests with me. I am your father. I gave you life once, and am prepared to do it again. The Dark Lord has vowed to me that he will see it done, and indeed, with the aid of the Worthy Objects, it can be done.

In exchange for my aid to you, I expect a token of your subsequent unswerving loyalty to me. Should you see reason at any point in the future, and I expect that you will, send back to me the seal ring I gave you, the mark of our family. By that token I will know that you have come

to your senses, regained your familial pride, and are prepared to once again stand on our side.

Consider quickly, Draco. The time you have for this decision is not much. It should be an easy choice. When last we spoke, it appeared to me that you thought you had discovered something worth dying for. Can you still say the same?

Your Father,

Lucius Malfoy

Draco looked down at the letter for several long moments. He scrubbed the back of his bruised and dirty hand across his eyes, and read the letter again. Then he turned it over, Summoned a quill to himself, and wrote across the blank back of the parchment three short sentences in what looked like silvery ink. It was not ink.

Dear Father.

You have proven that you can make me die.

But that's all you can make me do.

Draco.

The physical act of writing hurt too much for him to want to write anything lengthier. Besides, Draco felt he had little more to say on the subject. He would hear back from his father on this topic, he was quite sure. This letter had been the opening salvo in what promised to be a most unpleasant exchange. Not that Draco cared. In comparison to the other letter he had received that day, the missive from his father seemed as gentle as a pat on the head.

He strapped the letter to the owl's leg, and watched it fly out the open window and into the late afternoon sky beyond.

Once inside King's Cross, Harry debated briefly what to do with his baggage -- he wasn't keen on hefting an enormous bag that held half of

his worldly possessions in it through Diagon Alley all day. Especially once he realized that the words GRYFFINDOR SEEKER were still embroidered across the side of the bag in yellow thread. He'd have to do something about that.

Harry remembered Draco telling him, *You suck at incognito, Potter*, and shrugged wryly to himself.

He wound up storing his bag in a locker, which took the last of his Muggle money. He'd have to walk to the Leaky Cauldron, but he didn't mind much, the exercise would hopefully wake him up. He pulled the wrapper off a Scrumdiddlyumptious bar and nibbled it thoughtfully on his way to the station exit (having conscientiously shoved the wrapper into his pocket, as it wouldn't do to have the Muggle porters encountering the moving pictures on the enchanted plastic.)

The exit escalator took Harry past a bank of mirrors. It took him a moment to recognize himself, and then he stared. The boy looking back at him from the mirror's flat surface, with his Muggle clothes -- jeans and trainers, zip-up blue rain jacket, worn white t-shirt -- his tangled black hair, his face looking strangely naked without his glasses, seemed for a moment a stranger. And the clothes, which he had dug out of the back of his closet, looked so aggressively *Muggle*. They made him think of his past self, the Harry who lived with the Dursleys, the Harry who ached to belong somewhere, anywhere other than where he was.

Harry, who had found the place where he belonged, and then left it in order to save it.

And that was another thing. More than anything else, he thought to himself, he looked young and defenseless. Without his robes, without a wand in his hand, without his scar or the badge of his House, he looked like any teenage boy. Half gawky adolescent and half defenseless child. A little boy with a chocolate bar in his hand. And he was supposed to save the world.

He wished abruptly that Draco was there, because Draco would tell him that he was being stupid. It wasn't as if he'd wandered arbitrarily into the business of world-saving, he'd been born to it, bred to it, was uniquely marked for it. Blood, inheritance and choices had made him what he was. Every choice he had ever made bringing him to this place and to the

points beyond it. It didn't matter that he looked like a boy. He was more than that, and he'd have to learn to accept it.

You're being stupid, Potter, he said to himself, as he reached the top of the escalator and tossed the rest of his half-eaten chocolate bar into the nearest bin. *All those years poncing around like you're the Chosen One and now you're trying to get out of it? Would it help if I got you a Harry Potter, World Savior nametag you could wear around the house so you don't forget?*

The voice in his head had a slight drawling quality to it. Although Harry knew his inner monologue was not nearly as funny as Draco would have been under the same circumstances, he grinned faintly to himself anyway as he walked out of the station. It helped a little, if not by much.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon and Hermione had just finished cleaning up the mess in the common room. Hours had passed since she had finished with Snape in the Potions dungeon. He'd forced her to make the antidote mixture no less than five times until her methodology was perfect. Hermione had almost enjoyed the experience. She had always liked being able to lose herself in the solution to a problem. It was not until she left the dungeon, a box filled with the ingredients needed to make a fortnight's worth of antidote in her arms, that she'd again faced the fact that Draco was still missing.

A second thorough search of the castle had turned up nothing. The Slytherin dungeons were empty and there was no reply when she banged on Draco's door. She'd horribly annoyed Madam Pomfrey by showing up twice at the infirmary door tearfully inquiring if Draco had come by and had scandalized Filch by appearing in his office to beg for his assistance. He'd sent her away smartly. She'd wanted to see Dumbledore, but Filch had grumblingly told her that Dumbledore had been called away to the Ministry.

In despair, she'd set herself to the task of cleaning up the common room. She didn't want to think about what Draco might be doing, and she didn't want to think about Harry. Therefore, she needed something to do. Otherwise, it was too overwhelming.

Cleaning up took less time than she had expected. Having cast the last *Reparo* charm on a smashed lamp, Hermione rose to her feet --

And almost dropped her wand as the portrait door swung wide open, and Draco stepped into the room.

Hermione stood frozen for a moment, completely unsure what to do. She stared at him. And he looked back at her, hands in his pockets, shoulders canted slightly, an inquiring look on his face. She wasn't sure what she had expected, exactly. Some sign of terrific inner turmoil, whatever that might happen to be. If it had been Harry, whatever he was feeling would have been written all over his face. But it was Draco and his face was unreadable.

He looked...the same. Bright silver-gilt hair perfectly in place, perfectly elegant clothes perfectly clean and perfectly worn. The only odd thing was that there were gloves on his hands. It was warm in the room and she could not imagine why he was wearing gloves indoors. Perhaps he had just come from outside. Perhaps he had taken a walk around the lake to clear his head. Perhaps he hadn't, after all, been down in the cellars setting fire to things and jumping up on and down on anything that reminded him of Harry.

"Oh," she said finally. "Draco. Where have you been?"

"Thinking," he said. He flung himself into the armchair opposite the fire and stretched his long legs out until his feet rested on the ottoman near the fire. "And I talked to Snape a bit."

Hermione came and sat down opposite him, still staring. "Did you take your antidote?" she demanded, trying to keep the worst of the panicked inquiry from her voice.

He raised one silver eyebrow. "Of course I did. Why wouldn't I?" He stretched his hands out towards the fire, saw her looking at his gloves, and retracted them. "I think we ought to discuss our game plan," he said.

"Game plan?" Hermione echoed faintly.

"Well, yes. I mean, we've got to find Potter. Don't we?"

She nodded, unable to speak. She had been prepared for incoherently upset or hysterical Draco. She was not prepared for calm, rational, faintly bored-looking Draco. As if his best friend in the world ran off on him towards certain death every day, leaving behind a letter telling him that every single awful thing he might ever have thought about himself was essentially true. She had seen Draco get more upset than this over a hangnail. In fact, the temper tantrum he had thrown over a bad haircut in sixth year was still a legend. People pointed at the scorch marks on the dungeon wall and spoke of the incident in hushed tones.

"I mean, he doesn't want to be followed. I understand that. And normally I'd say we should just let him go. After all, he seems to have a decent handle on the situation, wouldn't you say? And heroic rescues are awfully embarrassing if you're rescuing someone who isn't actually in danger."

"Meep," said Hermione, lost for words.

"I mean, you say, 'Here we are to save you,' and they say, 'But I just ran off to have a quiet think and a pint,' and then there's embarrassment and apologies and you've wasted a whole afternoon and I think I feel a bit sick. Ugh." He closed his eyes and breathed deeply for a moment. "The antidote," he said. "It makes me a little nauseated. Sorry. Where was I?"

"Rescuing people who aren't in danger," she replied, quietly. "Draco. What are you doing?"

Something flashed behind his eyes briefly, a dark light that sent a chill through Hermione's nerves. "I don't know what you mean. We were talking about everyone's favorite subject. The Boy Who Ran Away. Leaving you to pick up the pieces as usual, I might add. Being a selfish fuckwit must just be built into that whole 'How To Be A Hero' business."

"Because villains are noted for their kindness and generosity?" Hermione said. A faint inkling of what was going on with Draco had begun to seep into her consciousness. "Look, I know you're angry at Harry --"

"This isn't angry," Draco said. A bright spark of fire flashed beneath the lowered lids of his eyes. "And I'd rather not have a sentimental conversation about Potter, if you don't mind. As my father used to say, sentiment breeds weakness. A prescient man, my father."

"Your father poisoned you and left you to die," Hermione pointed out.

"True," Draco admitted. "But as a strategic move, you must admit it was effective."

Hermione stared at him. Finally, she said faintly, "I think you'd better tell me about your game plan."

"All right." Draco leaned forward. The firelight danced along the curve of his mouth as he talked, the line of the full lower lip marked as if he had bitten it. "He might not be letting me into his mind these days, but I can still think like he does. He left his Firebolt behind, so he didn't go anywhere by broomstick. He could have Flooed, but I know he hates that, and besides, Floo networks can be tampered with. I would imagine he took the train. Either from Hogsmeade or from one of the Muggle villages along the train route to London. Probably the midnight train. We've taken that one ourselves, if you recall."

"I recall," said Hermione. "And I'd pretty much come to that conclusion too. So I'm glad we agree. The question, of course, is where did he get off the train?"

"London," said Draco promptly. "He'd go to London. He's familiar enough with it that it won't panic him, it's big enough that he can lose himself, Diagon Alley has whatever he might need, and if he needs money he'll have to go to Gringotts. And he *will* need money. He never brings enough to school and he always has to owl for extra if he wants to buy anything."

"He wouldn't walk into Gringotts as Harry Potter," Hermione pointed out. "He's not that dense. And he wouldn't stay at the Leaky Cauldron. He'd find somewhere where they wouldn't recognize him on sight. I wish I had a map of wizarding London --" Her mind was busy now, ticking over possibilities. "Have you got one?"

Draco looked thoughtful. "I have a map of wizarding strip clubs but I doubt that would be all that useful to you."

"A map of wizarding strip clubs?"

"*Fantastic Breasts and Where to Find Them*. You can borrow it if you think it will help."

"I do *not* think Harry went to a strip club."

"Who knows?" Draco's voice was careless. "That boy is apparently just full of surprises."

Hermione hesitated. "Draco..."

He folded his arms across his chest, interlacing the gloved fingers. "Hermione?" he replied, mimicking her serious tone.

"What are you going to do when you find him?"

"What are we going to do with him? Bring him back here, I guess. Did you think we should go somewhere else?"

"No. I didn't mean that. I mean...what are you going to do?" She took a deep breath. "I can tell what you're doing. And I know why you're doing it. And if that's what you have to do, then fine. But it won't hold when you see Harry and you know it won't --"

Bang! Draco had kicked over the ottoman. It hit the floor with a crash that made Hermione jump. "Are you asking me if I'm going to hurt him?" he said, and there was suddenly a terrible light in his eyes and his voice cut like the edge of a whip. "Are you asking *me* that?"

Hermione tensed but held her ground. "That's not what I meant --"

"Then what did you mean?" His eyes narrowed and Hermione shivered. For a moment she remembered all those past years, the semi-feral cruelty of which this delicately pretty boy was capable when pushed.

"Harry's not the only one I worry about," she said. "You know that, right?"

"Actually, I didn't." He lowered his eyelids. His lashes were a shade darker than his hair, a tarnished color. "And for your information, I want to find him for the same reasons you do. Well, perhaps not precisely the same reasons," and his lip curled slightly, less a smile than wry shrug. "To make sure he's all right, to bring him back safe, you know the story. So he won't die. Because I promised I'd look after him, didn't I? And I will."

"And once he's back safe? Then what?"

"Then I never want to see him again," he said, and fixed his gaze on the fire.

The breath caught in her throat. "You don't mean that."

"Don't tell me what I mean."

"I don't understand why you're *doing* this," she said, despairingly. "It's *me* -- I love Harry -- I *miss* Harry -- I *want* to talk about it --"

"Back at the Manor," Draco interrupted, still staring at the fire, his voice very flat, "back at the Manor, when I was growing up, my father used to have this chair he'd bring out every time he had a dinner party and he'd put it next to him and I'd have to sit in it. Those parties used to go on for hours and hours. You wouldn't know what something like that would be like, but they're like ceremonies. Very formal affairs. Everyone plays a part. Everyone. My father was like that. He planned everything. That chair was a special trick of his. It was enchanted. It had what looked like a row of raised decorations across the back. But they weren't just decorations. They were filed to points like knives. They ran along the arms of the chair, too. And I'd have to sit very straight all through dinner and speak normally and behave normally, and if I moved to make myself more comfortable, or shifted away from the knives, then they'd get longer, and sharper, and it would be worse. And I couldn't get up or get away from them. I had to pretend that I was having a good time. And I got good at it, too. It took years. But everyone always told my father what wonderful manners I had."

He stopped speaking. Hermione stared at him. "You're telling me riddles."

"Not a riddle," he clarified. "A parable. They're two entirely different things."

"A parable."

"A short tale from which a moral conclusion may be drawn. Better living through allegory. Surely you know what a parable is."

"I know what a parable is," Hermione said. "But I don't have quite the gothic turn of mind that you have. I'm practical. You know that. If thinking about Harry is like knives sticking into you then I don't see why

you would even agree to come with me and look for him in the first place --"

"I haven't got a choice," said Draco. "You ought to know that. It's your doing, anyway."

Hermione blinked at him. "My doing?"

"*'Stay with him'*," Draco said. "Don't you remember? 'Stay with him always - and watch him - and make sure he's all right. Don't leave him, and don't let him go off on his own - and if he does, you have to follow him. Promise me, Draco. Promise me.'"

His voice had a savage twist to it.

Hermione blinked at him. "I didn't think this would happen," she said. "When I made you promise that. I thought I might not be there to protect him, and that you would. You don't have to..."

"But I do have to," he said. "I'm a Malfoy. And I gave you my word. I don't get out of that."

"I could release you from your promise."

"No," he said. "You can't. And you wouldn't, if you could. You said you needed me. You said I shouldn't leave you. Do you want me to leave you?"

He was still staring at the fire. Hermione wound her fingers nervously together. "No," she said. And then, "Can I ask you just one more thing?"

He didn't look at her. "I might not answer."

"What did you do to your hands?"

His shoulders tensed.

A log fell in the fire, sending up a shower of volcanic sparks.

"Draco..."

"I still think we should start with Gringotts," he said, cutting her off. "It's worth owling them. At least we can alert them to look for Harry. The

Leaky Cauldron, too. He's Harry. He forgets...sometimes...how famous he is. He'd cover his scar, I think...maybe take his glasses off. But I don't think he realizes how recognizable his face is. Even his eyes. Not a lot of people have eyes that color. I don't think it would occur to him to change them..."

Hermione slid off the chair. She was kneeling on the floor now, not at his feet, but opposite him, looking up at his face. He was still staring into the fire and his hands were a black tangle in his lap.

"Draco," she said, again. Her voice caught -- she wanted to say gentle things, but knew her words would break like hummingbird wings against the glass walls of the resistance he had thrown up to keep everyone out and himself in. "Did you..."

Before he could speak the portrait door swung open and Madam Pomfrey stepped into the room. She looked slightly flustered and there was a packet of bandages still in her hand, as if she'd forgotten she was holding it.

"Ginny is awake," she said. "She's asking for you both. She says she has to speak to you immediately."

The goblin behind the bank teller window squinted its eyes at him suspiciously. "And you're quite sure you're Sirius Black?"

"Yes," said Harry, firmly. "I hold the rights to Vault Six Hundred and Eighty Seven along with my godson, Harry Potter. Here's my key, right here, and my paperwork -- you can see it's all in order."

The goblin raised an arched eyebrow, but indeed, everything was in order -- Harry had the large gold key to the vault, and the paperwork he'd taken from Sirius' desk at the Manor. Harry was, briefly, thankful that the wizarding world did not rely on things like photographic identification, and even more thankful that goblins both had poor eyesight, and took little interest in the affairs of wizards. "Indeed, and may I say, Mister Black," said the goblin, lifting the key in its long, clever fingers, "that you're looking fantastic for your age, really fantastic. One would hardly recognize you from your Wanted posters."

"Well," said Harry weakly. "I moisturize daily. It does wonders for the complexion."

The goblin shrugged, losing interest. "Very well. I'll have someone take you down to your vault. Unless there's something else I can do for you?"

"Wait," said Harry hastily. "There is one thing --" Turning his pocket inside out, he produced the gold coin he'd taken from Lucius' belongings, and pushed it across the counter towards the goblin, who squinted at it in much the same manner it had squinted at Harry. "Could you tell me anything about this coin?"

"It's a Carpathian Gallien," said the goblin, after a moment's contemplation. "Not much seen around these parts, Mister Black. Romanian, probably, in origin. I can certainly check it for you while you're down in the vaults, and give you a precise location when you return."

"Thank you," said Harry, much relieved. "I'd appreciate that."

Two smaller goblins in red and gold suits were summoned to lead Harry down to the vaults, and Harry allowed himself to be led. The goblin behind the counter watched bemusedly as the thin boy with the bright green eyes and the untidy black hair disappeared through the double doors at the end of the hall. *Harry Potter breaking into his own vault*, he thought to himself with a mixture of disapprobation and amusement. *Wizards certainly are a peculiar breed, very peculiar indeed.*

Hermione sat and listened to Ginny's recitation of events with the bizarre sense that she was dreaming. It all seemed so very unreal. That such enormous occurrences had been going on behind the scenes and she had had not a single clue about them astonished her. Although, she supposed, after Harry's departure nothing should come as a shock.

Draco stood by the window while Ginny spoke. No flicker of interest crossed his expressionless face. He stared out at the darkening sky. There was frost on the windowpane and it threw oddly shaped shadows against his pale skin, like feathery scars.

"To paraphrase Hamlet, Oedipus, Lear, and all those other guys," was all he said, when she had finished speaking, "It would have been nice if we'd known all this before things got quite so out of hand."

Ginny, pale but composed, looked at him, and then at Hermione. Her eyes were dark, unhappy. There were bruise-blue shadows under them although other than that Madam Pomfrey's healing magic had taken care of every mark on her. "I know what you're thinking," she said. "I was incredibly foolish. And, Draco -- I stole from you. From your house. I'm sorry. This is all my fault."

"That would be an accurate assessment of the situation, yes," said Draco, still staring out the window. His gloved thumbs were hooked into the belt at his waist. "At least Dumbledore took that Time-Turner away from you. About time."

Ginny said nothing, but the tense lines around her mouth deepened. Hermione fought down the urge to scream. It was at this point that Harry would have stepped in and said something to Draco, and Draco would have made a smart remark back, but he would have quelled himself, because Harry had requested it. But there was no Harry here to curb or curtail him and there had never been anyone else he would listen to. "Draco," she said, knowing it would make very little difference. "Don't. She knows."

An almost imperceptible shift in his position, and now he was looking at her out of the corner of one gray eye. She could sense the rage in him. It was like a thin silver wire winding through all of his movements. He was holding it down. She could see that, too. But eventually it would filter into everything he did like poison spreading slowly into water.

"I am not entirely sure," he said, "that we can assume she knows anything, given her recent actions. Although I suppose there is a logic to it. Apparently we didn't have enough murderous psychopaths running around with my father, the Dark Lord, and that nymphomaniacal postal worker of his constantly stalking us. Apparently Ginny here decided four psychopaths makes a matched set. I think we should just all take a moment to admire the symmetry."

"I know," Ginny said again. She was still calm and her voice betrayed no hurt. Only her fingers, plucking nervously at the white counterpane

stretched over her thin knees, indicated her tension. "I'll take care of it, as much as I can. I'll tell Dumbledore --"

The effect of this statement on Draco was immediate, galvanic, and astonishing. He went white as a sheet and spun away from the window, hissing, "No. *No!* You can't go to Dumbledore. I forbid it."

Ginny stared at him. So did Hermione. "You *forbid* it?" Ginny demanded. "What on earth ...?"

"Forbid it?" Hermione's tone was sharp. "But why?"

Draco laughed -- not a mirthful noise at all, but a peremptory bark of derision. "You really don't know?" His lips curled back as he looked at them; he was the only person Hermione could think of who could make a sneer look elegant. "Don't you understand what she's done? Intentionally or not, Ginny, you *raised the dead*. Lord Voldemort -- Tom Riddle -- he was dead, and you brought him back. That's *necromancy*. That's the worst kind of magic there is. It's the Dementor's Kiss. You go straight to Azkaban, no appeals, no second chances. Do you understand? *They'll kill you for this.*"

Hermione sucked in a little gasp of air. "No, surely not. She's an underaged witch, and she didn't do it on purpose --"

"You tell that to my father," Draco spat, his voice edged with venom. "He tried to kill her when she was eleven, you think he wouldn't now? And maybe Dumbledore would try to protect her but I'd like to see him and this fucking deserted school stand up against the Ministry, the Dark Lord, and all my father's Death Eaters. They'll lay siege to this place and they'll drag her out of her and throw her to the Dementors in the middle of Hogsmeade and they'll be making an example -- my father loves to make examples --" He turned his blazing silver gaze on Ginny. "And may I point out," he added, more quietly, "that, since Finnigan obviously isn't Finnigan anymore, and we don't know where *he* is, there might well be a murder charge in there somewhere, too."

At that, Ginny did lose her composure. Tears flooded into her eyes and spilled down her cheeks.

Hermione held herself back. She wanted to go to Ginny and comfort her. But more than she wanted to do that, she wanted to see what Draco would do. He stood where he was without moving for a long moment, looking down at Ginny, who was obviously trying to get a hold of herself. She cried the way someone who desperately does not want to be crying would cry -- breathy, tearful gasps, as if she could not get enough air. She brushed the back of her hand furtively across her eyes, scattering tears onto the counterpane. "I'm sorry --" she said. "Crying. It's stupid, I know."

Draco's eyes narrowed. Then he reached out his hand and gently touched his gloved fingers to her cheek. "It's a war," he said. "There are casualties in a war."

"I don't like thinking of Seamus as a casualty," Ginny said.

"I didn't mean Seamus."

"He might be all right," Hermione said, quietly. "In most cases of possession, once the possessing demon or spirit is destroyed, the victim reverts to normal with no recollection of what occurred."

Draco took his hand from Ginny's cheek, but sat down at the foot of her bed. This was better behavior than Hermione had expected. "And in the other cases?" he asked.

Trust Draco to ask questions Hermione did not want to answer. "Sometimes they remember," she said.

Ginny's weeping had quieted, but she flinched at this. "If it'll help Seamus," she said, "we should go to Dumbledore anyway. I don't care what happens to me."

"But we don't know that it will help Seamus," said Hermione. "And Dumbledore isn't here, either -- there's a note on his door that says he's gone to London. We don't know how dangerous Tom is or even how much he remembers. I mean, Ginny...you said he attacked you last night, and you were knocked out."

Ginny nodded.

"But we found you this morning," Hermione said. "And he hadn't -- hurt you any more. You said all the bruises you have and the bump on your head, that was all from last night. Then you were unconscious. If he'd wanted to hurt you or kill you, he could have. And he didn't. He ran away instead. Maybe it was just a temporary possession, and then Seamus reasserted himself, and was completely horrified and ran away." She shrugged. "I know it sounds stupid, but the point is, we don't *know*."

"There is one thing we do know," said Draco. He had taken a parchment out of his pocket and was holding it up to the light. After a brief moment, Hermione recognized it as the Marauder's Map. "Neither Seamus Finnigan nor Tom Riddle is currently in the castle."

"I know." Ginny's voice was small. "I can sort of...feel Tom when he's around. He's not around. He's gone."

Hermione sighed. "Our first order of business is to find Harry," she said. "Then we'll tell him about the Tom Riddle business, and see what he thinks we should do. Meantime, I'll owl Seamus -- it's worth a try -- and owl a few people in Diagon Alley, tell them to keep a look out for him." She blinked at Ginny's expression. "Ginny, what?"

"Find Harry?" Ginny said. "What do you mean, find Harry?"

Draco, in the middle of stowing the Marauder's Map in a pocket, looked up, his expression for a moment unguarded. Then his eyes went opaque.

Hermione cursed herself. "I'm sorry, you've got enough to deal with, Ginny..."

"No." Ginny sat up very straight, tossing her hair back. "Tell me. I told you everything, please don't hide things from me."

"Indeed," said a voice behind them. A voice that made Hermione jump and spin around in surprise. A voice she had not been expecting here, just as she had not been expecting to see its owner.

"That's pretty much what I was about to say myself," Charlie Weasley went on, striding quickly towards them, his fiery hair tousled and damp from the cold air outside. "Now what's all this with the miserable

expressions and the talk about hiding things? Would somebody like to tell me what's going on?"

When, halfway up what seemed like the sixth round of spiral stairs, a three-headed snake lunged out at him from behind an alcove, Ron was perturbed.

Gasping out a very rude word, he stumbled backward, almost knocking Rhysenn down the rest of the stairs. She shrieked and staggered to the side as he seized a torch out of a nearby bracket and spun to face the serpent.

Which had disappeared back around the corner of the stairs.

Ron swore again, under his breath. He hated snakes. Not as much as he hated spiders, but he was still not a fan. The fact that Harry could speak to them had never endeared the cold-blooded, slithering creatures to him much. They remained, in his mind, creepy and vaguely slimy.

He moved slowly up the stairs, the torch outthrust stiffly before him. He could see the shadow of the snake thrown in sharp relief against the wall up ahead of him, and he swallowed hard, his throat as dry as dust. He tried to imagine what Harry or Draco would do in this situation. That was easy in Harry's case; Harry would talk to the snake, whisper soothingly to it in Parseltongue, and soon enough the snake would adoringly obey his every command. Draco would whip out one of his annoyingly sharp and expensive-looking swords, and within five minutes would be juggling two of the snake's heads while playing football with the third one and mentally composing a scathing one-liner to fit the occasion.

Ron, knowing himself capable of none of those actions, tightened his grip on the torch and took another, hesitant step upward.

"Oh, for goodness sake," said an irritable voice behind him; he turned his head and saw that Rhysenn had regained her feet and was regarding him with a vexed expression. "There's no need to get so wound up about Kevin."

"Kevin?" said Ron blankly.

"The snake," said Rhysenn blandly, as if this were obvious.

"KEVIN?"

"Yes. Kevin. He guards the north exit to the roof."

"Oh, really." Ron's voice dripped sarcasm. "It didn't occur to you that maybe we should take one of the other exits to the roof, then? Like, the north exit or the east exit even the west exit?"

"West exit is attack hornets," said Rhysenn. "East exit is living skeletons."

"North exit?"

"Giant tarantula."

"Ah," said Ron. His irritation had abated somewhat.

"If you're so afraid," said Rhysenn with a sniff, "I'll go first," and with that, she stomped by him, the skirt of her corseted black dress held high. Ron followed her, feeling foolish.

The snake watched Rhysenn go by with only a flicker of its lazy adder's tongues. But when Ron made as if to pass it, it reared up, and fixed him with the cold gaze of its six golden eyes.

Ron stared back at it. Its eyes were hypnotic, gold fissures in the dark scales around it. When it spoke to him, he was only somewhat surprised: he heard its voice inside his mind, much in the same way that he imagined Harry heard Draco's.

Diviner, said the snake.

Ron lowered the torch in his hand. *Yes. That's me.*

You are bitter, for one so blessed. Such a gift as yours is rare. The dreams you dream are true dreams and will come to pass.

Ron thought of his vision of Ginny dead and it struck him again, like a second blow against his heart. *Is there nothing I can do? Is the future I see set in stone? Can it be changed?*

No. What you see cannot be altered or undone. All things end, Diviner, and to you is given the gift of seeing those ends. If you tried, you could see the end of the world.

It doesn't seem like much of a gift to me, Ron said sourly.

It is not, said the serpent, *all that you can do.*

Ron lifted the torch; the light of it blazed up between them and turned the gold eyes he stared at into six individual flames. *What do you mean? What else can I do?*

But the snake, startled by the fire, shied away, hissing. It slithered away from him, and vanished through a hole in the alcove.

Ron swore, almost dropping the torch in his dismay. "Come back here --"

But Rhysenn had caught at his sleeve. Her gray eyes were dark with some distress he could not define. "Do not trouble the castle's inhabitants," she said softly. "It would be unwise."

Ron said nothing, but allowed her to tug him up the stairs. When he drew level with her, she moved to take his arm, and in his distracted state, he let her.

"Charlie." Ginny's voice was a thready whisper.

He had been looking down at his hands where they lay open on his knees, now he looked up at his sister. "What is it, Ginny?"

She could still hardly believe he was here. He had arrived so unexpectedly, had shooed Hermione and Draco out of the infirmary, closed the curtains around her bed, and sat down on the low chair next to her. She had waited for him to say something, but he had been silent, allowing Ginny her own silence, giving her the space to gather herself.

His blue eyes were on her now, steady, reassuring. She thought of her brothers. Bill, so much older than she was, she had always looked up to. He was dashing and glamorous. Percy was reliable, sometimes irritating,

dependable in an emergency. George and Fred had made her life a torment when she was younger, but they also made her laugh. Ron, she loved the most out of all of them, he was the closest to her in age, the most like a friend. But Charlie was the kindest.

"How did you know to come?" she whispered.

"Draco," he said promptly. "He owled me."

She stared at him, her mouth partly open. "He did *what?*"

"He owled me. He said you'd been hurt, I should come right away." Charlie shrugged. "So I came right away. I should thank him for owling me and not Mum or Dad -- I don't think they could have taken it right now."

"He must have done it while I was unconscious," Ginny said. She looked down at her hands against the white bedspread, several shades darker than the white sheets but still very pale. She felt bruised all over, although she knew Madam Pomfrey had healed most of her injuries. She could still feel where Tom had touched her. Like rings of fire where his hands had braceleted her wrists, her arms. Her mouth felt bruised where he had bitten it. "Charlie," she said, slowly. "I've ... done bad things. Really bad things."

He put his hand over hers on the bedspread. His fingers were warm and strong. "You don't have to tell me," he said.

"I *can't* tell you," she said. "But I want to. I want to ask you what I should do."

"You should come home," he said. "Right away. With me."

She shook her head. "I wish I could," she said. "I really do. But it seems like... running away."

"Running away from what, exactly?" Charlie asked. "You want to be with your friends when they need you. I understand that. You want to be with Hermione and with Draco and Harry--"

"Harry's gone," Ginny said. "They don't want to tell me what's happened. But I can see it in their faces. He's gone off somewhere."

Charlie looked at her as if he couldn't quite believe what she was saying. "Harry's *gone*? Gone where?"

"To kill Voldemort," said Ginny, simply.

"Oh," said Charlie. He looked stunned. Ginny, for a moment, was almost amused. "You sound pretty calm about it."

"I always thought he would," Ginny said. "They never saw it. They didn't want to. It was just a matter of time. If they hadn't loved him so much he would have left a long time ago. He was never really entirely *here*. There was always that part of him he had sort of bound up, locked away. Waiting. There was always that part of Harry you couldn't get to or touch."

Charlie looked hesitant, worried. "You don't still..."

"No," she said. "No, I don't. That's why I could see it, and they couldn't." She lifted her chin, looked at her brother. "Charlie..."

Charlie leaned forward and put his arms around her, and Ginny let her head fall down on his shoulder and for a moment just allowed herself to lose herself in being held by her brother, in forgetting. Charlie smelled like the kitchen at the Burrow, like smoke and soap and scrubbed wood. He smelled like home.

But when she closed her eyes, other images came to dance against the backs of her eyelids. Other blue eyes lit the darkness in her mind's eye. She heard a drawling voice in her ear and felt the bones in her hand snap like twigs. *But he didn't hurt me. He could have done anything to me. I was unconscious. But he just left me there. Why didn't he murder me when he had the chance?*

Charlie pulled away from her, looking startled, and she realized she had spoken aloud. "What on earth are you talking about? Who could have killed you?"

She shivered. "I was thinking about...my first year here. Sorry."

Charlie expelled a breath. "I can't make you come home, Ginny," he said. "All I can tell you is that I think it would be the right thing for you to do."

We're all exhausted...working around the clock...we could use you. Use your help. And...we miss you."

Ginny looked tiredly at her brother. It was not that she wanted to stay. She wanted to go home. She could not help Harry; he was gone. Hermione had never needed her help and did not need it now. And Draco. She would have wanted to help him, but she couldn't; she could see through the coldness in his eyes to what lay beneath: shock, panic-stricken loneliness, abandonment beyond any abandonment she could imagine. And she knew who would need to help him with that, who would be, perhaps, the only person who could, and it was not her.

And there was something else, as well. Something harder to define. She looked down at her hand. The burn was healed, but it had left a latticework of pale white lines along her skin, from fingertips to wrist. Like a veiling of openwork white lace. She was glad it was there; it served as a reminder. Tom was out there, somewhere, in the world; he was there because she had brought him here. And this time there was no Harry to send him back where he had come from. This time she would have to do it herself.

She closed her hand slowly and looked up at her brother.

"Take me back home, Charlie," she said. "I want to go home."

The last of the sunlight had narrowed to a coppery spindle and the rest of the sky was full of ominous black clouds. A cool wind blew from the Forbidden Forest across the lake, up over the grounds, and broke like a wave against the front steps of the school where three small figures stood in a huddled group. A taller figure, scarlet-haired and wrapped in a dark green cloak, waited at the foot of the stairs.

Hermione said her farewells to Ginny first, embracing the younger girl tightly, and Ginny hugged her back. Then Hermione stepped away and back up the steps, leaving Ginny and Draco to say good-bye to each other with a modicum of privacy.

Draco stood one step above Ginny, looking down at her. Her hair was the same coppery color as the last sunset light. He reached out slowly -- everything seemed to be coming slowly now, as if he moved through thickened water -- and tugged on a lock of her bright hair and said, "I suppose I haven't treated you very well, have I?"

"No," she said. "But I expected that."

"Did you?"

Incredibly, the corner of her mouth curved into the ghost of a smile. "You make it hard to be complacent, you know," she said. "I know why you said what you said to me, yesterday. But you don't make it very easy, do you? On anyone. Yourself least of all."

"Don't worry about me," he said. "I can take care of myself."

"Harry's gone, isn't he?" said Ginny.

There was a part of Draco's mind that simply shut down whenever anyone said anything about Harry, and he shut it down now. It was like an portcullis falling; he could hear the ringing sound as the iron spikes drove home, sealing that part of himself safely away. "Yeah. He's gone. Did Hermione tell you that?"

"No," she said. "I could see it in your face." She reached up, then, and brushed the hair out of his eyes; he withstood the brush of her slim cold fingers against his skin with a twinge of guilt, feeling somehow that touching him might damage her in some way he couldn't quite explain. "Now I'm worried," she said.

"We'll find him," Draco said. "Don't worry about Harry."

"I wasn't worrying about Harry."

"Ginny!" It was Charlie calling, from the foot of the stairs. "Ginny -- we'd better go before it gets dark."

Ginny, turning, began to lower her hand. Draco caught it lightly and turned it over, palm up. She looked at him, startled, as he reached into his

pocket with his free hand; finding what he wanted, he laid it gently on her open palm.

He had picked it up from the Gryffindor common room floor that afternoon. It was all that was left of the destroyed bracelet Seamus had given to Ginny: the remains of the glass heart-shaped charm, cracked in half. He had looked, but had not been able to find the other half anywhere.

"Careful," he said. "It has a cutting edge."

"I know," she said. She closed her fingers around it. He kept his hand on her wrist. He could feel the faint pulse of her blood even through the thin layer of the gloves he wore. Her heartbeat was steady and rapid. She was so very alive; even at the heart of all the mistakes she had made and the disaster collapsing around them all he could not blame her entirely. Some part of him envied her. At least she had done *something*. He had done nothing, and it had lost him everything. "Draco?"

"Yes?"

"It's just you and Hermione now," she said.

Draco raised an eyebrow. There had been some ugly arguments on topics related to Hermione, months ago. He did not want to have them again.

"So?" he said.

"So work it out," she said, surprising him.

"Work what out?" he asked, although he suspected that he knew.

"Harry's *gone*," she snapped, her voice suddenly flint-hard. "And if I know him, he won't make it easy for you to find him. Maybe he wants to be found. Maybe he doesn't. I can't tell you. What I can tell you is that with him gone you won't know who you are anymore. So when you find that out, maybe you'll finally know what it is you want, Draco, because you certainly don't know now. And if Hermione can help you figure it out, then fine. Do what you have to do and don't worry about the rest of us. I think we'd all be happier if you just knew what you wanted. If there even is anything you want. God, I hope someday you can at least tell me *that*."

It was the most she had said to him in a long time, and several responses suggested themselves immediately to Draco. Some were flippant, a few were denials, one at least was cruel. But a sudden memory had also come to him, of himself standing on these same front steps with Hermione, looking down at their interlaced fingers, gloved in white and black, and then he had looked down the stairs and seen Harry, his gaze on both of them. In some way Harry and Hermione had always been inseparable in his mind. Hermione was a part of Harry, as much as his green eyes, his vulnerable honesty, his willful stubborn pride.

He remembered his father's chair again, the row of knives that ran along the back. He remembered after the parties were over, getting undressed in his room, peeling off his clothes and turning around to see the blood that ran down his back in vertical threads like the marks of a whip. Later the house-elves would be sent with Healfast potions and by the next day all the marks would be gone. It had not occurred to Draco then that there was such a thing as an injury which magic could not help.

He looked down at Ginny. The rising wind took her hair and her cloak and blew them out behind her like banners of fire: gold and red. There was an intent look on her small pale face. You could not set someone free when you had never had them, but he could tell that was what she was doing anyway, cutting the ties that bound her to him, such as they were. He had wanted her to do this and now that she was he recognized the irony of it; it would almost have been amusing, had everything not been so bleak.

He reached out to touch the edge of her red hair. He had not lied when he said he had a weakness for it. He had a weakness for all beautiful things, sunsets and expensive clothes and beautiful places. In the faded light her hair was nearly the exact color of blood, edged with fainter gold where the light outlined it.

She pulled away. "Don't," she said. "You think it's kind, but it's not kindness."

"I'm not kind," he said. "Never that."

She stepped away from him, backwards down the stairs. "Then what are you?" she said. "Do you even know?"

He did not reply, just put his hands in his pockets and looked down at her. She raised her eyes to his, briefly. Then she turned and was running away back down the steps towards the carriage and her brother waiting next to it.

Harry ducked and swore under his breath as a copy of *Who's Who In the Wizarding World* tumbled down from an upper bookshelf, almost making a dent in his head. He grabbed at the ladder he was standing on to steady himself and leaned back, looking up at the innumerable shelves disappearing into the air above him -- he'd never been in this section of Flourish and Blotts, and in fact the clerk behind the front counter had looked at him quite oddly when he'd come into the shop and asked for the Travel section -- although perhaps he was just trying to place the slight, nervous-looking boy with tangled black hair and no glasses, who ducked away from the light as if he were shy of it.

"You look a bit like Harry Potter," the clerk said, directing Harry towards the back of the store.

"People always say that," Harry had replied nervously, pulling his cloak closer around himself. "I don't see it, myself."

Harry bit his lip now, gaze skidding over the travel book titles -- *Let's Floo Europe 1997*, *The Lonely Broomstick Guide to Eastern Europe*, *A Wizard's Guide to Muggle Europe*, *Culture Shock: The Carpathians*, *The Wizarding Rough Guides*. Harry reached out a hand and pulled a few of the more helpful-looking volumes off the shelf. Jumping down from the ladder, he made a beeline for an overstuffed chair in one of the more hidden corners of the shop. He sank down into it, expelling a small sigh of relief -- it had been hours since he'd sat down, and his sleep on the train had not been exactly restful.

The books turned out to be something of a disappointment. They failed to contain any information on how to get from one place to another -- which was what Harry *really* wanted to know -- and instead were full of what wizards no doubt considered helpful tips on how to get along in the Muggle world. Harry read the tips with increasing disbelief and a sense of incredulous amusement.

According to *Let's Floo*:

Muggle trains, unlike their wizarding equivalent, are unequipped with Sounding Charms which alert the passenger when the train draws near a station. Therefore the traveler must remain vigilant. You may wish to stick your head out the window and keep an eye on the surrounding countryside to ensure that you do not miss your stop. The farther you stick your head out, the better your view will be.

Harry choked on a muffled laugh, and looked up and around, the book sliding onto his lap. He couldn't remember the last time he'd read something so ridiculous and he could only imagine what snide comment Draco would have to make about it --

Harry sobered quickly, subsiding back into his chair. He'd forgotten for a moment that Draco wasn't there. They'd been anchored to each other's sides so constantly for the past eight months, in near-constant mental contact when they were not actually physically proximate, that having him suddenly *not* there was like opening his eyes on darkness and realizing he could see nothing because he was blind.

He tried to return to reading, but the words washed together on the page. The sudden recollection of Draco's absence had been a physical sort of shock, as if someone had walked up and, without warning, slid a very cold, very thin dagger sharply home between two of his ribs. He could only imagine how much worse it was going to get as the days and weeks wore on and on. He remembered being told about amputees who still felt pain in the limbs they'd lost long ago, the mind's map recalling as whole those places which had been burned or cut away.

He thought about reaching out to Draco just once, unblocking his own mind and looking for his friend's. He knew he could do it at this distance. It would be difficult but possible; that past summer Harry had managed to find Draco over the distance between the Burrow and the Manor. Lying on his back in the sunshine one afternoon, in the grass out by the quarry, an arm over his face, he had thought of an amusing observation, and wished Draco were there to share it with him. Having suddenly missed him, he as quickly sought him through the space between them, reaching out as if he searched for a light in the darkness. *There you are*, he'd thought, smiling as he found him. *Is the sun shining at the Manor, too?*

And the reply, drawling, sarcastic, almost instant. *No, Potter, the sun only shines on you.*

Harry had laughed. *What are you doing?*

I'm flying. Draco's inner voice had sounded like summer: lazy as a slow river under the hot sun. *See?*

And he had unlocked his mind to Harry, as if he had thrown a window wide open. Harry, his gasp hitching on a laugh, had caught with one hand at the grass underneath him as in his mind he left the ground and soared up into the hot blue air, the earth dropping rapidly away below. He had seen the fountains and gardens of the Manor spread out beneath him, a riot of blue water and apricot roses, had seen the dark rise of the forest in the distance, Malfoy Park held cupped in the curve of the trees, a shimmering ribbon of river -- before Ron's voice calling to him from the house had snapped the cord that held him and he'd tumbled down and back into himself and sat up gasping, his heart pounding and his eyes wide. Magic was something he'd grown used to, it was a part of his daily life, but for a moment, sprawled on his back in the grass as if he'd actually fallen from a great height, he felt like someone who'd never heard of electricity before and had just now switched on his first lamp.

That was gone now, though, and he'd better get used to it. And unblocking his mind to Draco's was *not* a good idea -- Harry knew, without false modesty, that his will was strong enough to withstand almost any enchantment brought to bear against it, but he also knew that Draco was cleverer than he was, that he was brilliantly manipulative, and that while he couldn't lie to Harry, he could certainly artfully present the facts. Draco would break his resolve down in two seconds flat. No, it was better to do what he had been doing, and keep the contact closed, much as it hurt him, much as he was already desperate for news of his friends. In the end, this decision would keep them alive and that was what mattered.

Wasn't it?

Harry got to his feet, slowly, looking at the pile of books on the armchair. Finally he selected *The Lonely Broomstick Guide to the Continent* almost at random and dragged himself over to the front counter to pay. Exhaustion hung over him like a second cloak. He was so tired he stepped

on a round-faced witch's outstretched foot and nearly knocked over a hooded wizard carrying an enormous pile of history books.

Flustered from apologizing, Harry was halfway through paying the clerk behind the counter when a thought occurred to him. "Excuse me," he began, a bit nervously, "But I was wondering if there's a way out of Diagon Alley that won't take me back through the Leaky Cauldron?"

The clerk looked up at him sharply, and once again Harry had the feeling that the man was trying to place him. "What's wrong with the Leaky Cauldron, lad?"

"I..." said Harry, swallowing hard. "I'm trying to avoid an old girlfriend. You know how these things are."

"Ah. Yes." The clerk wrinkled his narrow face in thought. "I don't know as there's a better way..."

"There is another way," said the hooded wizard with the history books, who had been silently standing behind Harry in the line. "There's a back way out through the Shrieking Teacup. It's a pub. Two streets down from Margin Alley you take a left and keep walking. You can't miss it."

"Ah," said Harry. He would have thanked the stranger, but there was something in his aspect -- in the cloak drawn close about his face, and the withdrawn posture -- that advised against it. "Well," Harry said. "I'll be going along then."

He took his purchase and escaped out into the street, now almost completely dark. The firefly lamps were lighting themselves, one by one, pale beacons of light in the greater darkness. Harry set off towards Margin Alley with a determined stride.

Back in the bookshop, the wizard who had directed Harry to the Shrieking Teacup pushed his stack of books across the counter towards the clerk, his hood slipping back slightly as he did so, revealing his bright hair.

The clerk ducked his head. "Young Mister Finnigan," he observed, with a pleased smile, and glanced down at the stack of books with a chuckle. "Doing a bit of brushing up on your history, then?" he asked, running a finger along the embossed spines. *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Lord, The*

Downfall of Darkness: A History of You-Know-Who, I Was Voldemort's Minion: The Autobiography of An Ex-Death Eater, The Trial of Igor Karkaroff, Inside the Ministry Trials, Death Eaters Who Recanted. "You know," he added, brushing his wand across the book covers and adding up the prices that appeared, glowing, in midair, "I don't think your parents would be any too pleased that you were hanging about in a place like the Shrieking Teacup."

"Oh, I wouldn't go there," said Seamus Finnigan, and his blue eyes lit with amusement. "I was just having a bit of fun with the tourist."

"Good lad," chuckled the clerk. "I suppose I should have guessed. You Gryffindors are such pranksters, although I always say there's no harm in you, really."

"Isn't that the truth," agreed Seamus, sliding his Galleons across the counter. "I mean," he said, raising his fair, blue-eyed face to the light, "do I look like someone who was likely to cause any trouble?"

And he smiled, a bright boyish smile that made the clerk think of pleasant spring afternoons and Quidditch and cats with tangled balls of yarn and cheerful childish laughter. He chuckled. "Not at all."

As the boy scooped his purchases off the counter, the clerk asked him to pass along his regards to the elder Finnigans.

Seamus smiled, and promised that he would.

Hermione looked sideways at Draco as he watched Charlie's carriage pull away from the foot of the steps. Clouds had begun to roll in over the horizon now and the light had turned the color of pewter. The shadows of the clouds overhead moved up the steps and Hermione shivered, but Draco didn't seem to notice. His face was hidden behind the uneven locks of white-blond hair that tumbled forward to cover his eyes. She remembered what he said about needing it cut; it curled the way ivy vines curled when they grew too long -- in looping tendrils. He tipped his head back then, and looked up, and his hair fell away from his face. In the tarnished light he seemed a photo negative of himself: ice-white skin and white hair and white eyes, and all that monochromatic pallor ought to

have looked washed out, but it didn't. People ought not to be that beautiful, Hermione thought. There ought to be limits on these things, or what would be the point of imagination?

"I think," he said, and the normalcy of his tone startled her, "that it's going to rain. We should go inside."

It's just the two of us, now, she thought.

It was an odd, fleeting thought, and vanished as soon as it had crossed her mind.

"I know," she said.

They went inside, side by side, and the door to the Great Hall closed behind them just as the first drops of rain struck the paving outside. Already the inside of the castle, all damp stone that it was, smelled of rain, and Hermione remembered another rainy night, and Harry soaking wet, Crookshanks in his arms, and he'd looked up at her and past her at Draco on the stairs next to her and she had seen what passed between them even then, that peculiarly empathic antagonism that wasn't hate and wasn't love either, that was, even then, an indefinable connection. *You hate what you need. The more he has of this antidote the more it will hurt him. You may have to hold him down.*

"Draco," she said, softly, but he was looking out one of the near windows, distantly curious, at the gray-black night, crystallizing now to shattered silver, alive with frozen falling rain. "Draco," she said again, and this time he turned and looked at her.

There was something moving behind his eyes: it was a cool, resolved look, the look of something icy that was not icy at all, a refracted sort of frozen flame. She remembered him in Potions class, cracking firecrabs for a powder. The other students had used their small jeweled pins on the crabs first, a swift and merciful killing, but Draco had crushed them alive. They had burned his fingers as they died but he had not minded, or at least, it had not removed the look of intently fascinated cruelty from his face. He wore a similar look now. It was an inward look, giving her no clue what he was thinking. But it sent a shiver up her spine.

I will have to watch him, she thought. Not just for his own good, but for everyone's safety. Even my own.

"I'm going to the Owlery," she told him calmly, "to send a letter to Gringotts. You can come if you like."

He shrugged but fell into step beside her as she headed up the stairs. "I checked the Marauder's Map over again," he said. "Riddle's definitely nowhere on the grounds, and neither is Finnigan. Of course, the map doesn't show the Chamber of Secrets..."

"True, but after what Dumbledore did to the entrance to the Chamber after second year, I doubt anyone could get in there. Anyway, there's nothing in there Riddle would want now. Harry killed the basilisk and Dumbledore had the whole place flooded with lake water."

Draco looked at her sideways. "At some point, you're going to have to tell me a bit more about Tom Riddle and that diary business. I'm thinking my education might not have included some of the more salient particulars. Like why he's got it in for Ginny, for a start."

"I would have thought you'd be the expert on Young Voldemort."

"My father didn't tell me much." The windows, as they passed them, were opaquely silver with rain. "I know he is -- was -- the Dark Lord," said Draco. "I know Tom Riddle was a friend of my father's before he became Voldemort."

Hermione shuddered. "That still seems so weird. Tom Riddle. Here."

Draco sounded almost amused. "Everything in our lives is weird. What's one more undead evil maniac out to terrorize the populace? And may I point out that I always said Seamus Finnigan was up to no good."

"It's not Seamus and you know it."

"Perhaps not but you can bet the Dark Lord recognized a kindred spirit in him. 'Here's the kind of guy who could do with a good possessing!' he thought to himself the moment he clapped eyes on Captain Cardboard. 'He's got no personality himself, so plenty of room for mine.'"

"One of these days," said Hermione darkly, pushing the door to the Owlery open, "you can explain to me exactly what your problem with Seamus is --"

"Was," said Draco, blandly, ducking past her and into the long, dimly lit room beyond. Up here at the top of the school, the smell of rain was even stronger, along with the smell of dismal, wet owl. Hermione could never understand why people were always coming up to the Owlery to snog. She could not imagine engaging in passionate romantic activity with a bunch of goggle-eyed birds staring down at her.

Hermione shot Draco an angry look. "It's hardly Seamus' fault that --"

He cut her off. "I need some air. Everything in here reeks of owl."

He crossed the room to the large picture window that looked down over the grounds. Hermione scribbled several notes, including an inquiry note to Gringotts, addressed them, and sent them off with a brown barn owl. Then she joined Draco at the window.

Beyond the glass, rain tautened like silver strings, barring her view of the Forest and the grounds outside. She could see the slightly blurred reflection of Draco's face in the rained-over glass. His eyes looked black, veiled with lighter lashes, his gaze distant. She knew what he was thinking. She was thinking the same thing. *Where was Harry, was he all right, did he have somewhere to go, somewhere out of the rain? Was he alone, did he think of them, had he dismissed them from his life, was he safe now, would he die soon, would Draco know if he did, would Harry know when Draco was gone? Would he sit up in bed, as Draco had, blind-eyed with a sudden shattering sense of something missing, and whisper into the empty dark that he had lost something but he didn't know what?*

A bleak feeling of misery swept through her.

"If you wanted to find him," she said, without thinking, "you could find him."

He placed his gloved fingertips against the glass. "You can be a real bitch sometimes, you know that," he said tonelessly.

"It's not just anyone we're talking about, here. It's Harry. If you hate him -
-"

"It doesn't matter if I hate him."

"You're right," said Hermione. "It *doesn't* matter."

Draco looked sideways at her. She could see the dull gleam of his Epicyclical Charm where it lay in the pale hollow of his throat. "I was expecting a bit more of an argument on that one."

"Look, it doesn't matter if you hate him. You used to hate him. It doesn't matter if you love him or hate him or despise him or want to kill him or think he's the only real friend you've ever had --"

"If you keep trying to talk to me about Harry," said Draco, forgetting, for a moment, to use his surname, "I will walk away from you, Hermione, I promise you that."

"--It doesn't matter because it doesn't change anything, not really. This connection you two have, it's not dependent on love or hate or even liking each other at all. It's beyond that. *You're* beyond that. You're too angry to see it or to want to see it, but if you wanted to find him, *you could*."

"No," he said, between his teeth. "I can't. You think I didn't try?"

"I think you didn't try," she said. "You can walk in and out of his dreams. You think you can't find him? He's Apparated himself to you, before, when you needed him --"

"I remember that," said Draco. "And I stuck a sword in him."

"I could get you to him," said Hermione, a little desperately. "I could send you --"

"I'm not so sure, Hermione," said Draco, "that that's something that you would want to do."

"I just want Harry back," she said, her voice thin. "I just want him *back*."

"And I want a solid gold bonnet. We don't always get what we want in this life."

"*Don't you dare be flippant at me!*" Hermione shouted, losing control suddenly and shockingly. "If you won't even *try* --"

He moved quickly, so quickly she hardly saw him move towards her or catch at her arms and spin her to face him. Her back was against the cold glass of the window. When he leaned to her ear she smelled on him the antidote she had made herself, scents of blood and bitter aloe.

"You *want*," he whispered, his voice alive with soft mockery. His grip was tight on her upper arms; she could feel the pressure of his fingers through the skin, against her bones. "And you think I don't? You think I don't know about wanting what you can't have? You lot of fucking Gryffindors live everything you are on the surface -- every pinprick, every disappointment, you've never learned to swallow it down, even when it's poison and it chokes you. And because I *have* learned it, because I don't bawl my eyes out over every bloody paper cut, you think I don't care. You think you can push me and push me and push me and I won't break --"

He cut himself off. Hermione did not know what to do. He had drawn back and was looking at her as if he loathed her and in that moment she knew she represented every Gryffindor he had ever hated or been frustrated by to him: she was Harry to him, she was Ginny, she was herself.

She raised her chin. "You're hurting my arms."

He drawled, "You sound like you haven't decided whether that's a good thing or a bad thing."

"*Don't.*" Her tone was savage. "You don't mean it."

The sound of the rain on the window behind them was louder now. It sounded like gunfire. The glass rattled against her back.

His voice was cold. "I thought I already told you not to tell me what I do and don't mean."

"Go to hell, Malfoy," she snapped, and tried to pull away from him.

It didn't work. Any shifting just brought her in closer contact with his body. She could feel the buckle on his belt where it dug into the space just under her ribs. His clothes were damp and smelled like rain.

"Yes," he said, his voice flat. "I probably will."

Hermione stopped trying to pull away. A sudden arrow of remorse shot through her. There was no point in trying to hurt Draco, no point in fighting. They were on the same side, and anyway, he had already been hurt beyond the point of being able to be hurt again. "If you're determined to lose your mind over this," she said, as gently as she could, "lose it some other way."

He raised his eyebrows, in that way he had that lifted the veiling silvery lashes slowly up over his smoke-colored eyes. The pale scar at the corner of his eye looked like a line drawn in metallic ink. "What other way," he said, "would you suggest?"

She looked up at him. She had the sudden urge to tell him things. He had said he would not talk about Harry to her, but he had not forbidden her to do the same. She wanted to tell him how she had always thought that being as smart as she was would get her out of anything. That the idea that there was a problem she could not figure or study her way out of made her want to put her hand through a window. That Harry not leaving her a letter had broken her heart, that doing what she was doing, keeping busy, solving problems one by one, was the only way she could avoid thinking about it. That if Draco kept holding onto her arms like that and looking at her like that she was going to do something that would make them both very sorry. That she knew why he was doing it, too, and that it bothered her less than it probably should have.

She opened her mouth -- she never knew what it was she would have said had she spoken, for at that moment something as white as a falling star in the dimness hurtled between them. A snowy owl, wings outstretched, making a distressed, soft-pitched whooping noise -- Hedwig.

Draco let go of Hermione's arms and stepped back, half-raising his arm in surprise.

Hedwig banked, swooped towards him, and landed on the crook of his elbow. She folded her wings, bent her head, and thrust her beak into his hair.

Draco looked stunned. "What on Earth...?"

The spell was broken. "That's Harry's owl," said Hermione briskly, folding her arms over her chest. "Hedwig."

"I know perfectly well it's Potter's owl. What's it want with *me*? Oi there! You silly bird. Get off."

Draco wriggled his arm ineffectually. Hedwig did not budge.

"She misses Harry," said Hermione. "She knows he's gone."

"I'm not him, though," said Draco flatly, and looked at Hedwig as if she had personally insulted him.

"No," said Hermione in a strange little voice. "You're not."

Hedwig nipped at Draco's ear. An odd look crossed his face -- Hermione looked away. She heard Draco say something, under his breath, to Hedwig. Then he crossed the room and firmly deposited the woeful owl back on her perch, despite her insistent wibbling.

"Daft bloody bird," he said when he returned. He was gnawing his lower lip. "Look, Hermione --"

"Don't apologize," she said.

He stuck his gloved hands in his pockets. "At least let me do that," he said. "You hadn't done anything wrong."

"I don't want an apology," she said. "I want you to try to find Harry. Just try *once*."

An odd look came into his eyes. It was a look she had so rarely seen on Draco's face, and certainly not for years, that it took her a moment to place it in this context.

It was defeat.

"All right," he said.

Before she could think better of it, she leaned towards him and kissed him in the cheek. He tasted like rainwater and salt. "Thank you," she said.

"I'll do it." He didn't take his hands out of his pockets. "But I won't answer for any consequences."

"I know," Hermione said. She tried to push down the faint worry that his resigned tone produced in her. What consequences, after all, could there be?

Later, Harry would remember that first sight of the interior of the Shrieking Teacup and marvel bitterly at what a fool he had been. But when he first stepped through the doors, all freezing bare hands and chattering teeth, he was conscious only that it was warm inside and that the blood in his veins felt half-frozen.

The interior of the pub -- if that was what it was -- bore some resemblance to the Leaky Cauldron, but not much. It also was dark inside, illuminated mainly by the glow of a banked fire in an enormous stone grate along the far wall. But where the Leaky Cauldron was shabby, this place was all polished brass railings, deep armchairs, plush dark green sofas, and a gleaming bar. It was full of wizards, although he saw no witches. Sunk into the heavy armchairs, puffing on pipes, most were heavily robed and cowered against the chill air that soaked through the leaded glass windows.

The bar itself was staffed by a dour-looking man in tailored dark robes. Harry ordered a hot spiced butterbeer and went to stand by the fire. He had wanted to ask about the back way out, but some part of him rebelled passionately against the idea of heading back out into that rain. Instead, he set his drink on the mantel and leaned shivering to the fire. He didn't dare push the hood of his robe back; since the clerk in the bookshop had called out to him, he'd felt strangely naked and identifiable.

The fire, throwing its flaring shadows along the stone floor, made him think of the fire in the Gryffindor common room. And that, in turn, made him think of sitting on the sofa beside it, strands of long brown hair tickling his face as he did his schoolwork, Ron's quick voice in his ear. He reached out his hands closer to the fire -- they were wet and pale, almost blue at the tips, the scar along his palm an angry dark red. He had been stupid to have left his gloves in his bag at the station.

The heat of the fire was drawing his eyelids down. Pale gold sparks flew from it as a log settled, illuminating the bright sequins of brass affixed to the brick fireplace façade at regular intervals. Harry leaned a bit closer, tracing them with his fingertips. They were individual bronze plaques, and each one bore a name.

Evan Rosier. Antonin Dolohov. Augustin Mulciber. Bela Travers. Augustus Rookwood. Sebastian and Mary Lestrangle. Peter Pettigrew. And, below that, *Bartholomew Crouch, Jr.*

And even further below that, under a score of other names, *Lucius Malfoy.*

Only Lucius' name was crossed out, now, a line slashed through it.

Harry stared for a moment in blank incomprehension. Then his heart gave an almighty lurch and slammed against his ribcage with the force of a rogue Bludger.

Swiftly, he straightened up and looked around him. Nobody seemed to be looking at him, thankfully. Yet everything in the room had taken on a sinister cast. The men in their dark robes by the chess table, the sour-faced bartender, the shadows pooling in the corners of the room. The brass rods that held the heavy black curtains in place over the windows were carved in the shape of curling serpents.

He took a deep breath, trying to slow his racing pulse.

The names carved into the plaques on the fireplace were the names of those who had fallen or been lost in the service of Voldemort.

This was a Death Eater meeting place. He had not been looking at the street names as he had been walking. Perhaps he had turned onto Knockturn Alley without meaning to. It hardly mattered now. What mattered was that he was here. And that he had to get out.

Harry set his cup down on the mantel. The faint clank as it settled sent a shiver up his spine. He pulled his damp cloak about himself and stepped away from the fire. Staring down at his feet, he began to walk across the room. It wasn't far to the door -- no more than thirty paces --

"Harry!" a voice called out to him cheerfully. "Harry Potter! What on earth are you doing here?"

Harry jerked his head up, heart pounding in his chest.

Seamus Finnigan stood directly in front of him. He wore a heavy cloak, and the hood was thrown back, showing his bright hair, starred all over with drops of rain as if it had been sprinkled with seed pearls. His face was open, guileless. He stepped forward, holding out a hand towards Harry.

"I hardly would have expected to see you --"

"Seamus!" Harry was at the other boy's side in an instant, gripping his arm. "Shut *up*. What are you doing here?"

Seamus looked at him blankly. "I saw you come in," he said. "I followed you."

There was something wrong with this assertion. Harry recognized it even through the turmoil in his mind. "How did you see me? I had my hood up --"

"Your watch." Seamus pointed at Harry's wrist. "That gold watch that Hermione gave you -- wasn't it your father's?" He blinked once, slowly, at Harry, like a lizard blinking in the sun. "Is there something wrong, Harry?"

"Don't call me that!"

"But why not?" Seamus' voice was lazy, curious. He reached up then without warning and batted at the hood of Harry's cloak. It fell back, and Harry was bareheaded in the glare of the firelight. "It is you...isn't it?"

"Seamus --"

But it was too late for protestations. All around him Harry could hear rustling. The Death Eaters were standing up, setting down the glasses they had been holding, getting to their feet. Coming towards him. Harry's stomach twisted in panic.

Harry let go of Seamus' arm and stumbled back. The Death Eaters were advancing on them now, slow, unhurried. They moved as smoothly as Dementors. There were perhaps twelve of them. Everything seemed to be happening very slowly. Harry reached to jerk his right sleeve up: the runic band on his belt was freezing cold against his bare wrist. So cold it burned.

Harry flung his hand out, fingers splayed. "*Incendius!*"

It felt for a moment as if all Harry's pent-up anguish and fury was pouring down through his veins, into his hand, and through his fingers. Light flared, and a bank of fire sprang up just behind Seamus, blocking the Death Eaters from view.

Harry lowered his hand, held it out to Seamus. "Seamus -- come on --"

But the other boy shook his head, his eyes gone suddenly dark. In fact, they were altogether a darker blue than Harry remembered them. But there was barely time to notice that detail; the Death Eaters had begun pushing their way through the wall of flame, which was already beginning to die down.

"Come *on*," groaned Harry, in an agony of haste.

Seamus, bizarrely, grinned. "I don't think so, Harry." He crossed his arms over his chest. "Let's see if you can run as fast as you can fly."

Harry gaped. But there was no time. With a last, shocked look at the intransigent Seamus, Harry spun around and fled through the door and into the rain-soaked alley beyond.

The evening sky was violet, the color of venous blood. Ron sat at the edge of the castle's roof and looked down and understood why Voldemort had laughed at him when he'd said he wanted to go outside.

The castle stood perched on the top of a cliff, and the cliff fell away below it on all sides, steep and sheer as the side of a razor blade. Far below the cliff vanished into clouds; below the clouds, the slender line of a river was visible, rocketing along between the walls of a chasm. Mountains were all

that was discernible in the distance. Ron felt as if he stood at the edge of the world.

"Is it gone yet?"

Rhysenn spoke from the shadow of the tower through which they had come up to the roof. Her eyes were shut, her narrow little face as white as salt. Her dress blew around her like wings in the cold mountain air. She had been clinging to the shadows at the base of the tower since they had come outside.

Ron turned back and looked at the last gleam of the sun as it vanished over the horizon, drowning itself in the shadow of the blue mountains. "It's gone."

She opened her eyes slowly.

"It's a nice night," Ron said.

"Any night is better than any day," said Rhysenn, her tone positive, but she came to join him at the edge of the roof. "Careful," she said. "Fall, and I cannot catch you. I cannot fly."



"Voldemort would be displeased with you if I died," said Ron.

"Yes," she agreed. "Or I would not bother to warn you." She sat down then, about a foot from the roof's edge, her black skirts spreading around

her like dark water. "I am here to watch you," she said. "But I will talk to you also, if you desire."

"About what?" Ron demanded.

"Whatever you like."

"You're being awfully agreeable," Ron said bitterly. "I suppose you've been told to keep me happy. What's next? Turn yourself into Hermione and offer to shag me?"

She opened her gray eyes wide. "Is that what you want me to do?"

"No. But it would be a demon's trick."

"I am only half a demon. And I would only trick you if it was what you wanted."

"How does that work, anyway?" Ron asked, desperate to get off the subject of Hermione. "How can you be only half a demon?"

Rhysenn looked, briefly, amused. "It's a long story. I can tell it to you if you like."

Ron shoved his hands in his pockets. He was cold. "It isn't like I have anything better to do."

Rhysenn took a deep breath. Ron decided not to notice that this made her bosom inflate impressively over the bodice of her corset. "Six hundred years ago," she said, "A wizard, an ancestor of the Malfoys you know now, raised a demon with a spell..."

Harry ran.

He had left the Shrieking Teacup far behind him. But he had seen the Death Eaters pour out of the doors after him, a swift army of black-clad ants, and knew they were hot on his heels. They had Tracking Charms; they knew the area much better than he did. They would find him, and they would back him into a corner.

He hoped that when they did, he'd be able to kill at least a few of them before they took him.

He shook the thought out of his mind. He should not be defeatist. If he could find his way back to Diagon Alley he'd have a chance --

But the narrow alleys had turned into an unrecognizable warren of twisting, labyrinthine tunnels between blind stone buildings. The streets were slick with frozen rain and the mist covered everything like a blinding cloud. There seemed no doors in any of the buildings, and no windows.

So Harry ran. His booted feet found a skidding purchase on the icy ground. For almost the first time, he blessed his scrawniness, his wiry lightness and delicate build. It was what made him such a good Seeker, and now it allowed him to race over the ground as swiftly as an arrow flying through the air.

His heart pounded in his ears and the blood sang in his veins and he felt a savage sort of satisfaction as he reached a low metal fence and scrambled up and over it, dropping lightly to the other side. He winced as his cloak caught on a barb -- he twisted and slithered out of it -- it marked him out too clearly, anyway, was too recognizable. He began running again, only his worn t-shirt covering his arms now, but he had been running too hard to really feel the cold.

The rain sizzled against his flushed cheeks as he ran, caught in the tangles of his soaking hair, dripped down the round collar of his shirt. His feet, inside the dragonhide boots, were dry, but his trousers were almost wet through.

He thought he could hear the Death Eaters behind him, the pound of feet on the pavement, but perhaps that was just his imagination.

He put on a burst of speed as he reached the end of a long alleyway, and spun around the corner. Two narrower alleys branched off in opposite directions here -- Harry blinked, then flung himself blindly to the left.

He fled down the alley. He was beginning to tire now. His breath rasped in his chest. He heard Draco's voice in his head suddenly, laughing and incredulous: only a few months ago, they had been talking about their

methods of Quidditch training. *And you mean you don't make your team run laps around the field?*

It's flying, Malfoy. Who cares if we can run?

And it doesn't even bother you that I can probably outrun you?

No, Harry had lied. It doesn't bother me at all. I can still outfly you.

Draco had grinned at him, obviously entertained. *Whatever you say, Potter.*

It was bloody buggering awful when Draco was right.

The alley turned a sharp corner. Harry spun around it at top speed -- only to find that it dead-ended at the side of a building. He skidded to a stop and looking around himself despairingly. Wet black walls covered in ancient posters advertising now-defunct charms and potions rose all around him -- there was a bolted door in the side of the wall furthest from him -- he wiped rain out of his eyes and jogged forward quickly.

It was a moment before he realized there was someone there, leaning against the wall by the door. At first just a dark silhouette, and then there was a spark of light -- it flared to a greater glow-- and the faint illumination wove a thousand silver strands out of the still-falling frozen rain. He saw a slender figure in a long dark cloak, a bent fair head, a face hidden by a raised hand, a peeling poster behind the figure advertising *Finian's Finishing Potion -- Now in Brand New Cherry Flavor!*

Harry felt a tightening around his heart, the sharp pressure of shock behind his eyes, even before the figure lowered its hand, and raised its head, and looked at him, and smiled.

"About time you got here," Draco said.

The kitchen at the Burrow was full of light and warmth. Ginny submitted rather numbly to being kissed and hugged by her mother, whooped over by Fred and George, and ignored by Percy, who was sitting at the kitchen

table behind a massive stack of parchments. There was ink in his hair and a deal of chalk dust on his nose. It suited him.

Mr. Weasley was apparently out; Mrs. Weasley only looked shifty when she was asked where "out" was, although wherever it was he had apparently gone there with Mad-Eye Moody. Sirius Black, meanwhile, was in the living room with Professor Lupin. Like Percy, they were surrounded by parchments, file folders, and boxes of papers. Lupin was using his wand to draw bright sets of words on the air between the two of them; Sirius, sprawled and exhausted-looking on the couch, was nodding and adding check marks to some of them, x's to others. To Ginny, at this distance, it looked like a list of names.

"You're sure you're all right, Ginny darling?" her mother fussed anxiously. "You look so pale -- would you like some tea? Hot cocoa? Butterbeer?"

Ginny shook her head. "I'm all right."

"But you look miserable!" wailed Mrs. Weasley.

"It's nothing serious, Mum, really..."

"Boyfriend problems," said George sagely, pointing at her with the end of the quill he'd been chewing on. "I suspect little Ginny's been having boyfriend problems."

"Ah, but which boy?" wondered Fred portentously. "The dashing yet otherwise occupied Harry Potter? The stalwart yet tedious Seamus Finnigan? The redeemed-yet-still-sarcastic Draco Malfoy?"

"Seamus didn't seem at all tedious to me," protested Mrs. Weasley.

"Seamus and I broke up," said Ginny, in a leaden tone.

"And good riddance!" cried her mother. "I hated him on sight!"

"Oh, for goodness sake," Ginny wailed. "And Fred, I don't even know why you'd *mention* Harry, you know perfectly well I've been over him for ages."

"I suppose that leaves Malfoy," said George regretfully. "Which is too bad. You'll spend the rest of your life competing with his hair products for attention and fighting over which one of you is the prettiest."

"And let me tell you," added Fred, "Malfoy will *win*."

"It is not," Ginny said, shooting them both glares of loathing, "a boy problem."

Fred raised his eyebrows at her. Ginny knew perfectly well what they were doing; George and Fred had always used humor as a way to deflect the pain of bad situations. Without being able to help herself, her eyes went to the ivy plants in the window, each charmed to reflect the health of a Weasley child. Ron's was still blooming and healthy -- but for how long?

Ginny's mother saw where her daughter was looking and bit her lip, her eyes suddenly bright. "Oh, Ginny -- I'm glad you're home," she said in a soft voice, and Ginny let herself be gathered into another hug. It was Charlie who finally broke into the embrace, tapping Mrs. Weasley on the shoulder.

"Ginny's had a long, exhausting day," he said gently. "We should let her get some rest."

Nodding, Mrs. Weasley let her daughter go. With a grateful smile at Charlie, Ginny headed up the stairs to her bedroom, pausing to wave down at Lupin and Sirius as she went. It was nice to have a house full of people, especially people she liked so much. If only she were in a fitter state to appreciate it.

Her bedroom door creaked as she opened it. It was full of shadows and, unvisited in for so many months, smelled faintly of soap and dust. Ginny drew her wand out and waved it once, murmuring, "*Luminesce*." A soft glow suffused the room and Ginny stepped inside, shutting the door behind her.

It was only after she had locked the door and turned around that she realized that her bedroom was not, in fact, empty. There was someone sitting on the edge of her bed, and to say that that someone was the last person she would ever have expected to see now would not have been far from the truth.

"Good lord," she exclaimed, utterly surprised. "What on earth are *you* doing here?"

"Malfoy?" Harry's jaw dropped open and stayed open. The bitter rain went into his mouth and he nearly choked on it. "H-how -- how did you -- how did you know -- how did you find me?"

"Are you really that surprised?" Draco took a step away from the wall, and began walking towards him. Slowly, as if there were no hurry in the world. Harry stared at that face he hadn't really expected to ever see again. Sharp features, familiar gray eyes, the hood of the long cloak down around his shoulders. His hair was as wet as Harry's, plastered across his cheeks and forehead in long colorless streaks. "I can always find you."

"No." Harry's voice was a half-whisper. "I did *everything* to prevent this --"

"You're not glad to see me?" The narrow mouth curled up at the corner, like paper curling as it burned. "How astonishing."

"Of *course* I'm not glad to see you. I mean, I'm glad. But Malfoy -- there are Death Eaters chasing me --"

Draco, unexpectedly, threw back his head and laughed, a bright sharp bark of laughter so unlike him that Harry stared. "*Death Eaters* chasing you? Oh, you are funny. I love it. What's next? Going to start up with that whole and-I'm-a-pitiful-orphan-take-care-of-me-because-I-have-to-save-the-world thing? God, but you're boring sometimes."

Harry rocked back on his heels as if Draco had hit him. "I never -- I don't --"

"No, of course you *never*." Draco was still smiling the same half-smile and there was something about it Harry really didn't like. "Of course you *don't*." He raised his hand, there was something glowing in it, like a spark of witchlight or marshfire. "You're Harry Potter, after all."

Harry began to back away, driven by instinct. He wondered if Draco was going to hit him and if he could bring himself to hit back. He didn't think

he could. He deserved this, after all. That didn't make it any more unsettling. "I'm serious, Malfoy. There are Death Eaters chasing me. Your father will probably --"

Draco shook the wet hair out of his eyes. "Oh, right. My father. How could I forget my father. Such a bastard." His voice was toneless, cool, amused. The rain ran down his bare face in rivulets, parting the thick silver blades of his eyelashes, sliding down into the open collar of his shirt. "You know, don't you get bored with the same old whining every once in a while? Don't you want to do something a little different?"

"Different? What? Malfoy, I -- " Harry broke off as his back hit the damp wall. He could back up no farther. He shivered. "Okay, I know you're angry. I'm sorry I left you --"

"*Left me?*" Draco laughed. He lowered his hand, and the light in it winked out. "That's a new one. You make it sound so dramatic. You don't really think that's the sort of thing I'd care about, do you?"

Harry stared at him. He reached out then, tentatively, with his mind, but it was like hitting his hand against a concrete wall -- the other boy wasn't letting him in at all. Draco was close enough to him now that Harry could see the damp hair curling at the ends, the rain beading on his lashes, the familiar silver scar under his eye. Harry himself had made that scar, indirectly, just as he had made the scar on Draco's hand, just as he had marked him in dozens of ways that were less visible. "Well, I thought that you would --"

"Really, Potter." Draco's voice was the same cool drawl Harry remembered from years gone by. He took a last step forward, closing the slight gap between them, and pushed Harry, hard, against the wall. Harry felt cold wet stone through the thin material of his shirt. Grit scraped his bare elbows. Draco held him pinned there, his hand against Harry's chest, and with his other hand he reached into Harry's shirt pocket, and drew out his glasses. "I was wondering where these were." He flicked the glasses open, and slid them onto Harry's face. "Better," he said.

Wordless, Harry looked at him. It could have been a gentle gesture, this restoration of his glasses, but somehow, it wasn't. The glasses were wet with rain anyway and slid halfway down his nose, which actually was a

good thing, or he wouldn't have been able to see at all. "I left you a letter," he began, stumbling over his words. "Didn't you read what I --"

"Shut up," interrupted Draco pleasantly, his grip tightening on Harry's shirt, and for a dizzy moment Harry was positive Draco was going to hit him, just grab him and bang his head into the wall, and his muscles tensed up hard. Draco grinned. "Scared, Potter?"

"Hit me," Harry said. "If you want to hit me, hit me. If it'll make you feel better --"

"I feel fine," Draco said. He looked down at his hand, where it rested against Harry's chest. "You always have to make such a big deal out of everything," he said, and then he did exactly the last thing Harry would ever have expected, and leaned across the small space that separated them, and kissed Harry on the mouth.

References:

"The kind of family that bought their own furniture" --Draco's family, of course, would never buy a piece of furniture, having inherited the stuff down through the generations. MP Alan Clark once famously said about fellow politician Michael Heseltine that he was a man so unaristocratic that he had "**bought his own furniture**"-- the first time I came across a reference to this expression was in Textual Sphinx's lovely fic "To Sever the Lining From A Cloud," and it has stuck in my head since.

"I told you once you were wasting your time to barter your destiny for the friendship of a boy who would never like you." From DS6, Lucius talking to Draco: "You think I didn't see your face, back at the Mansion, when you looked at him, and at her, and her face when she looked at you both? Do you want to barter your destiny for the friendship of a boy who will never like you, and the favors of a girl who doesn't return your love? To ally yourself with people who will never regard you with anything more than suspicion and mistrust? They are not our kind of people, and they never will be. You will never belong with them." Yay for backstory continuity.

"To paraphrase Hamlet, Oedipus, Lear, and all those other guys" -- Roger Zelazny, *The Sign of the Unicorn*.

Scrumdiddlyumptious bars: *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

Draco Veritas Chapter Twelve: London After Midnight

Odi et amo: quare id faciam, fortasse requiris.

Nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.

-Catullus

-

It was a hell of a kiss, too.

Not that it mattered much, in practice, although perhaps, Harry would think later, it mattered in some kind of principle. At the time he was mainly aware of shock, a jolting sort of shock that seemed to fling the breath right out of him and he was suddenly pressed back up against the wall and the wet stone ground hard into his back and he was shivering all over and he would have thought that being smashed up against a wall like this by Draco would have offered some kind of warmth but really, it didn't.

Really, it made him colder than he had imagined it was possible to be, as if not just his cloak but his skin had been stripped away, leaving him shaking there in the dark. He didn't know what to do with his hands: they banged, flat, against the wall behind him and the gritty rock scraped his skin. His knees were giving out; he could not stand up. Without Draco to hold him up he would never stand up again.

Somewhere in the back of his mind words were forming. He could do nothing to shape them or to hold them back although he knew that Draco would not hear them, was either beyond hearing them or had chosen not to listen, or there was something even more terribly wrong than that, something he was only beginning to guess at, but his mind raced ahead of

his guesses and the silent cry came out without his being able to help it:
Not this way, not this way -

Draco let him go and stepped back.

Harry took his hands away from the wall. They were bloody where they had scraped against the bricks. He looked down at them with a dull fascination and then at Draco. Draco was sucking his lower lip in a meditative manner and the rain dripped off his eyelashes and his mouth and he then grinned at Harry, unaffectedly. "Well, all right," he said. "If you don't want to play."

"Play?!" Harry's voice scraped out of his throat. "What the hell are you playing at?"

"So you don't want me to kiss you. What *do* you want?" Draco shoved a wet lock of hair behind his ear. "Help me out here. I'm creative, but nobody's that creative."

"W-what?" Harry struggled for words, lost them, inhaled another gasping breath, and realized. It was like being slapped in the face, repeatedly. Each slap a different emotion. Realization. Shock. Anger. Disgust with himself, for being so stupid. Disappointment. "You're not Draco," he said.

The other boy cocked his blond head and smiled. "Of course I am."

"No," Harry said. His voice had hardened. He *knew*. If he hadn't been so shocked before, so desperate, he would have known immediately. And now that he did know he couldn't believe he'd ever been deceived, even for a moment - and he felt a sudden horrible pity for Ron, a pity mixed for the first time with understanding. To see what you wanted to see -
"No," Harry said again, more harshly. "You're not -"

"I am," said the boy, and laughed again that laugh that Harry hadn't liked. "Well, I am until next morning, anyway. After that -"

"Shut up," Harry said. "And stop fucking *smiling* at me. Who are you?"

The boy frowned petulantly. "You're not allowed to ask me that." He raised his hand, and again the small spark of light lit in his palm. "You

should know better." He sounded cross. "If you're going to be all weird like this, I'm going to go back inside."

A cold and venomous rage was beginning to spread through Harry's veins. "Oh no," he said. "You aren't," and he flicked out the fingers of his right hand, whispering under his breath.

The light flew out of the boy's hand and sailed across the alley. Harry reached up and plucked it out of the air. It was a small glowing cube, about an inch across, with a wick of fiery light trapped inside it. The letters MC were marked across one side of it.

Harry glanced up at the boy, who was gaping at him in surprise. "Are these your initials?"

"N-no. Of course not. You just - how did you do that? Magic without a wand?"

"I'm a Magid," Harry said. "I thought everyone knew that."

A strange look came into the boy's eyes. He looked horrified and - afraid. Harry saw it and hated it because even though he had no idea who he was actually talking to, those eyes were still Draco's eyes, and the face wearing that expression was still his friend's, and he felt as if someone had taken a Quidditch bat to his ribcage and was trying to batter their way through to his heart.

"A Magid?" the boy said in a half whisper. "But there are only a few - and they're registered - they never would have let you in if they knew that you -"

"Let me in where?" Harry demanded, furious. "Look, tell me what the hell is going on here or I'll break every bone in your body without touching you, I don't need a wand to hurt you, and I will if -"

"You're not," the boy said, still looking horrified. "You can't be."

"I can't be what?"

"Really him," the boy said.

"You know who I am," Harry said in a low voice. "You said my name. Several times."

"But you can't be Harry Potter. He'd never come to a place like this."

"I didn't come here!" Harry shouted. "I told you! I was chased here! I told you, you stupid bastard! And you, poncing around, pretending to be Draco, not listening to a word I said, it would serve you goddamn right if they caught up with me and wrung your bloody lying neck!"

"If...if who caught up with you?"

"*The Death Eaters!*" Harry yelled at the top of his lungs.

"You mean," the boy said, "*those* Death Eaters?"

He pointed behind him.

Rather against his own good judgment, Harry turned and stared.

The boy had not been lying. The entrance to the alley behind them was entirely blocked by an line of hooded men in familiar dark robes, and they were walking steadily towards Harry and his companion.

"Sorry if I startled you," said the young man sitting on Ginny's desk, his tone amused. He fixed her with a pair of familiar dark eyes and grinned engagingly. His eyes, as before, reminded her of Harry's eyes - not in their color, but in their ability to project a sort of opaque sincerity. "I didn't mean to shock you."

Ginny closed the door behind her, then turned to face him. "Ben?" she said.

He nodded once.

"You look different," she said.

He did look different. His dark hair was longer than it had been and there were scars on his face and hands that hadn't been there before. His eyes were the same and the thick uneven lashes around them; he looked up at

her through those lashes and said, "I am different. I'm older than I was the last time we met. I'm twenty-six."

"Oh." The strangeness of it all hit Ginny a little bit then, and she hung back from going near him. "I am glad to see you," she said, "but why are you here? I didn't think I would ever see you again."

He smiled a little, looking as if he were thinking of something. "Come here," he said, and held out a hand. The memory of another voice telling her, commanding her, come here, echoed in the back of her mind and for a moment she flinched away - but she reminded herself that this was Ben, who she knew, and who wouldn't touch her, and who had never been anything but kind to her, and she went over and stood in front of him.

"You don't look well," he said. "You're all right?" It was a question, not a statement. Up close, Ginny could see that the hem of his robes was damp, and so were the ends of his hair. So he had been outside, and not Apparated directly into her room.

"Are you all right?" she said, turning the question back on him. "Is Gareth -"

"He's waiting for me in the garden." Ben smiled crookedly. "He doesn't think you like him very much."

Ginny pictured arrogant blond Gareth, Slytherin's First Heir, clomping around irritably in the potato patch, and smiled for the first time that day. "He can come up if he wants," she said. Of course I like him. He just reminds me of Draco, that's all."

"Draco." Ben's amused look faded. "How is he?"

"Not that well," Ginny said slowly. "He's..."

"Dying," Ben said. "I know."

Ginny's mouth opened. "How do you know that?"

Ben put his elbows on his knees. As he leaned forward his cloak fell away and Ginny saw the gold glint of the scabbard at his waist with its elegant

design of leaves and flowers; there was no sword in it. Harry's scabbard. "Because," he said. "You told me."

"Oh!" Ginny realized suddenly what he must mean and a small flame of hope suddenly crackled inside her. "I came back in time, didn't I? I went to see you. That means I must get my Time Turner back again. Why did I go back in time? What did I want? Ben -"

He held up a hand to forestall her. "Slowly," he said. "Let me explain. I can't tell you everything you said to me, because you asked me not to. I can tell you that -"

But he didn't finish his sentence, because at that moment there was a crash from the garden. Looking startled, Ben sprang to his feet and went over to her window. He pushed it open and leaned out into the night, and called something out into the cold dark air - it sounded like another language, Ginny didn't recognize it - and then a moment later the pop of displaced air sounded in the room and Gareth was standing there next to him, looking very ill-tempered and hopping on one foot.

"Something bit me," he said, crossly, and glared at Ginny as if it were entirely her fault that he had been trespassing in her back garden in the middle of the night. He looked slightly different, just as Ben did - older, his face more sharply planed, still wide-cheekboned with the chin narrowing out like a cat's and the same unlikely green eyes and the same ghostly resemblance to Draco. He wore finer clothes than he had the last time she had seen him: a pale green heavy cloak over black robes, belted with silver. In his right hand was a chased silver dagger. "Right in the ankle."

"Oh, dear," Ginny said. "It was probably a garden gnome."

Ben put a hand on Gareth's shoulder and leaned around him to peer at his ankle. "Mortally wounded, are you?"

"No." Gareth looked satisfied. "I stepped on it and squashed it."

"Good work," said Ben, straight-faced. "Those gnomes can be tricky."

"It made a crunching sound," said Gareth thoughtfully.

"Blech," Ben said. "Spare me the details of your victory."

"Crunch," repeated Gareth with morbid glee.

Ben glared at him.

Gareth winked, and moved to put his dagger away. As he did so, Ginny, who had remained silent while they talked, suddenly gasped so audibly that both men looked up - Ben with concern, Gareth with his hand tightening on the dagger. Ginny simply stared at Gareth - not at Gareth, precisely, but at his wrist. As he had moved his arm his sleeve had fallen back and she had seen a bright flash of scarlet that struck her like a blow, for around his right wrist she could now see plainly that Gareth wore a dark red glass-like band, its edges scratched with runes, that was the twin of Harry's own.

Once upon a time, said the demon girl, there was a wizard, and he was a Malfoy, although they might have been called something slightly different then. Malfoy: a name they had not given to themselves, for all they wore it as a badge of pride. Bad deeds, bad faith, how could anyone bearing a name like that be expected to be anything but the darkest of Dark wizards?

I'm sorry. You're bored. No? Irritated, then. You don't like the Malfoys. They get under your skin. I see how you twitch when I say his name. Your eyes going black. No, not Lucius. You know who I mean.

Anyway, to get back to my story. There was a wizard once, who lived in a southern city. He was, for all practical purposes, a Malfoy, and like all Malfoys, his pride exceeded his wisdom. He fancied himself a sorcerer, a doer of great black deeds. He liked to call up storms that would destroy all the ships in the harbor. He cast a yellow plague over his city, and when that did not satisfy him, he cast a red plague of fever. On Tuesdays he summoned volleys of flaming arrows and on Wednesdays he made the city river run with blood. This was very bad for local property values, but the wizard did not care. He had made his reputation on grand and showy dark magics, and besides, he had no plans to sell his mountaintop castle any time soon.

Comeuppance for his behavior came to him, as comeuppance often does, in the form of a woman. A beauty with long black hair, a handspan waist, and eyes like black coals. He glimpsed her dancing amid a crowd of nobles, and when he inquired after her, he was told she was the daughter of a prosperous wizarding family. He determined that he would marry her, and sent a message to the family ordering them to deliver up their daughter speedily. They did so, which did not surprise him - it is never wise to say no to a wizard.

Had he made his inquiries more closely, he would have found, to his great perturbation, that in fact that family had never had a daughter.

Are you cold? You're shivering. The tips of your fingers are nearly as blue as your eyes. Come here. I'll give you a bit of my robe to wrap around you. Now where was I?

When Draco came out of the bathroom at Hogsmeade station, it took Hermione a moment to realize why it was that he looked different. Then she clapped a hand over her mouth in surprise. "Oh!" she said, around her fingers. "Draco. Your hair."

He looked, for a moment, mildly self-conscious. "You hate it?"

"No, it's..." She made a helpless little gesture with her hand, staring at him. He was dressed in what, for Draco, probably passed as low-key undercover gear. Worn-looking dark hooded jumper, Quidditch cords, and boots. "It's just different," she said.

She supposed she shouldn't be surprised. He'd been complaining it was too long for weeks, and had always been pushing it back out of his eyes. It wasn't that he'd never had hair this short before - it was that it looked like he'd taken a pair of Muggle scissors and lopped off the parts he felt were too long, without much regard for evenness or regularity. All the looping tendrils were gone, and instead his hair, no longer weighted down by its length, curled and stuck up and out and was, well, generally...

"It's a bit untidy," she said.

He shrugged. "Shearing Charm. Bit hard to do properly without a real mirror -"

"Draco!" she interrupted him, aghast. "You're not supposed to be doing any magic at all!"

He was saved reply by the sudden activation of the station's Sonorous Charm. "Midnight Train - King's Cross! Platform Two!"

Over her protests, Draco grabbed her bag on the way to the train, and Hermione stalked after him, irritably. "You're only supposed to be doing magic in emergencies," she reminded him as he held out a hand to help her up the stairs to their compartment. Draco had bought six tickets to ensure that nobody else would sit with them. Hermione had reluctantly conceded that this was a good idea. With Draco in the mood he was in, she dreaded what he might do to anyone unfortunate enough to annoy him.

"The state of my hair *is* an emergency," he said, swinging himself up into the compartment after her and pulling the door shut.

"Well, it certainly is now," Hermione said.

In reply to this, Draco gave her a very dark look.

She relented. "It's not so bad. It's kind of punk rock."

He threw himself into the seat by the window. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Hermione decided not to enlighten him. Served him right. They had been chugging away from the station for at least ten minutes before she spoke again, "This is the same train we took that night to the Manor when we went after Harry - do you remember?"

Draco didn't reply. When Hermione turned to look at him, she realized to her surprise that he had fallen asleep, curled up against the window with his head resting on one gloved hand. His feet were propped on their bags.

She supposed she should not be surprised. He was ill, after all. Of course he was tired.

She drew off the scarf she was wearing - it was the one he had given her for Christmas - and spread it over him. She briefly stroked his newly-cut hair. It felt like dandelion fluff, so fine it clung to her fingers. Her fingertips brushed his cheek, and burned. He was feverish. She drew her hand away.

She realized with a grim amusement that his use of her bag as a footrest meant that she could no longer reach her books, at least not without disturbing him. There was nothing else around to read except a rather lurid-looking copy of Teen Witch Weekly that someone had left behind on the seat beside her. Hermione picked it up with a resigned air. She detested TWW; all they ever did, in her opinion, was make up astounding lies about Harry, and print "true life" stories about terrible things that happened to young witches, related in every juicy detail. "Help! My Brother's a Werewolf And It's So Embarrassing," "Veelas Stole My Boyfriend," "My Bosom Enhancement Charm Went Horribly Awry," "I Fancy My Potions Professor" ("Oh, no," Hermione thought, "I can't look") and, "I Took A Potion And Now I'm In Love With My Worst Enemy!"

"Ghastly rubbish," Hermione muttered to herself, paging through it listlessly. She paused, then, her lip curling up at the corner. Across from a gigantic photo spread of Oliver Wood wearing approximately two-thirds of his Quidditch uniform, was Teen Witch Weekly's annual Ten Most Eligible Wizards Under Twenty-Five article. Hermione groaned to herself. Harry had been in it last year - never before, because the lowest age allowed was sixteen - and Draco hadn't, and he'd humiliated Harry horribly over it in the Great Hall. He'd had twenty copies of the front page of the article, (which featured a Colin Creevey-snapped photo of Harry coming out of the prefects' bathroom wearing just a towel and a horrified expression) printed up and placed strategically around the Hall. Then he'd stalked over to the Gryffindor table at the head of a sniggering line of Slytherins, each carrying copies of the magazine, and had gotten down on his knees in front of Harry, who was looking as if he wanted to die of abject humiliation and rage.

Draco'd held the magazine out to him, and had said in a wheedling sort of put-on voice (at odds with the bright look of malice in his eyes) "Could you autograph one for me, Potter? You can sign it, 'Harry Potter, ladies' man', if you like."

Harry, going quickly from red to white, had snapped out, "No."

"Harry Potter, Big Name Sex God? 'Harry Potter, Casanova?'" Draco had suggested. "Harry Potter, Singlehandedly Responsible For Ruining Knickers Across England?"

He'd grinned up at Harry. Behind him, the rest of the Slytherins had been collapsing against each other with mirth.

"You're disgusting, Malfoy," Harry had said. His tone was cold. Hermione had put her hand over his, tightening her fingers, not wanting him to hit Draco - not when Gryffindor had a game against Ravenclaw that afternoon that they couldn't afford to lose. "Go away."

Now, Hermione thought, he would have laughed it off. Draco had given him that, a portion of his own protective armor, although in Harry it was softened, less like arrogance, and more like indifference. Indifference, of course, was cruel in its own right. You could break yourself against that indifference and Harry would not notice. She wondered if Draco was ever sorry for what he had given to Harry, for how he had changed him.

At that time, of course, Harry could not laugh it off. He had snatched the magazine out of Draco's hands and crumpled it in his fist. Draco's grin had turned to a leer of triumph. "You going to hit me, Potter?" he said, a little breathless with the delight of having gotten to Harry, even a little bit. "Go ahead - I'll sell a gawk at the bruises to your fangirls over at the Weekly - look where Harry Potter touched me -"

Harry had bolted to his feet, Hermione still gripping his hand. Draco had blinked, flinching back as Harry leaned into him, their noses nearly touching. When Harry spoke, his voice had been so soft that only Draco and Hermione had heard him. "You wish I'd hit you," Harry had said, his voice soft and very deadly. "Don't you, Malfoy?"

Draco's lip had curled. "Meaning what, Potter?"

"Meaning it would tell you I thought you were worth hitting. But you're not even worth spitting on. And you know it."

Draco's face had tightened. And all around him, the Slytherins had gone silent; in those days, they had all been attuned to him, reacting as he did,

following his lead. But Draco had said nothing -he'd been uncharacteristically silent, staring back at Harry, mouth set in a bitter line. A moment later McGonagall, sensing trouble, had bustled up and sent the Slytherins packing back to their table.

Hermione, remembering now the bitter look on Draco's face, reached to stroke his shoulder. He shifted against her hand but did not wake up.

Hermione went back to her magazine, although she was only half reading it. Oliver Wood was on the list, which did not surprise her, and so was Charlie Weasley, which did, although she supposed it shouldn't have. He was posed against a background of dragons in flight, looking mildly amused at having his picture taken. There were one or two foreign Quidditch players she didn't know, the lead singer of the Every Flavor Boys (a talentless but attractive wizarding boy band - Hermione was amused that this phenomenon seemed to exist in both magical and Muggle worlds) and Viktor Krum - Hermione stifled a giggle. Oh *dear*. If only she had been a bit more attracted to Viktor, her life might have been a lot less complicated. She had liked Viktor. He had been nice, and interesting to talk to, and he had known a surprising amount about the Philosophy of Magic. But he had never made her stomach feel as if she had swallowed a Fluttering Fern.

No, there were only two boys who had ever made her feel like that. And there they both were when she turned Viktor over, Harry and Draco, on facing pages. Their names printed above them in curlicue script, Harry's running horizontal across the full page, Draco's vertical and to the right, the 'r' at the end of Harry's last name overlapping with the first 'r' in Draco's. The article made breathless much of the connection between them: their impending stepbrotherhood, the rivalry between their Houses, their history of enmity on the Quidditch pitch. Photos of Harry had apparently been harder to come by this year (probably because Harry had threatened Colin with death or expulsion if he ever sold another picture of Harry to the Weekly); all the ones they had were blurry shots taken with Omnilenses: Harry at a distance, Harry with his eyes averted, hand over his face, half-hidden by dark hair, cloak hood pulled down, ducking the gaze of the wizarding world.

Photos of Draco were easier to come by. He loved having his picture taken, or he had once, anyway. He looked the same in all the pictures:

arrogant chin-tilt and amused expression, flirting with the camera as he'd flirted with the girl who interviewed him:

TWW: And do you have any interests?

DM: I enjoy spelunking, romance novels, canoe portaging, building tents out of cutlery, rubbing myself with pesto, origami and pornography.

TWW: Really?

DM: Well, actually I find origami extremely boring. Maybe I *can* make a scale model of Hogwarts out of ten pieces of paper and a matchstick, but in the end, of what benefit is that to wizardkind? I ask you.

TWW: Can you tell us anything about your relationship with Harry Potter?

DM: No.

TWW: Come on, just one little thing? After such a long history of being enemies, you're about to be stepbrothers. Surely you've tried to make some kind of peace with each other?

DM: Well, sometimes we wrestle naked in treacle.

TWW: Really?

DM: No, but wouldn't it be funny if we did?

TWW: What would you like to be when you grow up?

DM: When I grow up? * laughs * When I grow up, I'd like to be a pastry.

TWW: You mean a pastry chef?

DM: No. I mean a pastry. I don't have very high aspirations, really. I'm a meek sort of fellow.

TWW: If you'll forgive me interjecting my own opinion, you don't seem meek to me.

DM: Well, I certainly am meek. I heard somewhere that the meek are going to inherit big one of these days and I plan to be around to cash in when it happens. It takes a lot of income to look as pretty as I do.

TWW: So there you have it, girls. Draco Malfoy, seventeen years old, probably the richest wizard in England. Blond good looks, a rapier tongue, and when he grows up, he wants to be a pastry. We here at TWW think he already is one.

A faint twinge of wistfulness tugged at Hermione as she turned the page and saw more photos of Draco there, mixed in with photos of the other boys on the list - there he was in his summer Quidditch uniform, all bare arms and tan skin and wicked bright grin and his fist clenched over the fluttering Snitch. Hermione felt a pang - he seemed armored in the unassailable beauty of youth and perfect health. He stirred against the window and shifted, and as he did so his hand slid from his lap to the seat beside him, and she saw something, just under the edge of his glove where it ended at his wrist. Something that looked like a thin line of silvery thread - but his gloves were black.

She reached down, moving as carefully as she could so as not to disturb him, and delicately peeled back the edge of his glove. He stirred but did not wake up as she drew it off his hand. And caught her breath.

His hand was a mess. The palm was crusted with dried blood around two deep, cross-shaped scars that slashed their way from the heel of the palm to the base of his fingers. She knew immediately that he had tried to obliterate the scar he shared with Harry. He had half succeeded. It was not gone but when his hand healed the shape of it would be altered forever.

"Oh," she whispered, under her breath, and tugged the glove back up. Very lightly she closed her fingers over his hand. She felt as if she had seen something she was not supposed to see. At the same time it had not surprised her. She supposed she had guessed what he had done. As a gesture, it was just like him.

His eyes were closed, the lids faintly bluish. She leaned sideways and gently kissed his temple, just where the white-fair hair waved away from the sleep-dampened skin. He did not move. She wondered what he was dreaming.

The marriage took place speedily and for several weeks the wizard was very happy with his new bride. True, she had a number of odd habits. She never ate in front of him, preferring to take all her meals alone in her room. He never saw her about during the day, for she claimed to have a rare allergy of the skin that made her extremely sensitive to sunlight. When he hung gold jewelry on her she winced and shrank from it in disgust, claiming that she had been brought up to find gold ostentatious and unattractive. She allowed him, however, to buy her as much silver jewelry as he liked, and seemed to have an especial fondness for green gemstones.

All these things were odd, indeed, but she more than made up for her small peculiarities, in his eyes, by her talents in other areas. Indeed, she was so remarkably skilled in the arts of giving pleasure that he found he could not be with her often enough. If it had not been for her insistence upon withdrawing to her own bedroom for meals he would not have been able to part from her at all. His studies suffered, as did his practices of magic. All he thought of was her. He dreamed of drowning himself in the nets of her dark hair, burning himself on the coals of her eyes, abandoning himself to the drowsy sensuality of her touch. He wanted nothing but her and dreamed of nothing else.

What was that? You want to know if he loved her? Well, that's a good question, isn't it. That would depend on how you define love, I suppose. You think you can define it for me? You're just a child, what do you know? Oh, come now, don't be offended. Come back and sit by me, let me put my robe around you. Give me your hand. I'll listen. Ask me questions.

Did he want to be with her all the time? Why, yes, he did at that. And did he think she was beautiful? Yes, he did. And did he miss her when she was not there? Indeed, he felt it as if his own hand had been wrenched away. And did he want no one else to have her? Why, he would have killed any man who touched her.

And did he want her happiness more than he wanted his own?

Well, no, of course not. He was a Malfoy. Malfoys don't love like that.

Death Eaters.

Harry's hand flew to his belt and gripped hard at the runic band there. It was freezing cold to the touch. His mind did what it always did when faced with a panic situation - narrowed itself down to a set of exact determined points. He saw the whole alley clearly: its one exit point, the barred metal door in the brick wall, the piles of wet, broken boxes, the places where the stones underfoot were slippery. He flexed the fingers of his right hand and wondered how many of them he could take out before they overwhelmed him -

"Wait." The blond boy who wasn't Draco stepped in front of him, a hand out, and Harry faltered for a moment, because despite everything this stranger still looked like Draco, and the instinct inside him to be loyal and cooperative was hard to choke down. "Give me back the cube - and wait - you don't know - just *wait*, wait right here -"

Dazed, Harry held the cube out; the boy took it and hurried down the alley towards the mass of Death Eaters. Harry saw them pause, all in a line, black-gloved hands going for their wands and was reminded of a set of black chess pieces. He remained where he was, left hand braced against the wet wall. He could feel the locked power inside him, wanting to break free, and remembered the release he'd felt inside the Shrieking Teacup as the fire rose inside him like a wave, breaking through his brain and out through his hand, burning a path for him.

He stayed still, fist clenched against his side, shivering - and watching.

He could not hear what the blond boy was saying to the Death Eaters. They stood impassive, looking at the boy, pale faces like a row of white dots under their charcoaled hoods. The boy himself, from this distance, looked so much like Draco that Harry could only look at him out of the corner of his eye, noting the wet blond hair, the nervous tension in the shoulders as he moved. He looked as if he were explaining something to the Death Eaters: his gestures were conciliatory.

He pointed back at Harry and then at himself, and then held out his hand, the small glassy cube glimmering on his palm. The Death Eaters glanced at it, and then the tallest of them glanced back at Harry. A tense moment followed. Harry stood where he was, very conscious of the icy dampness that dripped down the back of his shirt, his shaking, frozen hands.

Through the still-falling frozen rain he looked at the Death Eaters, and they looked back, the slender figure of the blond boy in between them. Then they turned as one, and walked away.

The boy turned and began walking back towards Harry. Harry let himself sag back against the wall, still tense. His heart was beating like a triphammer in his chest. As the boy neared him he held out his hand with the glowing cube in it and said in a subdued voice, "If you still want this -"

"What did you say to them?" Harry demanded sharply, brushing the proffered hand away. "What did you do?"

"I told them I knew who you were," said the boy. "Or, at least, that I knew you weren't Harry Potter."

"And they believed you? I find that hard to imagine."

"You wouldn't," said the boy, "if you knew where we were. They were very apologetic - very embarrassed, actually. Everyone knows the Midnight Club. No one's supposed to interfere with employees or customers. They know that."

Harry blinked rain out of his eyes. "Customers?"

"It would be a lot easier if you'd come inside with me," said the boy. "I could show you -"

"Show me what? I don't trust you -"

"I could have turned you over to those Death Eaters if I'd wanted to!"

"I don't see why you'd help me," said Harry, crossly, and shivered. "You don't even know me."

Some kind of guardedness fell away from the boy's face. "You're Harry Potter," he said. "Aren't you?" As if that somehow explained everything, and there was something plainly and briefly vulnerable in the way he looked at Harry. Draco would never have looked like that. "And you're freezing. If you stay out here, you'll die of the cold."

Harry tried to shake his wet hair back, but it was too sodden and heavy with icy water. He scrubbed the back of his cold hand along his cheekbone and hesitated. He could, of course, flee again - but the Death Eaters were still out there, and he had no desire to run into them again, as he had no idea what lie the blond boy had told them to get them to go away. He looked at the stranger, who had his hand on the wide bar of the heavy metal door in the wall.

"Have you got a name?" Harry asked.

The boy looked briefly surprised, then shook his head. "I keep forgetting you don't know. I can't tell you that."

"I won't call you Draco," Harry said stiffly.

"I know. That's all right. You don't have to call me anything, then. Just - come on."

The boy gestured for Harry to follow him. Harry hesitated for a moment. Then, casting a last glance behind him at the empty frozen alley, he followed.

"Ben," said Gareth in an irritable tone, "your underage female admirer is being extremely peculiar about my runic band. Would you mind detaching her from my arm?"

Ben looked curious. "Is she underage? I hadn't thought about it."

"I am not," said Ginny crossly, releasing her grip on Gareth's sleeve. "And I'm not an admirer, either. I wouldn't dream of it. I think you two are very cute together."

At this, Ben looked startled and Gareth heartily amused. "I always wondered what the history books said about us," Gareth said.

"Most of the good stuff is in the footnotes," said Ginny. "I've got a lot of books about Founder history -"

"I want to read one," Gareth said.

"No," said Ben, very sharply and unexpectedly, "you don't."

Now it was Gareth's turn to appear startled. He did not, however, argue the point.

"Now what's all this about Gareth's runic band?" Ben said to Ginny.

"Harry has one just like it," Ginny said. "Nobody knows where it came from or what it does. I've been worried all this time it was something dangerous. If there's another one like it -"

"I can't imagine there would be," Gareth said. "My father made this specifically for me when I was born. It must be the same one. I suppose it had to go somewhere after I died," he added, matter-of-factly, "although odd, it ending up in the hands of a Gryffindor heir."

"Not that odd," said Ben. He did not appear disposed to elaborate and Ginny did not press him. There would have been no point. Ben said what he wanted to say when he said it, and not a word more.

"What does it do?" Ginny demanded of Gareth, who seemed quietly amused to have found himself the center of attention.

"Even I don't know entirely," Gareth said. "It's a rather complex protection charm, from my understanding. It repels demonic activity - vampires, hellhounds, succubi and such forth. In addition, when the wearer is lost, it guides him towards the nearest aid, without his knowledge that he is being guided. It's a handy item, and no mistake."

"So it'll keep Harry safe?" Ginny said.

"Well, not entirely," Gareth said. "It'll guide him towards help, and it'll keep demons away, but other than that, it won't save his life, or heal his wounds, or protect him from malicious spells. Not as far as I know, anyway," he added. "I know there are some complicated charms woven into the runes around the band. I doubt anyone other than my father could tell you what they all do."

"Can I see it?" Ginny asked.

"I can't take it off, if that's what you mean," Gareth said. "I can't ever take it off - but if you want to look at it, you can."

He held out his arm, drawing the sleeve back as he did so. Ginny went over to him, a little nervously. He gave off the same impression that Draco sometimes did, that it was not entirely a good idea to stand too close to him. "Turn your wrist over," she said, and he did. What she had thought was another bracelet on his arm was in fact a tattoo of a brightly colored serpent, gold and green and blue. Its tail coiled around his wrist and its head curled in the crook of his arm. She lightly touched the runic band, feeling, as she had felt before when she touched it in the Gryffindor common room, no sense of Dark magic emanating from it. "It will guide him when he's lost?" she said.

"It will bring him to the closest person willing to aid him," Gareth said. "I've met some interesting people that way."

Ben chuckled under his breath but said nothing. He had seated himself on Ginny's desk again and was watching them curiously, elbow propped on his knee.

"Why can't you take it off?" Ginny asked, still looking down at Gareth's wrist. She had a slight urge to ask him if she could touch the tattoo, which looked unbelievably alive, but had a feeling he'd take it the wrong way if she did. And he was already so jumpy. It hardly seemed worth the risk.

He withdrew his wrist from her grasp and touched the runic band himself with long, careful fingers. He looked at her sidelong. His eyes were not the same color green as Harry's, although they had the same startling quality. "Because I can't remove it while I'm still living," he said. "It won't come off my wrist until the day I die. It's enchanted that way."

"Draco," protested Hermione, tugging at the sleeve of his robe. "What are we doing here? This is the most expensive hotel on Diagon Alley!"

Draco shrugged. "So?" he inquired, scanning the front of the building with a look of blasé satisfaction in his gray eyes. It was a lovely building, Hermione had to admit - it had once been the offices of the Ministry of Magic before they had outgrown it. It was too expensive a hotel even to

have a name. It just had a street address and a silk awning, protected from the damp with Impervio charms.

"So, I thought we were going to try to be low-profile."

"I agreed to be low-profile. I didn't agree to slum. You can't expect me to stay in some flophouse."

"I didn't say flophouse - what about the Leaky Cauldron?"

Draco wrinkled up his nose. "The Leaky Cauldron? So *déclassé*. All the stairwells reek of stew, and you can't honestly expect me to sleep on sheets someone else has already slept on. That way lies skin disease and unsightly rashes."

"The sheets in the Leaky Cauldron are *perfectly clean*."

"By plebian standards," said Draco.

Hermione shot him a ferocious glare.

Draco looked amused. "I suppose you think that sounded arrogant."

"I think that boat sailed with the 'flophouse' comment, actually."

Draco made an exasperated gesture. "Look, it's just as easy to be low-profile in an expensive hotel. Easier, in fact. A few well-placed fistfuls of Galleons and the management will be prepared to swear on oath that my name's Nigel Todwhacker, and I'm a well-known industrialist with a thriving whelk exportation business and a manor house in Walton-on-the-Naze."

"You're seventeen," said Hermione crossly. "Nobody's going to believe that you're a well-known industrialist. Perhaps you should think of something more age-appropriate."

"Well, I could tell them my name's Nigel Todwhacker and I spend all my time in my room masturbating and memorizing the liner notes on old Chöcolate Frög albums, but that might be more information than they need."

Hermione burst out laughing despite herself.

Her laughter coaxed a smile out of Draco. He no longer smiled the way he once had, of course, but a smile was still a smile. "Besides, they don't have to believe me," he added. "They just need an excuse to act like they believe me. I don't like lying unless I have to, you know that, but if you're going to lie the key is to give the other person a reason to want to believe you."

"He's right, you know," said a silky voice. Hermione spun around and saw, with a flash of alarm, Blaise Zabini standing on the pavement a few steps away from them. She wore an ornately decorated set of silk robes, a colorful cloak, and looked, as always, beautiful. Her scarlet hair was free of clips or other ornaments. Hermione wondered how long she'd been listening. "He should know - he's the expert at telling people what they want to hear. Still," Blaise added, her voice dropping, "you can only get away with that sort of thing for so long...right, Draco?"



Harry found himself being hurried down a long, undecorated hallway so quickly that he barely had time to register his surroundings. His companion had a tight hold on his bare arm and was using his leverage to shove Harry along the corridor so quickly that Harry was having difficulty not tripping over his own feet.

It was freezing cold. Harry had a feeling that they were under the main part of a building, perhaps using a sort of tradesman's entrance. The corridor ended in a stone stairway that curved away into darkness. Pausing at the foot, the boy let go of Harry's arms and spun Harry around to face him. "You need to put your glasses on," he said, in a sharply agitated voice. "Why do you keep taking them off?"

"I charmed my eyes so I wouldn't need them," Harry said gruffly. "Now they make my vision blur."

"Well, put them on anyway or you'll get in trouble." The boy cast an anxious glance up and down the corridor. "Do it now."

Harry did it, grudgingly, sliding the glasses down to the bridge of his nose so he could see over the lenses. "In trouble with who?"

"With the manager," said the boy. "All our Harrys have to wear the glasses. School robes too, usually, although you look all right, you're all wet, that could be a look, I guess. Bit weird, but...you don't have any Quidditch gear with you, do you?"

"No, I bloody well don't." Every time the situation seemed as if it couldn't get any more surreal, Harry reflected, it did. "Maybe I should just go..."

"It's not safe out there and you know it." The boy's cold hand closed around Harry's wrist - a weirdly familiar feeling, those delicately articulated long fingers he knew by touch. "Go on up the stairs ahead of me."

Harry went, not quickly, keeping his right hand out of his pocket. He thought about the alley and his willingness to kill the Death Eaters there and what that said about him. Although wondering about it wasn't the same as regretting it, which he didn't.

The stairway ended in another hallway. This one, however, was far from undecorated. The walls were painted an almost blood-colored scarlet, and the rich Oriental carpets on the polished floor were tasseled with red and gold. Enormous gold-framed oil portraits hung on the walls, and bronze candelabras floated in midair, spilling smoke so heavily scented that Harry could taste it on the air, sweet and musky, like spoiled fruit. He narrowed his eyes and turned to the boy standing behind him. "What is this place?" he said. "It looks like a hotel, or an eighteenth century brothel."

Looking rather helpless, the boy shrugged. "I don't know anything about the eighteenth century...."

He cut himself off and edged nearer Harry, blocking him, as several people appeared at the end of the hallway. "Come on," the boy said, and pushed Harry again, down the hall. They went slowly enough this time for Harry to get a better look at the oil paintings on the walls. They were ornately tinted, all pinks and whites and blues, and they showed nude wizards and witches, festooned with ribbons, engaged in the sort of activities usually featured in the magazines that Fred and George kept hidden under their beds. *Eighteenth-century brothel*, Harry thought again, rather dizzily, and then something occurred to him was both so logical and at the same time so disgusting that his mind reeled.

He was still reeling when they came out into an enormous circular room, from which many small corridors extruded like the spokes of a wheel. This room had a floor of black marble, veined with gold, a high ceiling painted with naked angels, chandeliers dripping teardrop crystals. Two spiral staircases rose from the center of the room. Huge couches ran along the walls and there were wizards and witches sprawled in them. Some of them Harry recognized - famous faces, the kind that usually looked out from the cover of *Teen Witch Weekly*. Some of them he didn't. He saw handsome faces, beautiful faces, and some who were quite ordinary. He felt the boy standing next to him relax slightly. "Oh, good," he said, "the other Harrys, they must be upstairs."

"Upstairs?" Harry said, his own voice sounding like a stranger's.

"Which is where we're going," said the boy quietly. Harry began to move, but the boy pulled him back. "No, not that way, that way is the manager's office and the catalogue rooms."

"Catalogue rooms?" said Harry faintly, letting the boy steer him towards the leftmost staircase.

"You know," said the boy, "the catalogues. I mean, they like it if you bring hair or eyelashes or whatever that they can use to make the potion, but if you don't, or you want someone famous, then you can choose someone out of the catalogue. The price varies by how hard it is to get the materials. You're expensive. But it doesn't matter, they usually keep a few of you around anyway. Someone always wants you."

Harry's stomach knotted. "Someone always...wants me? Wants me for what?" he asked, although he had a feeling he knew perfectly well what.

"Well, a lot of them want to *be* you," the boy said, his tone hesitant. "That's why I thought - when I saw you - that you were a customer. You reacted like you recognized me, and I thought you were...you know...playing." His voice trailed off.

"And Draco," Harry said. They were at the top of the stairs now, and had turned onto another interminable corridor. More oil paintings lined these walls, but these were not portraits. Harry could see flesh-colored paint, writhing limbs, long trailing scarves of lace and satin. At regular intervals down the corridor were doors, each one set with a bronze numbered plate. "Someone paid you to ...?"

"Well, not specifically. They usually keep a few of him around as well. Especially since he's been in all the news articles lately...that always ups the demand, and -"

The boy's speech was interrupted by Harry, who had chosen that moment to stagger off into a corner where he could be violently sick. He had eaten so little that day that there wasn't much to come up, mostly stomach acid that burned his throat. When he straightened up and turned around the boy was staring at him.

"I'm sorry," the boy said nervously. "I forget, working here, that the idea might upset people who aren't used to it."

"Used to it?" Harry said savagely. "It's disgusting, how could you get used to it, or want to? It's *using* people."

"It doesn't hurt them. They don't even know about it -"

"That's not the point!" Harry shivered. The nausea was receding, replacing itself with a feverish anger. "If they did know - if Draco knew about this, hell, if his *father* knew about this - I mean, I hate the bastard, but I can't imagine he'd be any too pleased if he knew that--"

"Well, of course Lucius Malfoy knows about the Midnight Club," interrupted the boy, looking surprised. "He owns it."

Dearest Seamus,

Nothing could have made your father and I happier than your last letter. That you should choose to be so open and truthful with us makes us very proud parents indeed. Although we really don't understand the cause of your anxiety. It's perfectly all right with us, of course, if you're gay. We're just glad you were honest with us so that we can be properly supportive. Let us know if there are any organizational meetings we should be attending. If there are no existing organizations we'd be happy to start one. And if you'd like to bring your boyfriend home for the holidays, that would be fine as well, we've still plenty of room in the East Wing. And if you haven't got a boyfriend yet, your aunt wants me to remind you that she always thought that Dean Thomas you were friends with was a nice, good-looking boy. And so artistic!

Enjoy your holidays and don't drink too much butterbeer at New Year's - you remember what happened to your Uncle Eamon. Although we suppose they don't have nearly so many cattle gratings in London.

Love,

Mum

Standing in the alley outside the Shrieking Teacup, Tom read the letter over again. It was his sixth reading and still he could not believe his eyes. Surely the Finnegans had misunderstood his initial missive? But no, it appeared that they hadn't and that in fact he himself had made a miscalculation. Not a grave one, but a miscalculation nevertheless.

He tossed the letter into the air, where it burst into flames. The ashes sifted down around him like a fine dark powder, dusting the shoulders of his cloak and catching in his damp hair.

He bit his lip in vexation. It would not be exactly accurate to say that things were not going to plan. He had no plan for events to either go along with, or at least, if he had a plan, it was not yet a fully formed one. He had seen Harry in the bookshop and wanted to cause him trouble; that had, he thought, worked splendidly until the Death Eaters who had been chasing Harry had returned, shaking their heads, apparently having somehow lost their quarry. They were not inclined to share the details of their defeat with him, a total stranger, and he did not deem it wise to lose his temper and show his hand at such an early juncture. More importantly, he thought, he had heard them speak a name - *the Midnight Club*.

Tom knew the Midnight Club. It existed in his day, owned by Lucius' grandfather and run very profitably. During the war years it had been a base for smuggling operations, but at its heart, it had still been what it had been designed to be: a whorehouse. Tom had always found the concept rather amusing. A logical extension of the uses of Polyjuice, to be sure. And a testimony to the venality of the Malfoys. Very admirable.

It would not be difficult to find the club again. In fifty years, the streets surrounding Diagon Alley had hardly changed at all. He began to walk down the alley, fastidiously skirting the banks of dirty snow piled at the edge of the pavement. If he recalled correctly, the Midnight Club allowed the nightly rental of its rooms to patrons, and never asked for any kind of identification. They were not in a business where asking for identification would have been a judicious professional move. He could pay them in the cash he had taken from Seamus' trunk for a room and they would ask no questions. All the rooms were warded by Silencing Charms. In relative peace and quiet, he could read the books he had bought in Diagon Alley - he could learn his own history. And later...

He glanced down at his left hand, where he had wound the single strand of Ginny's poppy-red hair around his ring finger. Later there might perhaps be time for other amusements. Yes, later. He closed his hand into a fist and drew his hood up to hide his sudden savage grin.

Blaise felt a chill as Draco turned around to look at her. He didn't look pleased to see her - not at all. He looked tense and tired and his face was pale between the dark collar of his coat and the hood that concealed his silvery hair.

"Blaise," he said. "What do you want?"

She had seen the two of them from across the street. For a moment she had thought nothing of it. She was always seeing Draco, in crowds of people, from the windows of trains, navigating his way along city pavements. Any slim tall boy reminded her of him - sometimes it was less than that: the spark of sunlight off blond hair, the angle of a pair of shoulders, that certain way of walking, the expensive cloaks he favored. This time it was only the fact that Hermione was with him that had convinced her it really was Draco.

"I need to talk to you," she said. She had spent the last two days wondering how on earth to get in touch with Draco safely; bumping into him on Diagon Alley, whomever he happened to be with, was too good a chance to pass up. She had followed him from outside the Leaky Cauldron and had finally worked up the nerve to interrupt them. She was glad she had. Even if he didn't look terribly happy to see her.

He sighed and raised his chin. His hood fell back and she saw that his pale hair had been cut shorter, and was tangled as if he'd forgotten to brush it - for Draco, an oversight as serious as if he'd gone out with no trousers on. "What about, Blaise?"

For a moment she just looked at him. She had missed looking at him. She saw the way Hermione moved towards him when he spoke, the unconscious way she reached out and put a hand on his arm. And she saw the way he let her. She took a breath past the catch in her throat. "It's about Harry," she said.

Hermione dropped her hand from Draco's arm, her lips parting and her eyes widening. Draco evinced no similar response. His face was a study in utter blankness. "So talk."

Blaise tightened her lips. "Just give me five minutes alone," she said; it hurt to ask. She hated begging; it went completely contrary to her nature.

Draco knew that, too, and for a moment their eyes met in perfect, if not amicable, understanding.

"Fine," he said.

She followed him under the shadow of the awning; Hermione, her mittened hands in her pockets, waited for them by the edge of the pavement. Blaise restrained herself from shooting Hermione a triumphant look.

A brass handrail ran down the middle of the staircase. Blaise leaned up against it and turned to Draco. He was staring at her with an unnerving fierceness in his eyes. He put his hand out and caught at her wrist and his gloved hand was cool against her skin. "What about Harry?" he demanded.

She took a deep breath. "It's not about Harry, it's about you."

He went still all over. Then he flung her wrist aside with surprising force. "Why did you lie?"

Blaise braced her hands on the rail behind her. "Because it was the only way I could get you to listen to me - all you care about is Harry."

"That's not true." His voice cut like a whip coming down on her bare skin. It took force of will not to flinch away. "If you've got nothing to say to me -"

"I didn't say that. Just because I've got nothing to say about Harry doesn't mean I've got nothing to say!"

"So you have something to say that doesn't have anything to do with boys, hair or cosmetic charms? It's a bloody fucking first, then. Call out the Prophet reporters, it's a red letter day. Let's make the most of it."

Blaise blinked. This was unprecedentedly vicious, even for Draco. For a moment all she wanted to do was slap his face and walk away - leave him to whatever the Slytherins had planned for him. But she couldn't. She loved him, she thought, the way he had once hated Harry - with bitter resentment. Why did it have to be him, of all people; there was nothing special or interesting or different about falling in love with the best-

looking boy in school, who was also rich, who was also popular, who was also captain of the Quidditch team. It was predictable and stupid. And she had done it just the same.

"Spit it out, Zabini." Draco swung his arm up and shot a glare at the watch on his wrist. "You have fifty seconds."

"Draco-"

"Now you have forty-seven seconds."

Blaise bit back her wrath. "Your life's in danger," she said.

This did not have the effect she was expecting. For a moment, Draco stared at her. Then he burst out laughing. He laughed so hard he had to lean against one of the awning poles.

Blaise narrowed her eyes. "I'm not joking."

Draco was still laughing. "I know - you're not," he got out, between gasps. "It's just - the look on your face. So *concerned*. You're worried about me - that's awfully cute."

"It is not cute! You're an idiot, Draco Malfoy, and if you don't listen to me then you're going to be a very dead idiot. And I won't be sorry, either."

"No -" he gasped out. "No, you wouldn't be. You always - looked good in black." His laughter had turned into a coughing spasm. He leaned back against the awning pole, catching his breath. "You know," he said, "I have to congratulate you on your delivery, there. It's not often you get a chance to go up to someone and tell them 'Your life's in danger.' It's right up there with 'follow that flying carpet.'"

Blaise stared in bewilderment. "You've lost your mind," she said.

"Among other things." He had sobered now. She was glad. She had not liked that brittle laughter at all. "Blaise," he said. "Blaise, darling - angel - you're wasting your time."

"Don't," she said. He had always showered endearments on her, especially in public - baby, angel, darling, sweetest - always with a sarcastic edge

that left her feeling somehow abused. "I suppose you already know, then. I don't see how - Pansy said you didn't. But there's no need to make me feel like more of a fool than I do."

Her words had an odd effect on him. The faint smirk went from his face and his eyes narrowed. "Pansy?" he said. "Interesting. Perhaps you'd best explain after all."

Hesitantly at first, she explained what she knew: about the protective charms they had all been given, all the children of those who were still part of the Dark Lord's circle. Barrettes in some cases, earrings, buttons - each containing a bit of enchanted basilisk scale or skin. How Pansy had asked for an extra set of protective charms and been refused, and what Blaise suspected her of doing to remedy that lack. What Pansy had said when Blaise had gone to her, and how Blaise now knew for certain that Pansy would not stop at hurting Draco if it seemed necessary, and how Blaise had gone to Marcus afterward and he had explained, rather reluctantly but more thoroughly, what was in store.

That she had panicked subsequently and become quite abusive towards Marcus, she left out.

When she was done, Draco did not look grateful for the news. He did not look anything except, possibly, slightly interested. "So if I'm not poisoned to death by Monday, Voldemort's death squad is going to off me along with everyone else on Tuesday," he remarked. "Relatively speaking, of course."

"I don't know what you mean about being poisoned," Blaise said. "But you don't seem terribly afraid of dying."

"I am," he said. "Horribly. But - it's rather freeing, this imminent death business. It creates a strangely consequence-free environment. One feels one could run through the Great Hall wearing only a pair of luminous shorts and shouting that Professor McGonagall has a shady relationship with the giant squid, and you wouldn't even get detention. Not that I'm planning to of course, and did you say that Pansy was the one who shot me with that arrow? *Pansy?*"

"That's what she said," said Blaise.

"And how much of this did you know before?" he demanded.

Blaise slid her eyes away from his. "Just a bit of what Pansy was up to."

"And you never told me." His lip curled at the corner. "And here I thought you loved me."

Blaise gaped at him in mingled consternation and fury. She had always wondered - half-hoped, half-hoped not - if he knew how she felt about him. She had assumed he didn't. That he did know was infuriating to her. The fragile tether of her patience snapped, and she drew herself upright in a rage: "Loved you?" she spat out. "Of course I loved you. But just because you love someone doesn't mean you don't see what they are - and how they feel about you. You never loved me back."

"No," he said. "I didn't."

"You see, then," she said. "Maybe I wanted you punished. Maybe I hated you a little bit for not loving me enough or properly - haven't you ever felt that way, haven't you ever loved anyone who didn't love you? If you haven't then you don't know how it feels. It's not as if there weren't things you didn't tell me."

Draco had gone quiet, the sort of quietness that was like a yell or an interruption. He looked away from her.

Blaise sighed, feeling defeated. "You hate being blamed for anything," she said, in a bitter tone. "How could I forget that?"

"It's not that," he said. He looked at her and she had the feeling that for the first time he actually saw her. "It's just that it never occurred to me before that what I did to you was wrong. I'm sorry about that."

For a moment she could not react. Part of her did not want to accept his apology. It seemed too little a thing in the face of how much he had made her love him and how angry she still was. On the other hand she had to accept that perhaps he had not made her love him. She had decided to love him, because he had saved her, because he was beautiful, because she was restless and wanted something and he seemed like a solution.

He said, "Would you be willing to help my friends as well?"

She raised her chin. "Don't insult me," she said. "I already have helped them."

He nodded. "True, so I know you know where the Burrow is. Can you go back?"

"If I have to."

"I need you to talk to Ginny for me."

Blaise winced inwardly. Hermione she had always disliked, but could grudgingly respect. At least she was brilliant. Ginny was a useless Weasley and the way she looked at Draco was sickening. "And tell her what?"

"Everything you just told me." He produced a quill from his pocket, wrote something quickly on a piece of parchment, and handed it to her, folded. "And give this to her, as well, or she won't believe I sent you."

Blaise took it with a dry look. "What if I read it?"

"My father used to say that if you peep through a keyhole you may see what will vex you," said Draco, with a slight lift to the corner of his mouth. "Read it if you want."

"You vex me already," she said.

The slight lift became less slight and there was suddenly an odd softness in the way he was looking at her, a look of recognition. "Look at you," he said. "Fighting the good fight. Saving the world. I'm surprised at you."

"I don't care about the world," she said. "I care about you. I still do love you. I don't care if you love me back and I don't care if you don't deserve me loving you. You're selfish and you're spoilt and God do you not care about anyone but yourself, so you probably don't deserve it, but I do love you, and that matters to me because it's *mine*."

He had ducked his head but he was still looking at her with that unnerving oblique look of recognition. His face was so familiar to her, but still a stranger's: she knew the funny little white scar under his eye, but not how he had gotten it.

"I always did tell you," he said, "that you were just like me."

She tucked the note he had given her into her sleeve. "I'll owl you, then," she said, "and tell you what Ginny says."

He nodded. Then, to her surprise, he touched the side of her face lightly with his hand, lifting her hair away, and kissed her cheek. It wasn't a romantic gesture, really, but it surprised her all the same.

"Thank you," she said. "And - no luminous shorts?"

He smiled faintly. "No," he said.

She turned away. She was already on the pavement and heading down the street when she heard her name called. Not by Draco. A girl's voice. She turned around and saw Hermione hurrying towards her, her dark winter cloak clutched around her.

Blaise frowned. "What do you want?"

Hermione halted, a little breathless, in front of Blaise, and raised her chin. "To show you these," she said, and, under her hood, pushed a dark curl of her hair back so that Blaise could see the glitter of the green barrettes caught in her hair. "I just wanted you to know I was wearing them."



"Good," said Blaise. "It's nice to know all Gryffindors aren't as moronic as they look."

This didn't seem to faze Hermione. Blaise supposed she was used to Draco. "I wanted you to know that I trusted you," she said.

Blaise had nothing to say to that. She just nodded, awkwardly, at Hermione, and turned away before the other girl could see her blush. Slytherins didn't blush. Blaise walked away quickly.

Harry had never given much, if any, thought to what a room in a wizarding brothel might look like, so it was perhaps slightly odd that his first thought upon seeing one was, Well, that's hardly what I would have expected.

It was, however, hardly what he would have expected. Even in his dazed and feverish state Harry found that he was surprised at how bare it was, especially compared to the richly decorated corridor outside. His guide had taken him to the door farthest down the hallway, which bore a plaque proclaiming it to be *Room Thirty-Four*. It had no lock: instead the boy tapped the glowing cube he'd been holding outside against the knob, and the door swung open.

Inside was a room that was nearly austere in its simplicity. Clean wood walls, a bare wood floor, a fireplace and a desk. On the desk was a small, elegant gold writing set: quills, parchment, and inkbottle. A window, heavy silk curtains drawn closed across it, let in no light. And, of course, there was a bed. Draped across the bed was the only object in the room with any color: a dark violet velvet bedspread with the letters *TMC* intertwined across it in gold. Staring, Harry heard Draco's voice in his head, tense and weary, speaking to him on top of that frozen tower at the Manor, I've always known my father was into some nasty stuff...dragon's blood bars, unicorn smuggling, polyjuice brothels...

"No one's going to be using this room," the boy said, standing a little awkwardly in the doorway. "The silencing charms need repairing. You'll have to be quiet." He shifted his weight. There was something about the way he stood and looked at Harry that Harry thought of as odd, but since Harry couldn't stand looking at him directly or for very long, it didn't seem worth following up on. The boy reached out and shut the door behind him. "I'll check in on you," he said. "But I can't stay."

"I don't really want you to," Harry said. He was still looking around the room. There was a framed painting on one wall of a woman in a blue dress which was slipping down around her shoulders. She winked at him,

and he looked away. "I need sleep," Harry said, thinking out loud. "At least a few hours, until I can go. Will I be safe here that long?"

"I don't see why not - I can't promise anything, but I'll try. I'll come here and let you out of there are any problems -"

"Fine," Harry said, shortly. "Will you still look - like that?"

"Yes. I have to. Do you hate it that much?" The boy looked at him, nervously, and this time Harry forced himself to look back. It turned his stomach a little - although it wasn't as if he hadn't played with Polyjuice himself, before; he knew it was no more than a glamour, a thin skin of enchantment drawn over reality. But that didn't change the fact that this stranger looked back at him with Draco's eyes and frowned at him with Draco's mouth and that as he looked at Harry, Harry saw something in his face that he had never seen in Draco's when Draco looked at him, and that was fear.

"I hate it that much," Harry said. "Are you afraid of me?"

"Yes. Isn't everyone?"

Harry leaned against the mantel over the fireplace. The warmth that came from the fire barely seemed to penetrate his clothes. His bones felt as if they were made of ice; his head was heavy, and ached. He wanted to lie down and wrap himself in blankets. He could hardly remember what it felt like not to be tired and cold. "Is that why you're helping me? Because you're afraid of me?"

"No." The boy moved forward, a little hesitantly, and then, to Harry's great surprise, knelt down on the floor at Harry's feet. Harry's hand tightened on the mantel. "You're Harry Potter," the boy said rapidly, looking down, "everyone knows who you are. The Dark Lord would have killed us all, if it wasn't for you. I used to celebrate your birthday, when I was growing up - we all did. You might think because I work here, I'm one of them - the Death Eaters - but I'm not, none of us are, we're just ordinary wizards and witches. It's just the money, and we're not hurting anyone, not really. I don't want the Dark Lord coming back any more than you do - than anyone does. Any one of us would help you. Almost anyone in the wizarding world would. I'll do whatever I can."

Harry knew he should say something gracious, but he couldn't. The idea of anyone kneeling at his feet was too horrible, and that it was *Draco*, or at least wore his face, was more horrible still. "Don't," Harry said, feeling supremely wretched, "don't do that - get up off the floor, please get up."

The boy looked up at him. "You knew I wasn't him," he said. "You knew it right away, how did you know?"

"*Almost* right away," Harry said. *It was the way you said my name*, he thought, but that was not what he said. "You kissed me," he said.

"Ah," said the boy. "No truth to the rumors, then?"

Harry made a faint sound in the back of his throat, and moved away from the fire. Instead of being cold all over, he was now very hot on one side of his body, and freezing on the other. "I wish you'd get up," he said. "You're making me uncomfortable."

"Sorry." The boy got to his feet with a scramble that lacked any of Draco's usual grace. Harry winced a bit inwardly, but hid it. "I just wanted you to know that you could trust -"

"I trust who I have to trust," Harry said. "If you really want to help me..."

The boy nodded. "I do."

Harry reached into his jeans pocket and drew out a small iron key. "You know where King's Cross Station is?"

Apparently, he did. He took Harry's key, and, after promising repeatedly to return as soon as he possibly could with Harry's things, he left, to Harry's great relief. He was probably a perfectly nice bloke, Harry thought dizzily, sinking to the floor in front of the fire, outside of the whole being a prostitute and possibly not even a bloke business, not that that mattered one way or the other. Nor did it matter if he was nice or not - Harry couldn't stand looking at him without wanting to be sick.

He remembered being polyjuiced himself, the oddness of looking down and seeing a body that wasn't his body, hands that weren't his hands. The little things that would give him pause and startle him: the new length of his eyelashes, even, the wider span of his fingertips' reach. Every day had

been a thousand tiny shocks. But that was nothing compared to looking at the face of someone you knew, knew as well as you knew your own face, and seeing it animated by a stranger's spirit and intelligence. He wondered if it had been like this for Hermione when he and Draco had switched bodies and felt a momentary flash of guilt over what an ass he'd been to her about it.

The fire was making him drowsy. Unable to bear the thought of going anywhere near the bed, he stretched out on the floor next to the fire, put his head on his arms, and closed his eyes.

It was not long before the peculiar behavior of the wizard's new bride began to excite talk amongst his servants. The house-elves seemed merely afraid of her. Their ears trembled when she came near, and when she walked down the halls they slunk before her like whipped dogs. But the human servants hated her. At first the wizard put it down to jealousy, at least on the part of the female staff, but when his most favored manservant announced his intention to leave the wizard's service, the wizard lost his temper. "And what's the matter with you?" he raged at the unfortunate man. "Has my entire staff run mad?"

The servant gathered his courage. "It is your wife, sir," he said, in a quavering voice.

"I don't understand." The wizard clenched his hands in fury. "Is she a harsh mistress? Does she beat or upbraid you?"

"No, Lord, it is not that."

"What, then?"

"She isn't human, sir."

An unpleasant silence followed. The wizard stood and glared at his servant. His servant looked stolidly at his shoes.

"What do you mean," the wizard ground out finally, "she isn't human?"

"She is nosferatu, sir," said the servant. "A demon. An evil thing."

"She is the daughter of a noble family," the wizard protested.

"I have made inquiries, my Lord," said the servant. "That family has no daughters. She is not who she says she is."

"You lie," the wizard raged, and he ordered the servant out of his sight, and later, sent word to his guards and had the man whipped. But the servant's words stayed with him, as the truth often does. For days he could not get the man's words out of his head. *She is a demon. An evil thing.*

And he thought about his new wife. He thought about her allergy to sunlight, and the way she never ate in his presence. He thought about her hatred of gold, that metal most unloved by demons, for it resembled in its color the sun which they hated and feared. He thought about her black hair and her white skin and he began, finally, to wonder.

From such tiny beginnings do doubts grow like seedlings in the heart, putting forth their branches, unfurling their leaves, until even the memory of love is suffocated.

Dear Mum and Dad,

You can't imagine how pleased I was by your warm response to my news. Unfortunately I realized that this meant I must be completely honest with you. In fact, the truth is that when I ran out of pocket money last semester I was forced to supplement my income by appearing in numerous pornographic films. I now feel so ashamed of my activities that I cannot possibly face you.

I am sure this will be very hard for you. However, if you miss me, you can always rent Wizards Gone Wild, Take It Like A Giant, or Quidditch Through The Arse - although I was just an extra in that. I'm the guy in the back of the kitchen orgy scene wearing only a chef's hat.

I am sure you will never want to see me again after this news and I completely understand.

Your son,

Seamus

Tom folded the letter in half and handed it to the receptionist behind the Midnight Club's front desk with a charming smile. "Could you find an owl to post that for me, my good ..." Tom squinted, and hazarded a guess. "Goblin?"

The receptionist's answering smile showed a flashing row of metal teeth. "We'll be happy to take care of that for you, sir. Now, as to the room rates, we have only upstairs rooms available, nothing in the dungeon. Did you want a room for half a night, or the full night?"

"The full night," said Tom. He glanced around with a feeling of pleasure: the club had hardly changed at all in the past fifty years. The same gaudy crystal chandeliers, the same intricately lascivious oil paintings. Scented candles burned in front of a nearby triptych in which a number of naked, painted nymphs were frolicking in a pool and splashing each other with water. Tom cocked an eyebrow. The nymphs were very pretty, but interested him not at all. He had somewhat specialized tastes. "Lovely décor," he said.

"The Midnight Club prides itself on having the best of everything," said the goblin receptionist with a wink. "I'm afraid, sir, that I'll have to ask for your wand now. We don't allow guests any use of magic inside the club."

"Oh, of course." Tom could hardly contain his smirk as he drew Seamus' wand from an inside pocket and handed it across the desk. Most likely they would have a catalogue of photos of registered Magids somewhere behind the desk. Seamus Finnegan, of course, would not be on it. He watched the wand disappear into a locked copper box with no regrets.

"Now, sir, as to companionship," the goblin began delicately.

"Companionship?" Tom blinked, then allowed himself the smirk he'd been yearning for previously. "Oh. You want to know if I want a whore?"

The goblin looked pained. "We prefer not to use that term. It's...old-fashioned."

"So am I," said Tom. "I'm an old-fashioned sort of chap. Now, what can you do for me?"

"We have many girls you can choose from immediately, of course." The goblin spoke smoothly, back in his element. "Beautiful girls and, of course...beautiful boys?"

Tom shook his head. "I want someone specific. A specific girl."

"A famous witch or wizard will cost you extra, depending, of course, on how hard it is to get hold of the ingredients. You'd be surprised what some Quidditch players will sell on the black market for a little extra gold, no questions asked. But if you want someone like, say, Harry Potter, well then, we have to rely on some rather specialized thievery for that, so..."

"I said I want a girl," Tom snapped. "And I am not interested in your celebrities." He reached down and unwound the thin strand of copper hair from his ring finger, and held it out across the desk. "I want *this girl*."

Carefully, the goblin reached out and took the fragile hair from between his fingers. "Pretty red hair... is she an equally pretty girl?"

"Quite," said Tom, dispassionately. "I have a few other requirements, as well."

As he detailed them, the goblin's greenish-yellow eyes widened and he paused, arrested in the middle of retrieving a room key labeled *Twenty-Eight* from beneath the desk. "That may take some time, sir. A few hours at least."

"I don't mind waiting," said Tom, and held out his hand for the key, lips curling up into a smile. "I plan to catch up on my reading."

As Tom Riddle used an enchanted key to let himself into Room Twenty-Eight, Harry lay in his own room farther down the hall, face-down in front of the fireplace, trying to get warm. The heat seemed to come and go, leaving him sweating and shivering at regular and monotonous intervals. If he had not already been so ill, he might have recognized at this point that he had a fever. Very few people can spend a significant amount of time in freezing rain after several nights of little rest and an exhausting journey and *not* catch a fever, and Harry was no exception.

He was, however, not aware of this. He was only aware of the fact that he could not seem to get warm enough, despite lying as close as he could to the fire, and that sleep had turned into a distant possibility. He also seemed to be both having trouble organizing his thoughts and to be aware of things with a sudden piercing clarity that was both a relief and a disturbance.

He kept seeing the boy who he had thought was Draco, standing opposite him in the rain-soaked alley. It had been rather surprising to be kissed, that was true, and he wondered if it should have bothered him. It hadn't bothered him. But what had bothered him, and what had stayed with him, was the look on the boy's face as he'd spoken - the look on Draco's face - the way he'd looked at Harry as if Harry didn't matter.

Harry wasn't used to Draco looking at him like that. He was used to Draco looking at him as if he were all that mattered in the world.

He rolled onto his back, stared up at the ceiling. The fire threw a dancing pattern of shadows across the smooth surface. He could hear Draco's voice in his head, blurred with sleep, almost a whisper: *Are you going to stay?*

Yes. I'm going to stay.

But he hadn't stayed, of course, and so the last thing he'd said to Draco, the last thing he might ever say to him, had been a lie.

He shivered. His clothes were still damp, the fire had only partially dried them. There was a knot in his stomach. He wished he could still the voices in his head.

Is that what you want, Harry?

It's what I want.

Then I'll do it.

He rolled onto his side and looked at the fire. The heat stung his skin, this close up, but he didn't mind it. He felt cold down to his bones, as if he'd never be warm again - and in his mind, he was back on that tower, kneeling opposite Draco, cold moonlight spilling down on both of them,

bright and stinging and clear as pure alcohol. Maybe you just hate me, Harry had said, shivering in the freezing night.

Hate you? Draco had said. *I could never hate you.*

At least Harry thought that was what he had said. Perhaps it had not been worded quite like that. His tired mind struggled after the memory - kneeling on that tower, his hands full of glass and blood. He had picked up the glass carelessly on purpose, wanting the pain and the injury. *You hate me*, he'd said to the boy kneeling opposite him in the moonlight, I always thought you hated yourself, but maybe you just hate me.

He couldn't remember exactly what Draco had said back: some kind of denial, a sputtered half-sentence before interruption. Harry felt sick, thinking about it now; how could he have said something so stupid? He remembered Draco kicking the antidote bottle, breaking it beyond repair, and Harry had felt a terrible rage against him in that instant, a blindly narrow despair: *how could he do that to me, how could he?* When of course it hadn't had that much to do with Harry at all, or at least Harry couldn't believe that it did, because if it had then it was a gesture of such an ultimate sort of devotion that the thought of it filled Harry with a hollow and profound sense of unworthiness.

No, it hadn't been about him at all, but that was no reason for him to accuse Draco of hating him when he knew perfectly well that he didn't. You could tell when Draco hated you. For a moment there, in the alley that night, he'd thought he was talking to a Draco who hated him and it had unsettled him in a way he hadn't expected. He remembered what it had been like when Draco really had hated him, when they'd hated each other. There had never been any doubt in his mind back then that if Draco ever got the chance to, he'd cut Harry's throat and walk away smiling. Harry hadn't minded being hated - well, he'd minded it, nobody liked being hated, but in an odd way he'd taken an obscure pride in the fact that he seemed the one person in the world able to make Malfoy lose all his self-control. On rare occasions he had to admit he'd taken pleasure in goading Draco into rages; it had amused him the way that Draco's mouth twitched and his knuckles went white, the tendons in his hands knotting and unknotting as he tried to hold himself back from leaping at Harry and strangling him.

Sometimes, of course, he couldn't hold himself back. Fifth year, when Gryffindor had won the Quidditch cup yet *again*, Harry'd had Dobby deliver a blue velvet cushion to Draco in the middle of breakfast, on top of which rested a small plastic drinking glass and a note reading 'Perhaps this cup might be a bit more your size, Malfoy - H. Potter.'

Draco had done nothing at the time, but later Harry had been behind schedule, running alone to Potions class, when he'd felt a hand tug on his sleeve. Turning, he'd found his arm seized and without warning he was dragged under the nearest stairwell, his legs kicked out from under him, and Draco was on top of him, hands fisted in Harry's robes, doing his level best to render Harry unconscious by knocking his head repeatedly against the stone floor.

Draco had surprise on his side, and a near-blinding rage, but he wasn't a particularly skilled fist-fighter - he'd been taught fencing and dancing and the like, but Harry'd honed his brawling skills on the wrong side of Dudley's bad moods and knew exactly how to squirm away to evade wildly placed blows. He squirmed now, kicking upward with his legs, and they rolled sideways, a writhing, punching mass of flailing fists and kicking feet. They fetched up against the far wall, Draco's knees pinning Harry to the ground. Harry ducked, trying to slide out from under Draco and avoid the blows aimed at his head, when he realized suddenly that he didn't *want* to squirm away from Draco - he wanted to hit him back.

He stopped squirming and jerked his body upward, startling Draco so that the other boy lost his choke-hold on Harry and slid sideways. Harry flung himself up and over and now he was the one on top, the one with the advantage, and he bashed Draco across the face one, twice, hard with the side of his fist and the third time he hit him his hand came away bloody and then Draco jammed his forearm into Harry's throat, choking him, and shoved his hand down between them and Harry realized Draco was going for his wand and so he jerked his knee up, brutally hard - a dirty-fighting move, something Dudley might have done. It was enough to make Draco gag and double up, and Harry shoved him away and staggered to his feet, and only realized when he was standing up that he had grabbed Draco's wand himself and was holding it in his bloodied fist.

Draco was choking and gasping on the floor. Very slowly, he raised his head and looked up at Harry. His eyes widened, registering the wand

gripped in Harry's hand. It was an expensive wand - Harry knew as much from Draco's bragging, it had been in Draco's family for generations, had in fact been carved out of rosewood for an ancestor of his during the Tudor dynasty. It felt smooth and cool in his own hand and surprisingly light.

"You want me to break your wand in half, Malfoy?" Harry snarled. "You want to explain that to your father?"

Painfully, Draco pulled himself up to a kneeling position and looked up at Harry through his hair. His cheek was gashed and there was blood dripping from his split lip onto his shirt. He was still trying to catch his breath. "Give me....back...my wand, Potter, you fucking stupid...."



The wand made a faint springing sound like a violin string snapping back into place as Harry bent it into a wishbone shape with a flick of his fingers. Flexible, the wand bent with his movement, but a little more - and

it would snap. Draco winced despite himself, staring at it, his chest rising and falling rapidly with his gasps.

"Apologize," Harry said.

Draco made a choking sound. "For *what?*"

A bizarre rage boiled up inside Harry - the strength of it surprised him. "For *everything*," he snarled. "For being who you are. For being a miserable, slithering, slimy, pathetic, racist, smirking little maggot. The next thing out of your mouth better be an apology, Malfoy, or I'll snap this wand of yours into eight bloody pieces and I'm not kidding. I'll do it."

There was a silence. Draco raised his eyes and looked at Harry - a long, considering, struggling look, and for a moment Harry thought wildly that Draco actually was going to break and apologize, make some kind of conciliatory gesture, because he didn't seem to be about to try to hit him anyway, and then Draco leaned forward on his hands and spat a mouthful of blood all over Harry's shoes.

Startled, Harry stepped back despite himself, and Draco sank back on his heels, his head hanging down, eyes slitted closed, his voice a barely audible hiss, "There's your apology. Now do what you want."

Harry looked down at the other boy - his shoulders tensed, hands gripped on his knees, waiting for the snapping sound of his irreplaceable wand being broken in half - and he thought of Lucius Malfoy - and he couldn't do it. Cursing himself and his own stupid weakness, he flung the wand at the floor in front of Draco, "Take it - just take it, and fuck the hell off with it -"

Draco's head snapped up and he stared at Harry and there was no gratitude in his gaze, only a desperate bleak hatred. He didn't reach to touch his wand or wipe the blood off his mouth. He just stared at Harry and when he spoke his voice was uneven, as if he were struggling not to cry or to yell. "Why won't you die, Potter?" Draco half-whispered. "Why... won't...you...just...fucking...*die?*"

The sheer loathing in Draco's tone had astounded Harry. He'd realized then the essential inequality in their relationship - an inequality to which Draco seemed preternaturally sensitive. Harry didn't hate Draco as much

as Draco hated him. He just didn't. The real depth and richness of Harry's hatred was reserved for Voldemort. All that was left for Draco was the rags and bones of what was really no more than an intense dislike. Harry couldn't imagine spending that kind of hatred on Malfoy. After all he'd never killed anyone Harry loved. It would be like hating a piece of grit in his shoe, a blister on his heel, an annoying snatch of song stuck in his head. And Malfoy knew it.

Hate you? I could never hate you, Draco had said, and he'd meant it. Oh, he'd meant it; he couldn't imagine hating Harry now any more than he'd once been able to imagine not hating him. Whatever he did - hating or loving - he did it with his whole soul, and Harry's inability to do the same had hurt him in ways Harry couldn't imagine or explain and was only just beginning to understand. He felt suddenly with a bursting feeling behind his ribcage how unfair it all was - he wanted to go find Draco and shake him and explain to him that just because they'd once been unequal in hatred didn't mean that they were doomed to be unequal in all their relations with each other, forever. Fate and history were what Malfoys believed in: destiny and the weight of thousands of years of nothing ever changing. Harry believed in none of that. He'd spat in the face of the expected order of things when he was barely a year old. He wanted to tell Draco that there was more than one way for things to be -

But he couldn't. Not after what he'd done; he'd lost that chance, cut himself off, walked away and started over. He'd left all that behind by choice, everything and everyone, and he done it by refusing to think about it. He'd told himself he wouldn't think about Draco or Hermione, Ron or Sirius, anyone he'd loved or been loved by and who he had left. And he'd staggered around half-blind with guilt and despair because of it, he'd been ineffectual and stupid because of it, but he'd started on this path, and now there was no going back. Not even now, when things that had not made sense to him were finally beginning to make sense. He felt as if he had been sitting in a dark locked room, listening to incomprehensible noises filtering through a crack in the door, and now finally the door had been flung wide open and he could hear that the noises were music, and that he knew the melody - had always known it, but had not been able to hear it properly until now.

And yet there was nothing he could do about it. There are few feelings in the world worse than completely inopportune realization, and Harry felt it

as a twisting knot in his guts as he leaned back against the wall next to the fireplace, and for just one moment abandoned himself to a scathing bitterness - *What have I done? Oh, what have I done?*

He couldn't stand it any longer. He got to his feet, went over to the desk, and fumbled for parchment and a quill.

"I think we need false names," said Hermione, banging the edges of her small metal cauldron with the long-handled brass spoon she was using to stir the antidote as it settled. "Or at least, you do."

Draco glanced at her, looking faintly surprised. He sat on the counter next to the impromptu workstation she had set up in the kitchen of the hotel room. Hermione had insisted on having a kitchen so that she could mix the antidote properly; Draco had insisted on having the biggest and most expensive room in the hotel, so it had all worked out rather well, aside from the fact that Hermione, daughter of middle-class dentists, was, despite her knowledge that Draco could well afford the extravagance, secretly rather appalled at the gaudy splendor of their hotel suite.

A pair of gigantic fireplaces buttressed a vast marble-floored drawing room. Two bedrooms opened off it, one papered in all white and one in dark green and gold. Hermione had fled from the sight of the enormous bathtub with its silver mermaid spigots and floating, enchanted heart-shaped pillows. Curtains of white velvet draped the floor-to-ceiling windows: they had a thick, waxy feel to them when she touched them, like lily petals. There was a full kitchen with a selection of enchanted copper pots and self-washing plates.

"False names?" Draco said. "Why?"

"You're too famous," said Hermione. "And your name is pretty unusual, you know. Anyone seeing me calling 'Draco' to a tall blond boy is going to turn around and wonder."

Draco half-smiled. "I'm not the famous one."

When they had checked into the hotel, Hermione had worried that they would be recognized, that the desk clerks would want their names. Draco

had lounged against the registration desk, one foot up on the brass railing bar, and like a Muggle street magician had trickled a seemingly unending stream of gold Galleons out of his sleeve and onto the blank registration forms that requested his name. Like magic, the forms had disappeared back into the desk clerk's drawers, unsigned and unmarked. "Money buys silence," Draco had said to Hermione as the levitating staircase bore them up to their room. "He won't say anything."

"It's not just Harry who's famous anymore," Hermione said now.

Draco cut his eyes away from her. He always did that when she talked about Harry. Hermione said nothing; just stirred the antidote and looked at him. His black pullover jumper was slightly too big for him. He had dragged the sleeves down over his hands so only the tips of his fingers were visible. Wisps of curling white-blond hair poked out from beneath the drawn-up hood. He bit his lip.

"Fine," he said. "Pick a name for me."

"Something that sounds like your name, so you'll respond to it," Hermione said thoughtfully. "Drake?"

Draco's head came up and gray eyes flashed at her from beneath the hood. "Call me that and I'll kill you," he said.

Hermione grinned at him. "No?"

"I don't like nicknames," he said succinctly. "You might as well go around calling me 'muffin' or 'boo-bear'."

"Now there's an idea."

"If rule 413 of the Malfoy Family Code of Conduct didn't proscribe me from violence against females, Granger, you'd be wearing that pot you're stirring on your head."

"Hmph," said Hermione. "Hold my spoon while I drain."

She handed him the long-handled spoon and he held it, looking mutinous, while she drained half the mixture she'd made into a smaller mixing bowl and emptied a small packet of vert powder into it. She grabbed the spoon

back and began stirring furiously. This part of the procedure had to be done quickly or the antidote would be ruined.

"I think we should come up with a name for you," said Draco, leaning back on his hands. "Something classy. Trixie LaBouche? Boobs McChesty?"

"I'm not the one who needs a fake name and if I did, I wouldn't want to go around sounding like a porn star," protested Hermione, half out of breath from stirring.

"I always rather fancied that if I grew up to be a porn star, I would rename myself Baron Hotcock von Hugenstein," said Draco in a mock-wistful tone.

Hermione choked. "You wanted to be a porn star?"

"Doesn't everyone?" said Draco.

Hermione tried to imagine Harry wanting to be a porn star, and failed utterly. She bit back a giggle as she put her spoon down - the antidote was done. "Well, it's not very accurate," she said, pouring some of the mixture into a glass.

Draco looked affronted. "How would you know?"

"I just meant," she said, putting the glass into his hand, "that you're not a Baron."

He looked at her suspiciously.

"Drink your antidote," she said.

He half-closed his eyes and drank it. It took three swallows, and then he choked and dropped the glass and shut his eyes tightly, his hand pressed to his head. Shudders racked his body. Alarmed, Hermione grabbed at his hands, pulling them down - for a moment, his fingers wrapped her wrists and gripped them with bone-crushing force - then he released her and sat back, gasping and white-faced. Bright spots of dark red fever burned on his cheekbones.

"Are you all right?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, yes, terrific." Draco's tone was acidic.

The empty glass had fallen to the counter. Hermione picked it up and began rinsing it in the sink, biting back a response. She had no idea what to say really anyway. Snape had told her that Draco's reaction to the antidote would keep getting worse. If it got any worse than it already was she had no idea how she would deal with it.

"Draco..." she began, tucking a damp strand of hair behind her ear.

Before she could go on, a tapping sound came from the window. It sounded like an owl's beak. Wondering if it was perhaps a reply to their Gringotts inquiry, Hermione went across the room and drew the curtains back. It was an owl. She unlatched the window and the bird flew inside, shaking snow from its feathers. It flew directly across the room to Draco and dropped a rolled bit of parchment into his lap. It then hung about, keening softly, until Draco took a Sickle from his pocket and held it out; the bird snapped up the silver piece and flew out through the window.

Hermione closed the window behind the owl, latched it, and started back across the room towards Draco. He was staring down at the unopened letter in his lap. When he finally raised his head and looked up at her she was shocked to see that he had gone bone-white.

"It's from Harry," he said.

The wizard decided to follow his wife the next time she left the castle. He did not have long to wait. She had a habit of walking in the woods, alone, at night, and the next time she set forth upon one of her solitary journeys, he wrapped himself in his Invisibility Cloak and followed her.

Cloaked in darkness, she made her way to the heart of the forest, clutching a witch-light lantern to guide her way. At the center of the forest was a clearing, and she stepped into that clearing and called out in a voice that made him shiver. And from the shadows between the rocks and the spaces between the trees evolved a host of other shapes. Other women, like his wife, all with their dark, dark hair and dark-burning eyes and all beautiful. And the wizard sank back against the tree and stared at them.

They came together, these women, and greeted each other like sisters, and then they sat together in a circle and discussed their situations. Each, it seemed, was a succubus, and each had recently married a mortal man at the behest of the greater demon they served. Each complained bitterly and intently of the boredom of these marriages, of the inadequacy of their human husbands, how loathsome they found them, how hideous compared to demon-kind. And as he listened to this the wizard felt his heart grow cold and shrivel inside him until he wondered that the blood still moved inside his veins.

The demonesses then waxed philosophical. It seemed that their term of servitude was coming to an end. They had been ordered to marry these men that they might bear offspring, offspring who would be half demon and half human, with all the strengths of each species and none of the weaknesses. Demon children who could walk abroad in sunlight and bear the touch of gold. Humans who would be immortal. The demonesses had minimal interest in this goal, but seemed to look forward to a time when they were free of their marriages and could return to their lives as succubi, seducing human men and draining them of their lives and powers.

"I shall look forward to murdering my husband when I go," said the wizard's wife in a reflective manner. "I plan to drain him of his life slowly while he spasms in my arms."

At that the wizard was hard pressed to restrain himself from drawing his wand and damning the consequences. Only the knowledge that a Killing Curse could not work upon a demon kept him in his hiding place. He remained there while the demonesses laughed together about the murders they planned to commit, and remained there while they kissed each other in farewell and slipped away from the clearing, each returning confidently to a besotted and unsuspecting spouse. He remained there while the night waned into pallor and the sun rose over the forest, and when the day had broken, his heart had shrunk to the size of a splinter of glass and all his thoughts were thoughts of vengeance.

And now you really are shivering. Give me your hands, let me put them inside my cloak. There is no need to blush. It is easy enough for me to keep you warm when I cannot, myself, feel the cold.

"This book," said Ben, when Ginny, who had left in search of food, came back into her bedroom with a plate of sandwiches, "is full of historical inaccuracies."

Ginny blinked and set the sandwiches down on the bed. Ben was sitting on the desk, Gareth next to him, reading *Passionate Trousers*. The dark head and the light, bent together as they read, made her think of Harry and Draco. "I can't believe you're reading that," she said.

"As if we hadn't invented *Obliviate* charms by the tenth century," said Ben crossly. "There's no need for..."

"Oh, you're at the bit where the Dark Lord Morgan is ravishing Rhiannon," put in Ginny, with some relish. It was one of her favorite parts.

"Ravishing is one word for it," said Gareth. "She appears to have put up what only her mother would consider a struggle."

"This book is strangely riveting," Ben observed. "Would you mind if I took it back with me?"

"Yes," said Ginny. "I haven't finished it. Although I might consider trading it to you for a little more information."

Gareth looked sideways at Ben and raised an eyebrow. Ben shrugged. "What kind of information?" he asked cautiously.

"Well, I was going to ask you what you're doing here, but I'm not sure that counts. I can't see why you would have bothered coming at all if you weren't going to explain yourselves eventually."

"I just came for the food," said Gareth equably. He drew his short-bladed dagger out of the jeweled sheath at his belt, reached around Ben, and stabbed it into a sandwich. Apparently, Ginny thought, unlike his descendant, he had no problem with peanut butter.

"A thousand years is a long way to come for a sandwich," she pointed out. "And not that I'm not happy to see you...both of you...but..."

Ben, relented, drew his cloak aside and reached into a drawstring pouch that hung from his belt. "I came to give you this," he said, and held out his hand. In it was something slim, branched and gold-green. He laid it on her palm.

Ginny blinked. "A flower?"

It wasn't quite a flower. It looked more like a twig that had been torn from some kind of flowering plant. The stem of the twig was soft and dark green. Tiny, half-opened flowers, the pale yellow of fresh butter, budded along the stem.

"*Flora fortis*," Ben said. "Colloquially they call it Will-Power. It's sort of a hedge-witch remedy, but it works. Break off a bud every day and swallow it. If you keep the stem alive, it'll keep budding."

"Oh. Thank you," Ginny said hesitantly, "but what exactly am I supposed to use this for?"

"I'm a bit unclear on that myself," said Ben cheerfully.

"I suspect you'll know when you come to it," said Gareth, who was busy removing all the cucumbers from his cucumber and tomato sandwich.

"You eat a lot," Ginny observed, looking at him curiously. Gareth leaned behind Ben, so that Ben couldn't see him, and made a horrendous face at her. Ginny tried not to laugh. "I assume the flower has something to do with strengthening will, maybe helping people fight off the Imperius Curse?"

"Good thinking," said Ben, absently. He had returned to reading *Passionate Trousers*. "I kind of like Tristan," he said. "I think she should run off with him."

"I'm sure you do," Ginny said, and sat down on the edge of the bed. Gareth was reading over Ben's shoulder and swinging his feet; his right foot regularly thwacked Ben in the ankle, but Ben didn't seem to mind. It made Ginny feel oddly sad. She saw the way they were together, the way the lines of their bodies seemed to flow unconsciously towards each other like plants underwater, guided by a current. It made her sad because she wondered if she would ever have anything like that herself, and because

they reminded her of Harry and Draco, as if she were watching some strange, mirror-warped version of the two of them when she looked at Gareth and Ben.

"Did I tell you anything else?" she asked in a small voice. "Did I tell you anything about Draco, whether he's going to be all right? Did I say anything about Tom? Or Harry? Or -"

Ben set the book down, his dark eyes suddenly serious. "No," he said, shaking his head. "You gave me a Time-Turner set to this date. You told me to give you that flower. You said you'd need it later, and that..." He screwed up his face thoughtfully. "That I should tell you that you are the anchor."

"I'm the what? The ankle?"

"Anchor," Ben repeated firmly. "Does that not help?"

"Not a lot," Ginny said with a sigh.

"Oh," Ben said. "You also told me to remind you to lock the bedroom door, so your mother doesn't come in and find us here."

"Oh, now you tell me!" Ginny leapt to her feet and ran to her door. She slid the lock home and leaned back against the door. A moment later, the knob rattled.

"Ginny!" called Mrs. Weasley from the hall outside. "Are you all right? George said you were up looking for food."

"I'm fine, Mum!" Ginny called back. "I'm just going to sleep!" Ginny bit her lip. She hated lying to her mother. Still, this seemed a sin of omission, as it seemed unlikely that her mother was going to ask if there were two ancient, time-traveling, rather cute but probably gay wizards hanging out on her desk, reading romance novels. "I'll see you in the morning!"

"Hmph," said Mrs. Weasley. "Well, all right then."

A moment later Ginny heard her mother's footsteps retreating down the hall. She sagged against the door in relief and looked over at Ben and

Gareth. Ben was regarding her over the spine of her book, a quizzical look on his face.

"You don't mind if we just stay here and finish the book, do you?" he asked. "I do want to know what happens in the end."

"Oh, dear," said Ginny.

"Bloody bugging hell," said Gareth, his tone mournful, "I've eaten all the sandwiches."

Malfoy,

I know I said I wasn't going to write but this is important. I don't know exactly how to say this, but I think you should keep an eye on Seamus Finnegan from now on. I can't really say what happened but I bumped into him in Diagon Alley and he was acting very strangely. I would have warned Ginny directly but then I thought it would probably be better if I told you and you could keep an eye on them both. Something very strange happened to me today and I (the next part of the letter was blotted out with ink and carefully written over) hope you're all right and that everything else is too. I'll be back as soon as I can,

Harry

"Seamus," said Draco flatly, and let the letter drop out of his hand. "He bumped into bloody Seamus. Sorry, Tom. How bloody ironic. I'm surprised he's still alive to write and warn us."

"Don't say that," said Hermione automatically, picking up the letter. She glanced over it, fumbling in her pocket for her wand. She tapped the tip of it to the letter and whispered, "*Originatus revelatus.*"

Nothing happened. The spell meant to reveal from what location the letter had been sent was not working. Harry, Draco thought, must have blocked it.

"Harry's not quite that dimwitted," said Draco, with a dry sort of amusement. Hermione made a face at him. "Although, certainly,

dimwitted enough. That letter will be one for the history books. 'Bumped into Seamus Finnigan the other day. He seemed a bit off color. Perhaps he has 'flu, or has been possessed by the spirit of the most evil wizard who ever lived. Both options are so exciting I'm having difficulty choosing.'

"Oh, let Harry alone," said Hermione. "You know, it isn't exactly a conclusion that most people would jump to." Something seemed to occur to her. "Oh, God," she said. "I hope he isn't *stalking* Harry or anything. Oh - we *have* to get to him, Draco, as soon as possible."

"I'm aware of that." There was a bitter taste at the back of Draco's throat that had nothing to do with the antidote he had just swallowed. "Any suggestions as to how?"

Hermione was still looking thoughtful. "Have you ever heard of The Continuum Translocatrix?"

"Didn't they get to number five on the pop charts with *I Do Believe We're Naked?*"

"Don't joke." Hermione glared. "It's a locator spell that uses time magic. See, we burn the letter and make a paste out of the ashes, then we feed the ashes to a Kneazle, and then we use some of the Kneazle's blood to make a Locanarus Potion, and we boil the potion six times, and after that we -"

"We could do that," Draco agreed. He had picked up the letter again and was holding it up to the light. "Or we could just go to the address printed on the parchment."

"The what?" Hermione snatched the letter out of his hand. "What address?"

"It's a watermark. Hold the paper up to the light."

Hermione did as instructed. Her brow furrowed. "I just see three letters. TMC."

"Yeah," Draco said. "It's a place." He hesitated. "Not a very nice place."

Hermione lowered the letter. "What do you mean? Is it a dangerous place?"

"It's near Knockturn Alley," said Draco, a bit diffident now. He wasn't exactly sure how Hermione was going to react to the news that Harry seemed to have found his way to an infamous den of wizarding vice. He wasn't sure how he felt about it himself. Knowing Harry, he'd wandered in there thinking it was a flower shop. But then Draco wasn't sure exactly how well he actually did know Harry after all. "It's a club of sorts. A... gentleman's club."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "A strip club?"

"It's not a strip club," said Draco, with perfect truth.

"Then what is it?"

"It's a brothel," Draco said, and cringed.

Hermione went a greenish sort of color. "*A brothel?*"

"A Polyjuice brothel," said Draco. "Very illegal. People go there to..."

"I know what people go there to do!" Hermione said furiously. "I've read about places like that." Belying her officious tone, her cheeks were scarlet. "And how do you know all about this one, Draco Malfoy?"

"Because," he said. "My father owns it."

Hermione shook her head. "I suppose that shouldn't surprise me." She sagged back against the counter, biting her lip. "Now what? We can't exactly turn up at a polyjuice brothel and demand to search the place. Those places are horribly illegal and I doubt they like attention. They'd toss us right out on the street, or worse."

Draco looked at the letter again. The writing was hurried, urgent, the letters sprawling across the page, but still unmistakably Harry's, those looping a's and curving s's. He wondered if anyone could imitate Harry's handwriting well enough to fool him. He doubted it. The tone of this letter, like the other he had received yesterday, was Harry's; he heard Harry's voice speaking to him in his head when he read it. And Harry's

terrible handwriting would be hard to imitate. His own would be much easier: it was careful, elegant, standardized handwriting, just as his father had taught him.

He looked down at his right hand. Pale and slender, the index finger heavily laden down by the weight of his family signet ring. He flexed his fingers and lowered his hand thoughtfully.

"Draco?" Hermione said, in a worried tone. "Are you...?"

"I need parchment," he said. "And a quill. And some wax - sealing wax. And we need to hurry - I'd imagine we don't have very much time."

She drank the Polyjuice Potion before she put on the costume they had given her to wear. She couldn't have fit into it otherwise. The clothes were very small, made to be worn by a young girl, one no older than sixteen or seventeen, and a small girl at that.

She had worn her share of schoolgirl clothes before. It was amazing how many wizards had that fetish. The only other costumes more common in the brothel were Quidditch players' outfits. People went mad for those, and the brothel made them with "special adjustments" - tight trousers, high leather boots, heavy-buckled wristguards and formfitting summer tops. She had a feeling this schoolgirl outfit had been adjusted as well. Also, unusually, it was branded with the badge of a House -the infinitesimal black skirt was buttoned with small gold lion's head buttons, and the badge of Gryffindor adorned the tight white shirt. She rolled the thigh-high stockings up and twisted her long red hair into plaits and was done. No makeup, she'd been told, no cosmetic charms of any kind. Barefoot, she went down the long hallway to the door of Room Twenty-Eight. She tapped her charmed cube against the door and it melted away just long enough for her to step through it.



It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the darkness inside the room. Her customer sat on the edge of the bed, haloed by the pinkish light coming from the rose lamp behind him. He raised his head as she came in.

"Hello," she said, and paused there in the doorway.

He stood up. She was taken aback. He was young - very young - and surprisingly good-looking. Dark blond hair, eyes a clear and definite blue. A narrow, firmly set mouth and a lithe, muscular body. His clothes were dark, nondescript. There seemed no cunning in his face, but his eyes were old, belying his age.

She wondered what he wanted. Without a cue from him she did not know if he would prefer her to pretend to be naïve and terrified or precocious and daring. She lifted her hand and slowly pulled one of her plaits forward so that it fell down against her breast. Then she looked at him, coyly, through her hair.

"Come here," he said, and held out a hand.

Barefoot as he had requested, she went across the room to him. She took his hand and he drew her up against him. His hands slid down her body to her waist and held her there, lightly but firmly. "You will call me by my name," he said. "I am Tom. Say it."

"Tom," she said.

A faint little shudder ran through him. The air in the room seemed to her to be thickening somehow although she assumed it was merely the light in the lamp dimming. His hands ran restlessly up her body. He tilted her head back, touching her face with his fingers as if he were creating the shape of it himself out of the textures of the night and the air between them.

She held still as he touched her. She was used to peculiar reactions from customers. Given the business she was in, she supposed it could only be expected. People did not come to the Midnight Club for sex alone - what the brothel really dealt in was dreams and fantasies, the dark materials of the human soul. Lust brought people there, but so did love, and so did

grief. She was used to being wept on, clasped, worshipped and adored, hated and despised. It was all in a day's work.

"Ginny," said Tom now, his thumbs under her chin, tilting her head up. "Look at me."

She looked up at him. The room was definitely darker now. She could see only the outline of his features, the shadows cast by his lashes, the blue eyes.

"Are you afraid of me?" he said.

She took a guess at what he wanted her to say. "Yes."

Another shudder went through him and his arms tightened around her. He bent and pressed his lips against her cheek. They were cold and she shivered unaccountably. "Love," she heard him whisper, and she didn't think he was talking to her. "Such a selfish emotion. It makes the body a slave, and shackles the will to its narrow desires - and yet it is thought ennobling, why is that?"

She did not know what he meant but his tone made her nervous. Her relief at seeing him was rapidly beginning to drain away. This boy was beautiful, but he also seemed to be more than a little unhinged. "Your hands," she said. "So cold -"

"Be quiet." He shook her once, hard, by the shoulders, and she quieted instantly, startled into silence. Almost immediately the anger went out of his eyes and they went soft again, dreamy, unfocused. "Tell me you love me," he said.

This was more familiar ground. "I love you, Tom," she said.

"And you belong to me."

"I belong to you, Tom," she said, because he seemed to like the sound of his own name.

"And you'd die for me," he said.

"And I'd die for you, Tom."

"Beg me," he said.

She flicked her gaze upward, and was sorry she had. She did not like the look in his eyes at all. "Beg you to what?"

"Beg me to hurt you," he said.

She had had enough. She jerked away from him. "No. No - that's against the rules. You can't hurt me."

The dreamy look in his eyes intensified. "I think you'll find I can do whatever I want."

He was no longer holding her. She stepped away from him and he watched her, the same look in his eyes, unsettling, distant, familiar. She whirled around and ran for the door -

And found him standing in front of it. Leaning against it, in fact, his back slightly arched, a faint smile playing on his elegant mouth. "You don't want to run away from me, Ginny," he said. "You want to be with me. You wouldn't have brought me back to you otherwise, would you?"

A frightened sob caught in her throat. She stumbled back, away from him, whispering under her breath, "*Excubitor, excubitor* -"

He began to walk towards her. "The guards won't come," he said. "I've dismantled all the safety charms in this room. You can scream and scream. Go ahead. I want you to."

She tried to take a step backward, but her feet wouldn't move. They seemed bound to the floor. She whipped her head up and stared at him. He was walking towards her, his left hand held out and she saw that his lips were moving as he walked. The air in front of him seemed to shimmer...wandless magic? But how -

"Cry out if you like," he said. "No one will hear you. It will make no difference to me. You are mine to break. Look up at me, now. Look up at my face."

She obeyed, looking up at him through her terror. His face seemed illuminated by some savage inner light - his eyes glowed, a clear and

lambent blue. She recognized the look in them now, and why it had seemed familiar. It was the look of a cat batting at the body of a dying mouse.

"Don't hurt me," she whispered. "Please, please don't hurt me, I'll do whatever you like -"

"Yes," he said. "You will." He took his left hand from his chest then, and touched her face, and smiled. Then he put his hands around her throat. She tried to scream, but the pressure of his fingers cut off her breath; as the darkness opened like a pit beneath her feet her she heard the clear sound of his laughter following her down into unconsciousness.

Hermione was impressed by the spell on the front door of the Midnight Club. It seemed to her to be an interesting combination of an Unplottable Charm and a Distraction Spell. The building was there, quite visible, if a bit nondescript - it was sandwiched between two warehouses in a cul-de-sac several streets down from Knocturn Alley - but unless you knew it was there, and were looking for it, you couldn't see it at all.

If you did know what you were looking for - as Draco plainly did - the view revealed, shimmering slightly through a distortion in the air, a set of double red doors with black-bracketed smokeless torches burning on either side of the stone steps that led up to them. The building that rose above the doors was grey stone, windowless, imposing.

"So," Draco said, unnecessarily. "Here we are."

Hermione cut her eyes sideways at him. He had changed in the hotel room, out of his old clothes, and the sight of him now made her uneasy. He looked as if his father had dressed him - in fact, he looked very much his father's son. He wore elegant black clothes, a cloak over a suit, cut from heavy dark material that looked as if it had been imported from the nineteenth century specifically for Malfoy use. The cloak was made out of some weather-resistant enchanted cloth that the snow couldn't dampen or touch. His dress shirt was ferociously, spotlessly white, and the cold burn of his green cufflinks was the only color he wore. He had run a brush (*her* brush) through his hair before they left and Hermione had been forced to admit that it actually looked better now: the shorter cut suited the thin

shape of his face, and in the wet weather, it curled damply against the nape of his neck in a way that -

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Draco inquired, interrupting her thoughts.

Hopefully not, unless you're even more in love with yourself than you pretend you are, Hermione thought darkly, but all she said was, "If it's 'How the hell did Harry wander in here', then yes."

"That wasn't it," said Draco, still staring at the doors with a bemused expression.

"Well, if you're hoping that they have a karaoke bar so you can sing a cover version of 'You Don't Own Me', then no," said Hermione.

Now Draco did look at her. He smiled faintly. "I was wondering how we were going to get back out," he said. "The place is a fortress."

Hermione tapped the side pocket of her cloak. "I brought one of the hotel's return Portkeys," she said.

Now his smile was less faint. "You think of everything," he said.

She felt herself flush. "I try."

They went up the stairs together and Draco lifted the heavy bronze knocker and let it fall. The sound of the knock seemed to echo down some far corridor. When, a moment later, a small panel opened in the door, Hermione thought at first that there was no one there, only a faint, pale green light that seemed to emanate from within. A high-pitched voice trilled,

"Show your passes."

Hermione, panicked, looked to Draco. Not looking nervous at all, he was sliding the black glove off his right hand. He raised the hand and indolently waved it front of the open panel. There was a look on his face she recognized. Contemptuous, arrogant. She knew he was playing a part but she did not like it. "Recognize the ring?" he sneered, lowering his

hand. "You should. A hand that wears one like it pays your wages. Open the door."

There was a silence. The panel sealed itself up. Abruptly, with the rattling sound of a dozen bolts sliding back, the door opened in front of them, revealing a long blue corridor that stretched away into the middle distance. Gold torches burned at intervals along the corridor walls. And hovering in front of Hermione and Draco, roughly at eye level, was a fairy.

Hermione blinked. It was definitely a fairy - a small green one with gold and violet wings. It was not at all like the pictures of fairies she had seen in books. Its green-silver carapace had an insectile sheen, and behind its narrow lips shone a row of razor teeth. They gleamed as it squeaked a question:

"You have been sent by the Malfoys?"

Draco's eyes narrowed. Hermione couldn't help but admire how completely he had transformed himself. All his tiredness had dropped away and you could no longer see that he looked weary, or ill, or that he had dark shadows beneath his gray eyes. He wore the overbearing egotism of his family as if it were a second expensive cloak. "I *am* a Malfoy," he spat.

"Then," inquired the fairy, "why didn't you use one of the official Portkeys, sir...?"

Draco looked furious. "Because I was testing your security measures, you overgrown hornet!" he shouted.

The fairy's double-lidded eyes opened wide. "I am a *pixie*," it hissed. "And if you continue to shout at me in that manner -"

"Be quiet," Draco barked imperiously, and the fairy's mouth snapped shut. "My father sent me here to inspect the facilities, and that's *exactly* what I intend to do. Now look here. You can either take me immediately to Mister Blackthorpe - he's still the manager here, isn't he? - right, then, you can either take me to his office, or I can come back with an industrial-sized flyswatter and repaint these walls in a stylish new shade called

"Pixie Guts Splattered All Over." It's a long name, but I think the color would go well with the floor tiling."

The fairy spluttered. Because it was so small, the splutter sounded rather like the buzzing of a bee. For a moment Hermione was afraid that the winged creature was going to fly at Draco and bite him.

"Very well," it ground out, finally. "...Sir."

The fairy darted off down the hall. Gathering her cloak around her, Hermione moved to follow, but Draco stilled her with a hand on her arm.

She tilted her head back. "What?"

"Wait just a minute."

He turned her to face him, and looked at her consideringly - a long slow look, up and down. Hermione felt a blush start at the open neckline of her sensible button-down cardigan, and spread up towards her face.

"Put you cloak back," he said. When she didn't move, he hissed an exasperated breath through his teeth. "Fine-I'll do it," he said, and unbuckled the front of her cloak with a fluid movement, pushing the separated halves back over her shoulders. His hands went to her waist, pulling her cardigan out of the waistband of her skirt, fingers rucking up the material, cold on her skin. She shivered.

"Draco, what are you -"

His voice was low as he replied. "Just *trust* me." The word *trust* sounded strange in his mouth: an intimate threat. Hermione stood stock still as his fingers glided over her clothes, flipping the lower buttons out of their holes, tugging the cardigan up and tying it tightly under her breasts, leaving her stomach bare. He tackled her skirt next, folding the waistband over several times, shortening the skirt until the hem of it brushed the tops of her thighs. He straightened up and looked at her, the gleam of evaluation in his eyes.

Hermione struggled not to blush. "If you think that I -"

"You said undercover," he said, and tugged the barrettes from her hair, a swift but not ungentle gesture. Her hair - frizzing a bit at the ends from the damp outside - tumbled down over her shoulders, and he ran his fingers through it, quickly, tangling it. "Better," he said, and pressed the barrettes into her hand. "Don't glare. This is a good look for you."

She glared at him. "What look is that? Underaged Prostitute?"

He ignored this. "Just follow my lead and do whatever I say," he said, and started off down the corridor. "I know how to handle these people. They're my kind."

"I wouldn't be so proud of that," she said sharply.

He glanced back at her over his shoulder but didn't stop walking. "At least I'm not the one with visible knickers."

"I hate you sometimes," Hermione muttered under her breath, but he was already halfway down the corridor and couldn't hear her. Tugging ineffectually at the hem of her skirt, she followed.

Upon learning of his wife's betrayal, the wizard spent the next few days closeted in his tower, perfecting a number of spells. Then he dressed himself in his finest robes and presented himself at his wife's chamber. She greeted him there as modestly and sweetly as she always had, taking his hands and drawing him to the bed, but he resisted her. All her beauty seemed to him now to have taken on a ghoulish aspect.

She sensed his mood and wished to know if anything was wrong.

"No," he said. "It is only that I shudder at your touch," which was, after all, true enough. "Now lie down upon the bed."

And she did so, shrugging her robes to the floor and stretching herself out along the bed. She looked up at him through her hair as he drew a number of silk ribbons from his pockets, and held them up.

"You wish to bind me, Lord?" she asked.

"They will not hurt you," he said. "They are only ribbons."

With a cat's smile, she held her wrists out to be bound, and he knelt over her and bound her wrists together, and then her ankles, before she could protest.

She writhed in sudden anguish. "What have you done to me?" she wailed.

"Gold," he said, with some satisfaction, for threads of gold metal had been woven by him by enchantment into the ribbons. "And may it burn your skin to the bone, demon witch. May you writhe in the anguish you planned for me, before I hurl you out into the sunlight and end your hell-spawned existence."

She wept and pleaded then for mercy, and begged him in the name of his love for her to spare her life. But he had stopped his heart to her pleas. All his love for her had curdled into the purest hate. Hate that once was love is the strongest sort of hate. Hate that does not forget or know forgiveness; hate that is unmerciful.

At last she subsided into silence, and lay limp in her agonizing bonds. "My Lord," she said, looking up at him, "I know now that you will show me no mercy. And surely you can claim my death. But there is something that you do not know. I carry your daughter, Lord, in my body. Your blood runs in her veins as well as mine. Will you not, then, show mercy to her?"

"Love," observed Tom, kneeling next to the dead girl, "that curious condition."

He took a moment to admire the picture she made. All red and white and gold, pale bare skin and hair torn out of its braids and just a little blood. At first he had been irritated that her struggles had resulted in ripped and shredded clothes, but upon reflection the disarray added to the overall symmetry. She could have been Leda after the swan's ravages - although Leda had survived that rape, and this girl was quite, quite dead. A swift spell had broken her neck, and she'd collapsed forward into him, pliant and willing: his hands that were not only his hands had held her up, carried her to the bed, and inside him that tiny part that was still

Seamus had wept and beaten its fists against him and finally fallen sick and silent long before he was done.

He ran the back of his knuckle gently along her freckle-dusted cheekbone, up to her temple, his fingers stroking the soft hollows behind her ears. He sat back on his heels - he was reluctant to go, to leave her, she was so beautiful lying the way she was, with her hair all about her; he had never forgotten that hair, the precise color of it, like blood in wine. The marks of his fingers were darkening on her throat. Where her shirt had torn at the shoulder, he could see the blue tracery of veins against her peach-pale skin.

Earlier that day he had found a bruise on his arm, just below the elbow, dark against Seamus' winter-pale skin. It had startled him for a moment. He had no idea how Seamus had gotten that bruise - playing Quidditch, climbing trees, something innocent and pointless and foolish - and for a moment he had swum dizzily in the disorientation of knowing that he inhabited a borrowed body, that he was powerless over its history. And even as he wore Seamus' bruised skin, so he retained, somewhere in the depths of the living, thinking mind he had stolen, the memory of Seamus' love for Ginny. He had felt the ache of it, like the ache of the bruise on his arm, an ache like hunger. An ache he hated. An ache he did not understand.

It was easier when he thought of it as hunger. Hunger he understood; hunger could be cured. Surely love, too, could be cured by feeding it what it wanted. He leaned now to kiss her unresponsive lips, and searched inside himself for that bruise, that ache-of-love, but he felt nothing.

Elated, he sat back, his fingers trailing along her lips where his mouth had just been. If only he could - but no, he could not stay. He had only bought an hour with her, and she would be missed, whoever she was really; the brothel owners would come seeking her, and would be angry to find her dead, all her usefulness spoiled. Still, she had been useful to him at least. He had fed the hunger that was the love inside him, had stuffed it on a surfeit of death and desires fulfilled, and in doing so surely he had destroyed it. He was strong now, whole and perfect, all vulnerability burned away. He had to be.

With a last touch of his fingertips to her fiery hair, Tom rose to his feet, drawing his robes close about him. He knew exactly where he had to go now.

"Irregular," muttered the green-skinned demon who had turned out to be the manager of the Midnight Club. He wore long silk robes of deep purple that had been altered to accommodate his vestigial arms, and a red bowler hat with an ostrich plume. He stood behind the enormous mahogany desk in his gleaming walnut-and-cherrywood paneled office, tapping nervously at the open letter on his desk with the tip of a bronze quill. Beneath the brim of his hat, gold antennae quivered with agitation. "This is all most distressingly irregular."

"Oh, yes," Draco agreed cheerfully. He was sprawled in a gold-and-burgundy watered silk armchair with gilded armrests, his long legs flung out, his feet up on the mahogany desk. His cloak was open, and he was twirling a small green drink umbrella between his fingers. The drink it had come from sat untouched on a nearby table. "I told my father that myself, Mr. Blackthorpe. He was most displeased. He told me off for back-talking. He's quite right, of course. He is a business genius, after all. And he doesn't like back-talk or disobedience. Why, just last week our head gardener accidentally planted a whole copse of Festering Fireweed upside-down. Well, I bet you can guess what my father did about *that*."

Blackthorpe looked up at him, his mouth set in a thin line. Behind him, two hulking troll-like men Hermione assumed to be his bodyguards, glanced at one another and frowned.

"No, Mister Malfoy, I can't guess."

Draco leaned forward with a beautifully engaging smile. "He had him *killed*," he said, and snapped his fingers.

Everyone in the room jumped, Hermione included. She bit her lip. She had promised Draco she wouldn't say anything until he cued her once they were in the office, and she hadn't. It was more difficult than she had thought it would be. Still, a grudging admiration for him kept her silent. As if the past eight months had never happened, he was suddenly his old

self again, all razor looks and smiling malice. It was an impressive performance.

That was, of course, assuming it was a performance.

"Sorry if I scared you gentlemen," Draco said, not sounding sorry at all. His eyes were sparkling. He had unknotted his dove-gray silk tie, and against the bare hollow of his throat, Hermione could see the bright gleam of his Epicyclical charm. "Didn't realize you were so jumpy."

Blackthorpe cleared his throat. "It isn't that I don't want to respect your father's wishes," he said, glancing down again at the letter on his desk. Draco had done a good job on it. The signature was unmistakably Lucius', and the mark of the griffin seal ring, pressed into black wax on the parchment, was impressive. "It is merely that Lucius usually conducts his inspections on a more...scheduled basis. We had an understanding -"

"Indeed." Draco sounded bored. "That was, however, before the recent security breaches came to our attention."

Blackthorpe 's deep green skin paled to an unpleasant shade of chartreuse. "Security breaches?"

Draco smiled like a knife cut. "You hadn't heard? *Photographs*," he said. "All sorts of photographs, anonymously mailed to the Ministry. My father had quite a job covering it up, I can tell you. He had to cast six or seven *Obliviate* charms on the secretaries who opened up a packet of photos of Frances Parkinson cavorting about with a Polyjuiced version of the Every Flavor Boys. I'm sure you know how disastrous this kind of exposure could be for you, my good demon."

"I'm not a demon," said Blackthorpe tensely.

"Ah," said Draco delicately. "Skin condition, then?"

"I am an incubus!"

"Of course you are," Draco said soothingly. He settled himself more comfortably in the armchair, still twirling his drink umbrella. "You know, I'm awfully hungry. Have you got anything here to eat?"

"No," Blackthorpe snapped. He was visibly distraught. "About these security breaches..."

Draco shifted in his chair. "Nothing to eat? I'll take chocolate. Biscuits? Scotch pancake?"

"I saw some scones down in the espresso bar," opined one of the troll-guards helpfully.

Draco grinned delightfully. "Were they the kind with the little chocolate bits in?"

"Be quiet, Thorvald!" The Manager shot a glare at the troll behind him, then jerked his sharply pointed green chin towards Hermione. "And who is she?" he demanded poisonously. "Why is she along for this inspection tour of yours?"

Draco lazily slid his feet from the desk and turned to look at Hermione. "You mean Hepzibah? She's my personal secretary," he said smoothly, and winked at Hermione. "Charming girl."

Hermione opened her mouth to speak.

"Unfortunately," Draco added swiftly, "she doesn't speak a word of English."

Hermione's speech turned into a gasp of outrage. She shot Draco a violent glare, which he ignored. He was gazing at her with a bland smile.

If the green incubus manager had had an eyebrow, he would have raised it. "One might question the efficacy of a secretary who doesn't speak English," he said.

"One might," Draco agreed, "but I've never had any complaints about her performance." He examined his fingernails. "You should see her take a memo," he added conversationally. "When she bends over the desk -"

"Right," interrupted Blackthorpe with a moue of distaste. "Tell me, Mister Malfoy, just exactly what kind of inspection did your father have in mind?"

Draco smiled, a lazy cat smile, and slowly uncurled himself from the leather armchair, rising to his feet with arrogant grace. "A thorough one," he said. "I'd like to take one of your guards and search all the rooms. Check the surveillance spells...among other things."

Mr. Blackthorpe began to open his mouth.

"*All* the rooms," said Draco firmly.

The manager's shoulders sagged. "As you wish," he said.

Harry had finally succeeded in falling into a light doze on the floor when the door burst open. He sprang to his feet, flinging his hand out -
"*Stupefy!*"

There was a small burst of light and a muffled cry, followed by a thump.
"Don't! It's me!"

Harry blinked. The boy-who-looked-like-Draco-but-wasn't was sprawled on the floor near the door, nursing his arm. He looked at Harry resentfully, which had the side effect of making him briefly resemble Draco far more closely than he had so far. "Ouch! Why did you do that?"

"You burst in," Harry said, feeling a bit silly. "I didn't know who you were."

"I brought your bag," the boy said, pushing it towards Harry with his feet. "But that's not why I ran in here. Listen, you have to go. There are inspectors here. They're searching the rooms. They say Lucius Malfoy sent them. I think they might be looking for you."

Harry grabbed for his bag and whispered the spell that would shrink it down to pocket size. He stowed it, yanked his glasses off the mantel, and turned around. "How do I get out of here?"

The boy chewed his lip nervously. "I'll take you down to the Portkey room. It's for clients who want to come in and out without using the doors. You can Portkey away, just lock the door behind you." He

unbuttoned the cloak he was wearing and handed it to Harry. "Here, put this on, and pull the hood up."

Harry did as instructed, already on his way out of the room. In the corridor outside they kept to the shadows, walking single file. Harry had to walk quickly to keep up, his fingers slipping on the unfamiliar cloak buttons as he did them up. The cloak itself was heavy wool, and smelled of cigar smoke and dirty snow.

By the time they got to the staircase they were almost running. The boy fled down it, and Harry followed. There was another, smaller, staircase leading down from the ground floor, which they took at a run. Harry kept one hand on the railing as he ran. He was finally beginning to realize that the dizziness he was feeling was more than exhaustion. *I'm ill*, he thought, as his feet hit the last step, *really ill. Damn. This is not convenient.*

This level of the club was all businesslike wood walls and a polished wood floor. Harry kept a hand on the wall as they went, steadying himself. His skin felt dry and feverish and his eyes prickled. They reached the door at the end of the hall and the boy once again used his lighted cube to open it. He pushed Harry through and then stood in the doorway, looking tense and nervous.

"The Portkey is in there," he said, pointing. The room itself was almost completely bare, with slick stone walls. The only item of furniture in it was a round walnut-wood table with gilded legs. A thick rope of gold chain wound around the table and was attached at the top via a padlock to a round, heavy-looking bronze ring. The other end of the chain was sunk into the wall. "The ring is the Key," said the boy. "It's the kind you don't have to take with you. Just touch it, and it should work."

Harry nodded. He turned around and cleared his throat, wanting to say, *Thank you*, but the words seemed stuck behind his teeth. In the dim light, he could see only the outline of the other boy looking at him, that he had blond hair and was thin, and if Harry squinted he could imagine that the resemblance to Draco was no more than a superficial similarity of coloring and build. But if he stepped closer...no. Harry couldn't thank him. "Look," he said, finally. "Have you got a name? An actual name? Because..."

But there were footsteps in the corridor outside, and the boy, with a startled look, fled, slamming the door so hard behind him that Harry jumped. A moment later there were more noises outside the door and Harry saw the doorknob twist and heard the unmistakable click of a bolt sliding home: he was locked in.

Not that this was necessarily a bad thing. At least it meant there was no immediate pursuit on his trail. He turned to the table, reached a hand out to touch the Portkey - and paused. He leaned closer, examining it: it was nothing more than a round, solid-looking bronze ring, padlocked to the last link in the gold chain that wrapped the table. He could, of course, simply touch it and be flung to whatever destination it led to, but wouldn't that make it awfully easy for anyone following him to know exactly where he'd gone? Much better to take the Portkey with him, and cut off - or at least slow - any chance of pursuit.

He dug into his pocket and pulled out the penknife Sirius had given him for his fourteenth birthday. One of the attachments was a thin-bladed short knife, which Harry had discovered early on doubled spectacularly as a lockpick. Leaning forward, careful not to touch the Portkey, he went to work on the padlock.

Next to the door of Room Twenty-Eight was a small gilded table on which rested a cut-glass candy bowl full of colorfully wrapped, tiny packets that looked like bags of Fizzing Whizbees. On closer inspection, however, Hermione discovered that the contents of the bowl were not in fact edible. "Every Flavor *condoms*," she muttered under her breath to Draco. "Do the Bertie Botts people know about this?"

"Perhaps a strongly worded letter to them is in order," Draco murmured back.

"And downstairs - so many Oliver Woods!" Hermione added, sounding bewildered. "Whoever thought there was a need for thirteen Oliver Woods?"

"I never saw a need for *one* Oliver Wood," Draco pointed out.

"And that one that was wearing the tutu..."

Hermione trailed off, shaking her head. Draco shot her a sideways look, trying to hide his concern. He hadn't actually really paused to think, before charging into the club, how its attractions (so to speak) might affect her. Bookish though she was, Hermione was not actually very prudish. He supposed it came from having spent most of her adolescent life with boys for constant companions. Still, the Midnight Club would shake anyone up. They'd walked through rooms where the writhing shadows in the darkness had looked up at them with familiar faces, winked and smiled and beckoned...

He dropped his voice to a whisper so that Thorvald the troll, who was currently fiddling with the lock on the door of Room 28, which did not seem to want to cooperate with his efforts, couldn't overhear. "Hermione, are you bothered?"

She glanced up at him, eyes clear and curious. "What? Oh, no, not bothered. Bit bewildered." She glanced around. They were standing in an ornately decorated corridor, which was currently deserted. It hadn't been when they arrived, but at the sight of the troll bodyguard, the few club denizens there had melted away. One of them, a tall woman in backless silver robes wearing a cat mask, had pinched Draco in a very inappropriate place on her way down the hall. "I did feel bad for Filch when we saw him in the sauna room. He looked so embarrassed. I'm sure he recognized us both."

"Maybe it wasn't really him," Draco suggested, leaning back against the red-wallpapered corridor wall. Seeing Filch hadn't bothered him much. He'd been to the Midnight Club before, as a child, although at the time he hadn't quite understood why anyone would pay money to "play" with Polyjuiced celebrities, or Polyjuice themselves into a celebrity. But then, of course, he was Draco Malfoy, and until he'd met Harry Potter it had never occurred to him that he might ever want to be anyone else.

Hermione rolled her eyes. Draco tried not to look sideways at her. She was leaning against the wall next to him, idly playing with one of the buttons on the top half of her blouse. He wondered if she had forgotten he was there or if she simply didn't realize that from this angle, when she did that, he had a clear view down the front of her shirt. Not that this was of interest to him in any way.

"You honestly think people are paying good money to sleep with a Polyjuiced Filch?" she said dubiously. "I mean, the warts alone..."

"There is no need to be judgmental and dismissive," Draco said. "Sure, to you, Argus Filch might be a barmy old coot with an unsettling cat fixation and enough ear hair to choke a walrus. But to someone else out there, he might be a radiant sex god."

Hermione looked at him through her hair. "Would *you* sleep with him?"

"Don't be disgusting," Draco said. "I'd rather die."

"AUUUUUUUGH!"

Both Draco and Hermione jumped. Thorvald had hurled his ring of keys to the floor in exasperation and was swearing in Trollish. It was an unpleasant language and sounded like a bag of grapefruits being dumped down a well.

"Is there a problem?" Draco inquired.

"Door charms broken," the troll muttered. "Talk to manager. Get counterspell. Be right back. You stay here."

He glared at them.

"Of cou-" Hermione began.

Draco quelled her with a glare. "*Si le poisson, ou jeudi matin!*"

Hermione blinked at him, then shut her mouth. With a confused glare, the troll lumbered away. Draco leaned back against the wall.

"You're not supposed to speak *English*," he reminded her sternly.

Hermione was looking at him curiously. "Did you just say, 'Either the fish goes, or Thursday morning'?"

"Possibly," Draco admitted. "I didn't know you spoke French."

"Well, you never said you spoke it, either."

"I never said I didn't."

Hermione shot him a considering look. "And you were looking down my shirt just now," she said, in a mildly observational tone. "I did, actually, notice."

Draco jumped and cleared his throat. "I was being in-character."

"Congratulations." She sounded annoyed. "It was very convincing."

Draco ignored this. "I feel like we've been at this for hours, and all I've learned so far is that there are a lot more uses for Fizzing Whizzbees than I ever thought there were. And still no sign of..."

"Harry," Hermione said. "Can you not even....sense him, a little bit?"

Draco shrugged. "A little. Maybe. I'm not sure."

The tramp of heavy feet approaching cut off any reply that Hermione might have made. It was Thorvald, carrying what looked, from a distance, like a crowbar. He waved the bar at them as he drew closer. He seemed slightly sheepish, although Draco thought he might perhaps be imagining that. "Door charms broken," he said. "Got crowbar."

"That much is evident," said Draco, stepping back. "Go to it, then."

With a grunt, Thorvald wedged the crowbar into the crack between the door and the wall and pushed. Hermione winced at the sound of splintering wood. She glanced at Draco. He looked distant, distracted, as if he were doing sums in his head. The guard threw his weight against the bar, and this time the door tore away from its lock with a rending noise. Thorvald backed up, and Draco crossed in front of him, pushing the door wide with a gloved hand. He took a step forward.

Hermione could not see into the room, but she could see Draco's face. It went from the blankness of distraction to the blankness of shock in less than a second. He whitened, and staggered back with a little cry as if something had hit him.

"Draco?" Forgetting that she wasn't supposed to speak English, Hermione flung herself towards him. "What is it, what's wrong -"

He stiff-armed her away, hard, and gripped her arm. "Don't look - stay back."

"No. Let me go." She struggled, but he only held her tighter. "Let me go. Is it Harry - is it Harry?"

"No," he said. "It's not Harry."

Knowing he wouldn't lie about that, she stopped struggling briefly, and stared at him. His mouth was a twisted line and he didn't seem able to look at her. "You're hurting my arm," she whispered. "Let me go, Draco."

He loosened his grip. She tore her arm out of his grasp and pushed past him, almost knocking him back against the door. She heard him call after her, but not what he said: she was inside the room now, and her heart was hammering in her chest.

It was a room like the others. Plain wide bed, fireplace, bricked-up window, neat rug on the floor. A rosy lamp burned atop a chest of drawers. The mirror behind it was cracked in half. On the floor lay Ginny Weasley, on a bed of torn clothes and tangled hair, her neck twisted at an impossible angle. She was obviously dead.

Hermione crumpled down on her knees beside the body. She felt numb and floating, as if she were very far away. There were marks on Ginny's throat: finger-shaped bruises, ugly and dark. Her white shirt, open at the throat, was stained with blood. Something glittered in her outflung hand.

Hermione said, "Draco. Come here."

"No," he said. She looked up at him. He was inside the room, leaning back against the wall near the door, chest rising and falling quickly under his shirt. He looked pale and sweaty, like someone who was about to throw up. "I can't."

"It's not her. It's not Ginny," Hermione said. "It can't be. This is a Polyjuice brothel, Draco. What's the chance it's actually her?"

"I know that," Draco said. He was still not looking at her. Hermione noticed dimly that the guard seemed to have vanished. "But I can't. If it was -"

"It wouldn't be your fault," Hermione said.

Now Draco did look at her, slowly, as if his gaze was being dragged in her direction. "Liar," he said.

Hermione could not hold his gaze. Her own flinched away. "I don't have my wand," she said, looking down at her hands. "I can't change her back without you. We could wait -"

There was a rustle. She heard Draco move away from the wall, and whisper something: there was a flash of light, and the girl on the floor began to change. Hermione held her breath as the long red hair faded and withdrew into the scalp, the pale freckle-dotted skin darkened, and the clothes tightened as the body inside them swelled. Within a few moments a tall girl with a mop of short dark hair lay on the floor, her hazel eyes wide and unseeing.

Relief washed over her, and then a feeling of guilt. Whoever this girl was, she had been murdered. She reached out, and lightly touched the girl's dead hand, which lay half-open on the rug - "Oh, God," Hermione said. "Tom. It was Tom."

"How do you know?" Draco asked.

She sat back. "The charm you gave Ginny," she said. "That half a heart, cracked down the middle -"

"Yes? What about it?"

"This is the other half of it," she said, and held out what had been in the girl's fist. The edges of the glass heart were dark, as if it had been scorched in a fire. "He left it. So we'd know it was him."

Draco just stared for a moment. Then he held out his hand, and let her put the glass charm in it. He was still pale, and there was a dark, considering look behind his eyes now; Hermione was not sure she liked it any better than the brittle look he had worn earlier.

"I don't understand," Hermione said. "Is he trying to send us some kind of message? Why kill her? Just because he hates Ginny?"

"Because he loves her," Draco said.

Hermione blinked at him. "What?"

"He loves her," Draco said dully. "I expect because Finnegan did. He loves her, and he hates that he loves her. Love isn't an emotion that would be any use to him. He can't use it; it won't make him stronger or smarter or more powerful. It would just make him weak. If he could cut it out of himself, like a cancer, he would -" He broke off, and Hermione thought fleetingly of his bloody hand; he might have thought of it himself, because he closed his gloved fist around what he was holding. "But he can't - and he doesn't know why he can't. He's angry and that makes him want to hurt her, break her in pieces. You only hate people like this when you loved them once."

Hermione stared at him. "You sound as if you're sorry for him," she said.

"I'm sorry," Draco said. "But not for him."

Before she could respond, the door burst open again, and Thorvald the security troll was suddenly there, Mr. Blackthorpe behind him, and several other men in dark cloaks. They swarmed into the room like bees and Hermione stood up and backed away from the body on the floor as they crowded around it, silent and grim-faced. Mr. Blackthorpe looked up first, his yellow cat's eyes narrowed to slits. He was staring straight at Draco and the expression on his face was as sour as curdled milk.

Hermione glanced quickly at Draco. For a moment she saw him as he actually was: exhausted and ill and too young to be doing what he was doing, nerves worn thin from multiple shocks. Then, like a cloak, he seemed to draw his arrogance, his Malfoy-ness, around himself. He stood up straighter, squared his shoulders, raised his chin at a disdainful angle, and when he spoke, his voice was strong and carrying.

"Next time," he said, "perhaps you'll believe me when I tell you that there is a problem with your security."

"Oh, Tristan," she whispered, tightly clasped to his broad, rigidly muscled chest. "I always knew you would come for me. Even during the darkest of

my hours, deep in the dungeons of Castle Plumeria, I never despaired. Even when Sven held me down and ravished me...and ravished me...again...and again....and again...."

"Yes, well," said Tristan. "I think it would be best if we never spoke of that again, don't you?" He gazed at her, his eyes the color of impassioned hyacinths. "Oh, my minx...at last you are with me...and happiness is mine!"

"Oh, Tristan!"

"Oh, Rhiannon!"

"Oh, for God's sake," interrupted Gareth. "Isn't this bloody book over yet?"

"One more page," said Ben, giving him a superior look. "Fine. I'll read it to myself."

If there was one thing you could certainly say about Ben, Ginny thought, it was that he knew his own mind. He raised the book to cover his face and continued reading, looking very incongruous sprawled amongst Ginny's teddy bears and heart-shaped pillows. Gareth, who was sitting on the floor by the foot of the bed, slumped back against the wall and commended twiddling his fingers in a bored, desultory fashion. The runic band around his wrist gleamed when he moved his arm.

Ginny got up off the desk and went over to sit down next to him. He looked at her, faintly surprised, but shifted aside to give her space to sit down. "Gareth," Ginny whispered, pitching her voice very low, "your bracelet - it really won't come off before you die? There's no way to break that charm?"

He shook his head. "Not that I know of. Why, is it not that way for Harry?"

She shook her head. "No, he can take it off."

"Hmm." Gareth looked thoughtful. "Well, that could be because it was made with some of the same blood that -"

"I can't believe it just ended there!" Ben interrupted, throwing the book into the air. "I mean, she doesn't even realize that Tristan isn't actually

Tristan, but is in reality Tristan's evil twin brother Sebastian, and Tristan himself has been taken prisoner by the evil Duke Scorpio -"

"That's why it has a sequel, Ben," Ginny pointed out. "Although, admittedly, you'll have to wait a thousand years for it to come out."

Gareth jumped up from the floor. "Meanwhile, we've been here for four hours, and I'm hungry again. Benjamin, can we head home?"

Ben got off the bed and put his arms around Gareth and hugged him hard. "If you want to go, we can go."

Gareth just turned his face into Ben's shoulder, and smiled. They stood like that for a moment, and then they drew apart.

Ginny looked up at them from the floor, and tugged thoughtfully on a braid. "You probably had better go," she said. "I wouldn't put it past my mother to come back and break the door down if she sees my light's still on. But thank you - for coming, and for the flower, and everything."

Gareth said something noncommittal, nodded at her, and, freeing himself from Ben's embrace, went to the window. He smiled at Ben. "I'll see you down in the garden," he said, and clambered back over the sill, dropping into the darkness outside.

Ginny looked up at Ben. "Can't you just leave from here?"

"Our swords are downstairs. It's rude to bring edged weapons into someone else's house. Didn't you know that?"

Ginny shook her head. "Must have slipped Mum's mind when she was teaching me manners."

He reached out and touched her hair, and said something in the same language he had spoken to Gareth in earlier, that was soft and sweet-sounding and that she did not understand. Then he dropped his hand. "You will see me again," he said, "but if I do not see you, then take care for yourself, and be well."



"I will," she said, and watched him walk away, and he was almost gone when she spoke again. "Ben!" she called, and he turned at the window and looked at her. In the shadows, with the light behind him, she could see only the set of his shoulders and the outline of his black hair, and it was as if she looked at a vision of what Harry would be in ten years. If he lived ten more years.

"Yes?" he said.

"Why didn't you want Gareth to see my Founders book?" she asked. "You looked so angry. Is there something in it?"

Ben sighed. "Of course there's something in it," he said. "History."

"You mean if you knew what was going to happen to you it might create a time paradox...?"

"Oh, sod time paradoxes," Ben said sharply. "I don't want to know when he dies, all right? I don't want to know when I die either, but Gareth - he's never careful -" Ben paused. "I know if it was you," he said, "you'd want to know. It seems like you can't bear not having the truth..."

"I've been lied to so much, you see," Ginny said, but it didn't seem like he was listening. Perhaps he already knew, or understood.

"And truth is a beautiful thing," he said. "In principle. But it's also an unyielding thing. And the truth between two people always cuts two ways. Maybe I'd find out that we'll live and grow old together and maybe that would make me happy. Or maybe I'll spend the rest of my life waiting for him to die because I'll know what day it'll be. You can have too much truth, Ginny."

She nodded. The feeling of sadness had come back, worse than ever. "I know you're right," she said. "And I'm glad I'll see you again."

He smiled. "I might not be too happy to see you at first," he said. "Don't take it personally," and with that he was gone, flipping himself over the windowsill and vanishing into the night as if he had never been there at all.

Mr. Blackthorpe and the security trolls couldn't bundle Draco and Hermione out of the room with the dead girl in it fast enough. "To my office," the incubus manager snapped, glaring at them both as if the dead girl was their fault. "Now."

Draco considered briefly insisting that they be allowed to stay in the room, but he could tell from Blackthorpe's manner that he had reached the end of his patience. Any more requests, Draco was fairly sure, and his father would be called in. As a matter of fact, his father would probably be called in anyway. It looked like the time to use Hermione's Portkey might well be at hand - a very unwelcome thought, since they had not yet found Harry.

Hermione's hand on his arm startled him out of his reverie. He glanced down at her. She was pale, unhappy-looking, but composed. He slowed his walk slightly, so that they dropped behind the rest of the group. Blackthorpe, in whispered and slightly hysterical-looking conference with the hulking security trolls, didn't notice. "Hermione, are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she whispered back. "But I'm worried about you. You're two hours past the time you should have taken the antidote again. We have to get back."

"I feel fine," he said. His heart had quickened inside his chest. If the antidote was really wearing off, he could try - it might not work, but at least he could try -

She dropped her hand from his arm. "I could Portkey us -"

"No," Draco said. He moved away from her a little bit, not much, but he caught her hurt look. He dismissed it and willed his mind blank. It was hard, concentrating like this and also managing not to walk into a wall, but years of fencing practice had given him a better than decent ability to concentrate under adverse circumstances. Trailing one hand along the wall for guidance, he thought as hard as he could of *nothing*: in his mind, he was suddenly wandering in shadows, turning to seek out the barest sliver of light. A whispering din surrounded him, like the dry muttering of the ghosts in the Gray Places. He listened hard -

A sharp pain, in his hand. He'd cut his finger. It hurt. "Ouch. Stupid bloody padlock. Twisted the blade. Have to use another - Sirius would laugh if he -"

"Draco!" Hermione's voice sharp in his ear, snapping him back to the present. "Are you all right?"

He turned on her, furious. "I said I was fine!"

She bit her lip. "You don't look fine."

He glanced ahead. Blackthorpe was still enmeshed in conference with his guards. They seemed absorbed. Draco turned on Hermione, "I'm going," he said. "Stall them as long as you can in his office. Tell them - tell them I ran off to check out a suspicious noise. Tell them whatever you want."

Hermione's hand shot out to grab his sleeve, her voice a startled whisper. "But I'm not supposed to speak -"

But he was gone, spinning on his heel and running back down the corridor. He raced around the nearest turn and slowed his pace: his chest hurt, just a little bit. If he had the antidote -

But the antidote blocked his ability to find Harry. Who was nearby, Draco could *feel* it. He leaned heavily on a chair propped against the wall (black laquer and walnut wood, with carved inlays - probably Louis XV and doubtless expensive) and tried to blank his mind again. It was easier this time. He remembered, eight months ago in Malfoy Manor, thinking that the connection between himself and Harry was like a thin cold unspooling between them as they walked away from each other. And it was still there: faint and barely tangible, as if he followed a cord made of nothing more substantial than dust motes.

There was a staircase around the next corner; Draco took the steps two at a time, ignoring the tightening pain in his chest. He jumped the bottom step, hit the stripped-wood floor with a clatter of boots, and was running down the hallway. There were several doors, unmarked, but it didn't matter: he knew which one he needed. He could feel Harry nearby now, as if they stood in the same room. Nerves and shortness of breath made his fingers shake as he tried the door: it was locked, of course.

Draco stood back and put his hand against the door. He took a deep breath. He knew perfectly well that he wasn't supposed to do this. He was not meant to be using magic. Not for something like this - not for anything. He knew that, but it didn't matter. He could *feel* how close he was, and at the same time he could feel the pressurizing rise, the power uncoiling inside him that *wanted* to be used. Harry always envisioned it as a beast on a chain, barely controlled. Draco had never questioned his own control. He didn't question it now. He merely opened his hand against the surface of the door, and *pushed*.

The spell seemed to tear out of him as if the bones of his arm were tearing through the skin. He felt the blaze of it down through his veins and into his hand, taking him by surprise with its force. To Draco's great astonishment, the door gave a great jerk under his hand, and ripped itself off its hinges with a grinding noise. It toppled forward and Draco, taken completely off guard, tumbled after it. He staggered forward, tripped, and sprawled on the floor at Harry's feet.

The wizard had planned to kill his succubus wife immediately, as it were, but when he learned that she was pregnant, his plans took a different turn. It was not that he had a sentimental attachment to the idea of a daughter. It was that she was something of his, his blood and his breeding. Surely, then, her fate should rest in his hands.

He had a cage built inside the largest of his halls, and all its bars were made of solid gold. The succubus he had cast inside it, heavily bound in chains of gold. And there she withered and there she died, poisoned by the metal all around her, but even as she died the baby inside her body waxed and grew healthy. At last the child was delivered and once it was cut from her body, the succubus crumbled away to dust, which the wizard scattered on the wind.

He went then to look upon his daughter.

She was a baby not quite like other human babies. She had been born with a mane of long dark curling hair, and her eyes, heavily lashed with black fringe, were as gray as windowpane glass. She had long nails the color of blood and skin like white snow. The wizard took her and set her

down in a patch of sunlight, and she began to weep there, and to wriggle in pain, but she did not die.

"You are mine," said the wizard. "And yet you are also not mine, for the ichor of demons runs in your veins alongside my own blood. There is always the chance that you will revert to the maternal strain. Precautions must therefore be taken before you can begin to be useful to me."

His daughter looked at him with wide uncomprehending eyes. Eyes that were his own eyes, set in the face of what he hated. And perhaps his voice was not steady as he called for his servants, and perhaps his hand was not steady as he held his wand, but it made no difference to the effectiveness of his spells. He had had nine months to work on them and they were perfect.

He cast first a spell that would bind the child, utterly, to that side of her inheritance which was human in nature, and which was more specifically Malfoy. For as long as she lived she would be unable to lift a hand to harm anyone of Malfoy blood. Her obedience also he bound. She would be obedient to the head of the Malfoy family, bound to his bidding, whatever he might ask. His lightest request would be her law. She would come and go at his pleasure. And when he died, she would pass, like an inherited trinket, to the next in the family line.

You look curious. You want to know, I imagine, what would happen if there were only daughters. But there are never daughters. Draco never told you? Malfoys only have male children. It is a peculiarity of the line. But I digress.

All these spells and bindings the wizard laid upon the child. At the end, he bound her with sympathetic magic. Should she harm the Malfoy she served, should her disobedience or failure cause him pain, she would feel that same pain herself. And the farther she was, physically, from the one she served, the weaker her powers would be. Eventually she would feel it as a physical debilitation. She could not stay away long.

When he was done, he lifted the child up in his arms and kissed her once, on the forehead, and then he set her down inside the golden cage which had killed her mother, and he walked away. He did not speak to his daughter again for ten years.

And now you look sad. Have I made you sad? It is a sad story, I suppose, although it is my story, so I rarely think of it that way. And all love stories are sad, especially for you mortals. You have such short lives.

What's that? Well, of course it was a love story. Isn't a love story, after all, just a story about love? Must the story end happily for the love to have been real? There are many kinds of love, after all. Love that cannot harm and love that never abandons and love that cannot imagine betrayal. And then there is love that corrupts, and love that destroys, and love that works in the blood like poison. And they are not so far apart as you might think.

Harry gave a little gasp of astonishment, but other than that, remained perfectly still. He did not move away as Draco scrambled to his feet. He stood where he was and stared at Draco, and Draco, feeling stupid with relief and shock and exhaustion, stared right back. He hadn't seen Harry in so long - or at least it felt as if years had passed, although he knew perfectly well that it had been a matter of days - that all the words he had wanted to say turned to dust in his mouth.

He looked around instead. They were in a small room paneled in plain wood. There were no furnishings (unless one was to count the destroyed door lying in the middle of the floor, which Draco didn't.) Harry was standing by a small table on which sat a what looked like a bronze paperweight. A gold chain lay coiled around the base of the table. He held an open padlock in one hand.

Draco coughed. Harry was still staring at him. For some reason, Draco could taste blood in his mouth. Maybe he had bitten his lip. "Harry," he said, finally. The name sounded odd. "Are you all right?"

Harry said nothing. Draco became aware of the way that Harry looked. He looked ragged. He was wearing a torn and filthy shirt and there were tears in the knees of his jeans. His shoes were caked with mud. His black hair straggled over his face in damp and tangled strands, and he was flushed, the hectic color high in his cheeks. He wasn't wearing his glasses. One of his hands was bleeding, although not badly.

"Harry?" Draco said, and got to his feet.

Harry seemed to come alive. With a jerk, he stumbled back, putting himself between Draco and the table behind him. "Don't," he said vehemently. "Don't come any closer."

"It's me," Draco said. "It really is me -"

"I know it's you!" Harry half-shouted, startling them both. "I can't believe I ever-" He broke off and shook his head. He looked sick to his stomach. "I know it's you, Malfoy," he said, more quietly. "How do you know it's me?"

"Oh, for God's sake, Potter," said Draco. "Could we possibly have this idiotic conversation later? Like, once we're out of this pit? And what the hell are you protecting there? A paperweight? You're acting like it's the last Portkey out of Azkaban."

"It is," Harry said, "a Portkey."

"Oh," Draco said. He swallowed. "Well, where does it go to?"

"I've no idea," Harry said flatly. "Away from here."

"You don't need to use it," Draco said, very quickly. "I can get you out - Hermione's got a Portkey, she can get us all out -"

Harry looked shocked. "She's here, too? You brought her here?"

"We had to come," Draco said. "We had to see if we could find you -"

"You can always find me," Harry said, a sort of factual desperation in his voice. "I don't know why I bother running away. You keep finding me and finding me. Everywhere I go, every corner I turn, in crowds, on trains, in bloody bookshops, I keep seeing you. And when I don't see you, I hear you in my head." He shivered, and Draco saw how weary and exhausted he looked. "If I asked you to stop looking for me, would you?"

"If it was me that went missing," Draco said, "would you stop looking for me?"

"Yes," Harry said.

Draco stared at him. It had been one thing reading the letter, disconnected as it was from the actual Harry. It was another thing to have

Harry standing right in front of him, completely familiar from his tangled hair to his scarred hand to the faint twist at the corner of his mouth that meant he was saying something he didn't like having to say - to have Harry right in front of him, and to have him confirming that everything Draco had hoped was a mistake was not actually a mistake. "*What?*"

"If you asked me to, I would," Harry said. There was a faint sulky tone in his voice. "If it was important -"

"*Liar,*" Draco said, with all the venom at his disposal.

"I left," Harry said. "I left, and it practically killed me to leave, you know that? I look back and I can't believe that I did it. And now that you've found me, what? We get to say a friendly hello and then I leave and it kills me all over again? If you cared about me at all -"

"If I what?" Draco exploded. "You fucking hypocrite, Potter, it's amazing you don't choke to death on that bloody double standard of yours. And all this time I thought you were so honest -"

"I tried to be honest," Harry said. His voice sounded worn away at the edges, like one of his eternally frayed shirts. "I wrote you a letter. Did you...not read it?"

"I read it," Draco said, and into those three words he poured every ounce of bitterness and misery and rage in his heart.

It was enough to make Harry flinch. "I meant every word," he said quietly.

"I don't doubt that you did," Draco said disgustedly. "As if that's something to be proud of, Potter." He felt his hands curl into fists at his side. It wasn't that he wanted to hit Harry. He didn't want to hit him. It was just something to do with his hands. "And the amazing thing about you," Draco added, "is that you probably thought you were being helpful."

He expected Harry to look angry or defensive. Instead, Harry merely looked stricken. "I'm sorry," he said. "I wanted you to know."

"Well, now I know," Draco said. "And it doesn't change anything."

Harry continued to look stricken. "You didn't understand?" he said. "You really didn't understand why I had to go?"

"I understood why you had to go," Draco said. "I didn't understand why I couldn't come with you. You promised me you would wait for me and I believed you. I guess I thought you wouldn't lie to me. I trusted you. I never trusted anyone else in my life. But I trusted you."

Harry's mouth opened in almost comical surprise. And Draco felt the same astonishment. He couldn't believe he had just said what he had said. He was so used to evasion, misdirection, showing what he felt without saying it, expecting others to read his motives from his actions, that having so blatantly just stated exactly what he was thinking felt as if he had exposed a part of himself, cut his wrists open and bled on the floor at Harry's feet. He wondered what the hell had possessed him to say it.

Harry pushed a damp lock of hair out of his eyes. He was shivering. His thin shoulders shook as he took a deep breath. "If you read my letter," he said, his voice set and firm, "and you still don't understand, Malfoy, then it's probably because you don't want to understand. I told you the truth. I'm sorry if you didn't like it, or you don't believe me, or I annoyed you or disappointed you somehow. But I can't change who I am or what I want, or what I have to do."

"What you have to do? When have I ever -" Draco cut himself off, biting his own lip to shut himself up. When have I ever wanted you to be anything other than what you are? When did I ever think what you were wasn't good enough? I hated you for being what you are, and then I didn't hate you any more, and when have I ever asked you for anything? When have I even asked you for any of your secrets, for your pity or your compassion or even your friendship - I only asked you for that once, and you said no. I know better than to ask you for anything, Potter. Anything except to let me come with you and that was only because I had no choice but to ask.

But of course Draco said none of those things, nor did he think them aloud. Pride washed through him like an icy wave, freezing his spine into straightness, leveling his shoulders, forcing his chin up. "You're correct," he said. "There is no need for you to apologize. It was my mistake."

Harry's shoulders slumped. "So now it's all a mistake of yours? Look, Malfoy -"

"It doesn't matter." Draco cut him off. "It doesn't matter what I think."

"It does matter. Look, I'm sorry -"

"I told you not to apologize," Draco said, as viciously as he could.

Harry bit his lip. I hate it when you sound like that. If I could just make you understand -

GET OUT OF MY HEAD, POTTER!

The force of Draco's shout took them both by surprise. Draco felt the echo of it inside his head like the recoil of a rifle shot, slamming against the inside of his skull. He winced and put a hand to his head, but it was nothing compared to the effect on Harry, who reeled as if Draco had shoved him. He staggered back- Draco reached out to catch him but Harry twisted away, falling backward against the table - the table went over with a crash of splintering wood - and Draco's reaching hand closed on empty air.

Harry had vanished. And the Portkey had vanished with him.

The padlock, having fallen out of Harry's grasp, thumped to the floor where he had been standing a moment before. It was several minutes before Draco could bring himself to bend down and pick it up.

Hermione scrunched herself deep into the leather chair inside Mr Blackthorpe's elegant wood-paneled office, where he, along with six or seven dark-clad and official looking wizards, were embroiled in a panicked conference. She was terrified that at any moment Lucius Malfoy would join them, and the entire gig would be up. Where the hell *was* Draco? How could he just leave her here like this? Fortunately they hadn't asked her for an explanation, given that they didn't think she spoke any English, but she didn't like the way they were looking at her, not at all -

The crash of the door slamming open took them all by surprise. Blackthorpe jumped; Hermione twisted around in her seat as a glowering tower of icy rage stalked into the room. It took her a moment to recognize that it was Draco.

She had never seen him angry like this. He was absolutely livid, clutching what looked like a metal padlock in one hand. With his other hand, he gestured imperiously for silence. Which he got, as everyone in the room stared at him. He looked so angry that Hermione was astonished that sparks were not actually flying off him, setting fire to the furniture.

"This," he ground out, between his teeth, the effort of keeping himself from yelling obviously a strenuous one, "this padlock secured a Portkey. Am I correct?"

Mr Blackthorpe looked astonished. "Did you pry it off the chain? Whatever for, if I may ask?"

"I did not pry it off the chain," Draco snarled. "It was used by someone else, to escape this place."

Mr. Blackthorpe looked as if he might faint. "The murderer?"

For a moment, the look of rage in Draco's eyes faded. "Yes," he said, after a brief hesitation that was enough to tell Hermione that the person who had used this Portkey to escape was Harry. "I need to follow him, immediately. Get me another Portkey."

There was a short silence. Mr Blackthorpe cleared his throat. "There is no other Portkey," he said.

"Excuse me, what?" Tense with disbelief, Draco stared at him. "What did you say?"

"There is only the one Portkey. It was never considered wise to have more than the one - and it was sealed to the chain with Level Five binding charms -"

"Which proved so effective." Draco's voice dripped acid. "Where did this Portkey go?"

"To the Central London Floo Hub." Blackthorpe cleared his throat again. "Over three hundred fireplaces there, serving the whole Floo Network - he's probably long gone already. Mister Malfoy, if I might say - I'm sure your father wouldn't want you chasing after dangerous miscreants as it is. The murderer has killed once already -"

"I don't care about my father!" Draco shouted. Hermione, properly alarmed now, began rising from her seat. Draco would never normally talk about his father this way in public. And he was beginning to frighten her. Iron control was so much a part of his affect, so much a part of everything he was, that to see cracks in it was like doubting the security of Hogwarts. Or so she would have thought. "I want another Portkey! You must have an emergency backup Portkey - you must be hiding it around here somewhere -"

"I assure you, Mister Malfoy," Blackthorpe said, "that I am not."

Hermione believed him. No one would lie to Draco in the state he was in. Draco, however, seemed unconvinced. He threw the padlock, hard, against the far wall. It fell to the sideboard, knocking over a decanter with the satisfying sound of smashed glass.

"I want another Portkey," he snarled. "Or some Floo Powder. I want out of here, you understand me? I want to get to the Central Floo Hub and I want to get there now. The only question is whether I'm going to have to crawl there over a land bridge built out of your dead and eviscerated bodies." He threw a sharp glance sideways at Hermione, as if remembering for the first time that she was there. Color was beginning to come back into his livid face - too much color. He was flushed as if with a fever, his eyes wildly bright. "Get behind me, Hermione," he said.

Mr Blackthorpe made a sound of protest. "I thought you said her name was -"

"Shut up!" Draco yelled. "I asked you, *are you going to help me or not?*"

Mr Blackthorpe spread his hands wide in a gesture of helplessness. "Mister Malfoy," he said. "There is nothing I can do for you in this case. Nothing at all."

Draco's only response to that was to grin, suddenly and terrifyingly. Hermione knew that grin. She had only just time to scramble behind him when the mahogany desk and everything on it exploded in a shower of splinters and glass.

Harry hit the ground hard, as if he'd been dropped from a great height. He rolled, gasping, and sprawled flat on his back for a moment, dazed. Then he scrambled to his knees and cast about him, half-hoping -

But the room he had been in, with its smashed door and flat-paneled walls and Draco, too, that room was gone. He was kneeling on a damp and cold stone floor, inside what looked like a small entryway. Empty black archways led off in several directions. There was very little light. Harry could hear voices in the distance. The room smelled of chimney smoke.

He knelt where he was for a moment, his heart pounding. He opened his hand abruptly and the Portkey rolled out of it. It hit the stone floor with a dull clink. It's not fair, Harry thought bitterly, It's not fair.

He got to his feet. A wave of dizziness flooded over him and he put out his hand to brace himself against the wall. He could still see Draco in his head, white-faced, looking sick with horror and loathing. Without thinking about it, Harry suddenly hauled off and kicked the dropped Portkey viciously hard. It flew across the room and hit the far wall with a metallic clink. This relieved Harry's feelings only marginally.

He bit down on his lip. Don't think about it. Don't torture yourself over what you can't alter. It's done.

Someone jostled his shoulder then and a voice swore at him in a language he couldn't quite comprehend. Harry pressed himself back against the wall as a group of men poured through the room, laughing and talking to each other. They were dressed in identical dark robes, each robe striped around the cuffs with red and orange. Something like a memory tugged at the back of Harry's mind, but he was too ill now with fever and misery to concentrate. It was all he could do to slip in at the back of the line of strangers and follow them through the archway.

He trailed after them down a short corridor which emptied out into a truly enormous room which was packed with wizards. The group Harry had come in with scattered around him as he stood and stared.

He seemed to be at the bottom of what looked like an enormous chimney, going up and up and up until the roof vanished into the distance above him. The air was thick and hazy with smoke and smelled of ash and cinders and damp, cold brick. All along the walls above him were dark holes - fireplaces, Harry realized. Walkways bracketed the fireplaces. Harry could see people walking along them, ducking into the fireplaces, and vanishing in bursts of green and orange light.

I'm in a Floo Hub, he realized, with a sense of mixed wonder. He had heard of Floo Hubs, although he'd never been in one before. Hundreds of fireplaces, each connected to the Floo networks of different countries. You could get almost anywhere in the world from a Floo Hub. If escape was what he wanted, he could not have come to a better place. And yet...

He glanced around. Most of the wizards here on the ground floor seemed to be clustered around a desk at the far side of the room. Harry was fairly sure that this was where you purchased your Floo Powder and passes. His sense of misgiving returned. As far as he knew, you had to present your wizarding certificates in order to be allowed to Floo out of the country. Somewhere in his bag was his school certificate, but he hardly wanted to present that. As soon as they saw his name, they'd be all over him.

Harry sighed. His back and neck were aching, his bones hurt from exhaustion and illness, and it was nearly impossible to get his thoughts under control. He wondered dully how much Hermione hated him now. He was glad she hadn't been with Draco. He couldn't have stood it if they'd both looked at him like that. It was bad enough that Draco was furious with him. Although certainly he'd forgive him, eventually, wouldn't he? He'd have to. Harry could reason with him, tell him, explain. Sit him down and *think* at him until he had to admit that Harry wasn't lying. An ill-advised confidence surged over Harry suddenly. Of *course* Draco would relent, because he had to. He couldn't just give up on their friendship, he couldn't walk away from it; what bound them together was much more than both of them. Nor could Harry imagine living the rest of his life without Draco in it. Therefore Draco would have to forgive him.

This seemed to Harry, in his fevered state, to be the most sensible logic he had ever encountered. He smiled, and began to reach into his pocket for his book bag. He had just raised his hand when the world suddenly and terrifyingly seemed to burst apart around him.

He staggered and fell as a wave of blackness rolled up and over him, knocking him to the ground. He heard screaming in his ears and felt shards of glass tearing his skin. He screamed, having no idea who or what he was shouting for. He could not hear his own voice over the howling wind in his head. He seemed to be in two places at once: he could see wavering light in front of him, blood and fire, splintering walls. At the same time he felt the cold stone floor under him as his body twisted and thrashed in agony.

Through the fog of pain and the wailing screams that surrounded him, hands reached to touch him. There were voices all around him, chattering in another language. Harry wondered briefly if he was dying. Then he didn't care. Arms went around him and lifted him up. A familiar voice said his name in his ear but he fainted before he could reply.

Faint light moved in a reddish glow and behind that glow were shadows. Draco came up out of the darkness slowly, as if he were crawling his way up through mud or layers of water. When he opened his eyes, he did not immediately know where he was.

Slowly the blurred shapes that he was seeing resolved themselves and he recognized his surroundings. He was lying flat on his back on the bare marble floor of the hotel room in Diagon Alley, and his head was pounding as if a mountain troll had set up residence in his cortex.

Draco sat up slowly, convinced that if he moved quickly his head would come off completely. Pain laced his vision with a black mesh and he had to blink several times before he could focus. When he did focus, the first thing he saw was Hermione. She was sitting on the floor a little distance away from him, wearing white pajamas, her back against the couch. She was staring at him. In her pale face her dark eyes looked enormous, like wells of black ink.

"Hey," he said.

It was all he could think of.

Her hands, clasped in her lap, tightened themselves hard around the small silver flask she had been holding. Draco recognized it as the antidote flask she had been carrying around with her since they'd left school. It was chased silver, with a dark blue stone top. In the dim light it had a strange, bluish sheen that was somehow familiar. "You look awful," she said.

"I feel awful." Sitting up was proving to be too difficult. Draco lay back on his propped arms and concentrated on breathing through the pain in his head. He glanced down at himself - he was shoeless, wearing only his shirt and trousers. His shirt was splotted all over with silver stains and his gloves were gone, his hands bare. "Er...what happened exactly?"

She blinked at him. Her expression didn't change. "You don't remember?"

He shook his head, and winced as another bolt of pain shot through his temples. "I went looking for another Portkey..."

"So," she said, her voice very measured. "You don't remember tearing apart Blackthorpe's office? You started off by blowing his desk into toothpicks, and moved on to smashing every single one of the windows. I'm surprised you didn't kill everyone with the flying glass shards. Then of course all the floorboards wrenched themselves up and burst into flames."

"I put the flames out," said Draco, to whom recollection was returning in rather lurid fragments.

"With a rain of blood," said Hermione frigidly. "Then all those snakes burst out of the wall. Although they didn't get the attention they deserved, I fear, since everyone was kind of distracted by the wailing chorus of the damned and the giant rats that ate each other."

"I was proudest of the flock of invisible ducks, myself," Draco said.

Hermione did not laugh. She did not seem remotely amused. "I suppose you think you really showed them," she said. "Especially the part where you keeled over in a dead faint and I had to use the hotel Portkey to get us back here. Thank God I had it, or we'd both be dead."

Draco was interested. "Did I really keel over in a dead faint?"

"Yes," Hermione said flatly. "That's why you're on the floor. I couldn't lift you. I didn't want to use a spell. I think you've had enough magic tonight. Harry always did say that if you ever let your Magid powers get out of hand it would blow the roof off Hogwarts. I guess he was right."

Her flat tone of voice was beginning to alarm him. "How long have I been out? You changed into pajamas..."

"I had to," she said expressionlessly. "You coughed up blood all over my clothes."

"Oh." This, Draco felt, ought to be worrying information. He didn't feel upset, though. Just very tired. "I'm sure the hotel has house-elf laundry services. I'll pay for it -"

Thwack! Draco barely flinched away in time as the flask Hermione had been holding sailed by his ear. It smacked soundly into the tiled floor and rolled away. He blinked at her.

"How dare you," she hissed. "How dare you sit there and act as if this is all about *laundry?*"

"I didn't say it was about laundry -" Draco began in what he thought was a reasonable tone, but barely had he gotten the words out of his mouth when Hermione seized a crystal candlestick off the coffee table and slung it at his head. He ducked, again, and it shattered against the floor.

"Hey!" Draco protested. "You could have hit me!"

"Good!" Hermione shrieked. She was on her knees now, cheeks scarlet with rage and suddenly, with an almost painful clarity, Draco remembered the skinny, wild-haired girl who had slapped him full across the face when he was thirteen years old. It had been the first really stunning thing that had ever happened to him. "I wish I had hit you! Do you even have any idea what you did, you stupid, stupid bastard? You're not supposed to use your magic! I told you that! Snape told you that! Don't you listen to anyone? Did you think he was telling you that because he was trying to be *funny*? You're not supposed to use your magic because you're *dying*, and it takes every bit of your own strength and every bit of

the strength in that antidote just to keep you alive! And then you go and have a stupid temper tantrum like this one, and I can't even imagine what it's cost you - a week off your life? Two weeks? And for what? For nothing. It's not like you got what you wanted. They couldn't have helped you if you'd burned the whole place down."

"I was angry," Draco said. "I'm tired of living every second like I'm under a death sentence -"

"You are under a death sentence," Hermione said savagely. Casting about for something else to throw, she seized a heavy ceramic mug and hurled it at the far wall. It hit with a crash. Draco winced, but Hermione seemed to feel better. "You're not tired of living like you're under a death sentence, you're just bloody tired of living. I have to *make* you take your antidote. You go walking into a place like that brothel without even bringing a Portkey to get you back out. And then that little display of suicidal temper. If it wasn't for me you'd be dead three times over today and you act like you don't even care. You don't care about anything now, and it isn't fair. He left me too, you know."

She broke off, but Draco remained silent. He lay where he was and looked at her, as the angry color slowly faded out of her face. She bit her lip.

"Say something," she whispered.

"Every time I say anything, you throw something at me," Draco pointed out.

"I won't this time. Just say something."

Draco sighed. He felt very tired. "This isn't about Harry," he said. "But if you want to make it about Harry, then fine. He left you, too. But he didn't write you a letter and tell you how worthless you were and how it made him sick to look at you, did he?"

"He didn't say that to you, either," Hermione said.

"Not literally, perhaps, but that was the general gist. Harry's too kind a soul to say anything like that outright. Apparently he couldn't stand living in my head anymore because it's such a revolting place. I can't blame him. I don't like it there myself."

"What Harry thinks hasn't got anything to do with it," Hermione said. "I love Harry. But he's not infallible. And you shouldn't be living and dying by his opinion. I don't know why he wrote what he did. I have to believe he had a good reason. I also have to believe it doesn't matter. Because, in the end, he did leave, and we have to live with it. Only I'm terrified that you - you don't want to."

"It's not your job, Hermione," Draco said, "to keep me alive, you know. I wouldn't blame you if you gave up on me. Nobody would."

She shivered. He was aware suddenly of how small she was. At the best of times Hermione could only be generously thought of as slender - really, she was skinny, and more so now, as they had all lost weight in the past weeks. "You think I want to be responsible for you?" she whispered. "I'm so sick of being responsible. Of taking care of everyone. Only no one else will do it, will they? And first Ron left, and I lost him, and I thought, okay, I can get by still, I'll figure out a way to live without him until we get him back. And then Ginny, and I told myself I could get by without her, too. And then Harry left, and I told myself that if I just focused on going after him and getting him back I could survive even that. But if anything happens to you - if you leave me - then I have nothing, I have no one, and I can't do this alone, I was never meant to be alone, I was only ever any good when I was with Ron and Harry -" She broke off on a ragged breath, and put her face into her hands. "I shouldn't tell you these things. It can't help."

Slowly, Draco levered himself up into a sitting position. His chest felt strangely tense, as if he couldn't quite breathe properly. He held out his arm, and Hermione looked at him wonderingly for a moment and then crawled across the floor to him and half-leaned, half-fell against his chest, hiding her face.

He closed his arm around her. The fact that he had withstood the impact of her embrace without keeling over backward seemed to him fairly impressive, given his current physical state. They were in a very awkward position now: Hermione, shy of sitting in his lap apparently had thrown her legs over his, and her knee bumped against his ribcage. "You're kicking me," he said.

She looked up. Her face was wet and there was a damp spot on the front of his shirt. She smiled. She was like Harry, he thought, in that she seemed

to have a light behind her eyes that, when she smiled, broke across her face and lit it to a strange a sudden prettiness. "I didn't want to squash you," she said.

"You're not," he said.

She leaned her head against him again, and seemed to rest there for a moment, very still. Looking down, he could just see the nape of her neck, pale and vulnerable looking between the white collar of her pajamas and the strands of her dark hair. She was still shivering, but less violently now. For the first time in days he found himself feeling someone else's pain besides his own, and it was strange and startling and he tightened his grip on her. She smelled faintly of antidote: belladonna, bitter aloe, a scent like blood oranges. He said her name without being aware that he was saying it, and this time, when she looked up, her dark-lashed dark eyes wide and curious, this time he kissed her.

She did not seem startled to be kissed. Her arms came up around him, thrown awkwardly over his shoulders, her hands cold against the back of his neck, and she did not try to pull away. He held her tightly on his lap, hands on her waist, and leaned into her mouth, and he could feel the outline of the blue glass ring Harry had given her, hard as a splinter of bone, trapped between their bodies as they leaned together.

His strength gave way then and he fell backward, holding her. They thumped to the floor, a tangle of arms and legs. He heard her cry out in surprise but when he reached for her she quieted him with her fingers against his mouth. "Stop," she said. She looked determined, very serious. "Did I hurt you?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

She put her face down by his, and her clouded dark hair fell over them both. "I'm sorry," she whispered, her cheek brushing his, and he tasted the salt of her tears and thought, it was the closest he had come to crying in ten years. He seemed to be able to see them both, as well, from a distance, as if some part of him were hovering over the proceedings and observing in a disinterested manner. The blond boy sprawled on the floor, the dark-haired girl lying beside him, and if he also imagined a third shadow flung over and between them, it only made him more conscious that there was no one there to cast it.

"I'm sorry," she said again. She kissed his face where the scar was, just under his eye, and then drew his hand towards her, kissing his palm lightly, her mouth moving over the angry scars there to his wrist. He could feel the beat of his own heart, painfully, as if his heart had cracked in half, spilling blood like a river down through his veins to the point where her mouth met the pulse of his wrist. It was a feeling like falling. He reached over to her and pulled her down to fall with him.

It would have been a lie to say he had not imagined this before. He was too much of a Slytherin to strictly discipline his own imagination; surely he could not be blamed for acts he had never committed. Still, against the grain of his nature, eventually the idea of betraying Harry had been too painful to contemplate even in the abstract and even now he felt that pain like the afterimage of sun against closed eyelids. It blended with the pain of the cold tiles digging into his skin and his bones bruising on the hard floor and the pain in his cut hand, trapped between their bodies as they clung together. It was pain like a winter chill, sweet and piercing.

Her hands on him were restless and a little uneasy. Her fingertips glided over his face, she stroked his hair as if he needed or wanted reassurance; she made a whispering sound when he kissed her that was like the soft sound of snow falling in layers on the ground. He kissed her throat, then, and the lids of her closed eyes, and she shivered and moved so that he could kiss her mouth. The lazy, sensual falling sensation was leaving him, sinking away like spilling sand, and he felt the new urgency in her as she moved against him. She locked her arm around the back of his neck and he rolled towards her, hooking his leg around the back of her knee, pulling her against him, her breasts against his chest. And he knew that he should stop what they were doing, stop it right now, and wondered if it was his illness and exhaustion that had killed all his willpower or if he really was the awful person that Harry apparently had always thought he was, and if Harry hated him anyway there was no point in stopping, in fact there was hardly any point in not doing anything he wanted to do.

His hand, no longer trapped between them, still throbbed with a dull painful ache as he traced the line of her collarbone down to the top buttons of her pajamas and began to undo them one by one. He thought at first that it was the pain in his hand that was making the operation so difficult and it was only after a few seconds of fumbling that he realized that there was something caught in the buttons. He tugged at it,

impatiently, and it came away in his hand, startling him. He tried to close his hand around it, but it slid through his fingers and hit the tiles with the sound of splintering crystal and only then did he realize what it had been.

Hermione gave a little gasp and scrabbled for it with her hand. "My ring -" She twisted around to pick it up and held it up between them. It was not shattered, but a thin and branching crack had spread through it, almost splitting it in thirds. "It's all right," she said. "It's all right, I can *Reparo* it."

"Can you?" Draco said. His voice was affectless, and his face was calm, but she could see the pulse jumping in his throat. He propped himself on his elbows and looked down at her as she drew the chain through her hand and then closed her fingers around the ring itself. She felt suddenly aware of his weight pressing her down. For two boys so similarly built, Draco and Harry *felt* very different. Harry was wiry-thin, hollow-boned like a bird, all light touches and tangled hair and inexpert sincerity. Draco was more substantial, muscle curving over bones, stomach flat where Harry's was more concave, hair silky where Harry's was fine and rough and yet in other ways they were very much the same.

Draco reached down to touch her face.

Without thinking, she shied away. "Don't," she said.

He let his hand fall. "Don't what?"

She shivered. The ring was cold in the palm of her hand. "Don't touch me," she said. "Because if you do, then I will - and I can't. We can't."

He looked at her. Their faces were inches apart. She could see his eyes, her own reflection in them, the texture of the irises. This close up, they were more than just gray, she could see where they were threaded with blue and slate and hazel. "And why not?" he asked, his voice still very calm and cold.

"Because of Harry." She shivered again. "I don't want to hurt Harry."

"Oh," he said. He half-smiled and she thought how that pretty mouth was no longer pretty when it twisted like that, into a cruel amused line. "Well, I do. Isn't that what this was all about?"

She froze. "Get off me," she said.

He laughed. His breath stirred her hair. "Whatever you say," he replied in a mocking tone, and moved to get off her, slowly, very slowly, so that she could feel every inch of him as he slid down her body. He rolled casually off her and sprawled on the floor, legs apart, booted heels angled against the marble tiles.

"Is that why you kissed me?" she demanded, sitting up, scooting backwards away from him. "To hurt Harry?"

"No," he said.

She felt a wave of peculiar relief.

"It's why I didn't stop, though," he added, flicking an invisible something off his cuffs with a sharp nail.

The relief vanished, and bitterness took its place. "Well, *I* don't want to hurt Harry," she said, through her teeth. "If you do, that's your problem."

His eyes narrowed like a cat's. "So," he hissed, his voice all velvet, "if I didn't want to hurt him, then it would be acceptable? Mealy-mouthed self-serving protestations of good intentions excuse our behavior, somehow? Oh, I don't want to hurt Harry, so I'll announce that I don't want to hurt him before I go right ahead and rip his heart out, that'll make it okay. Or were you planning on fucking me but keeping it a secret? Because you couldn't, you know. He'd find out. And he wouldn't want you anymore, not after that."

She expelled her breath in a ragged little gasp. "That's not true -"

"It is true," he said. "He wouldn't want you. Not if it was me."

"You -"

Hermione bit off what she was going to say. He was looking at her, glaring really, all his old refined malice plain in the set of his shoulders and the tense line of his mouth. His eyes were the only expressive things in his face: like bright fissures in a blank wall. She saw the rage in them, the fury and the fierceness, and behind the fierceness a terrible emptiness that

seemed to spiral away to a place without any light. She had always wondered why she never envied this odd, bitter, intense boy who had so much of her Harry, and now she knew: no bond, however close and beautiful, was worth buying with this pain of loss, this terrifying severance. Not for her. Perhaps for Draco it was worth it. But she would never know, because she could never ask him.

"You don't need to be cruel to make your point," she said, which was not what she had been going to say. "However cruel you are to me, you're worse to yourself. And I hate watching it. So I'm going to sleep. Do what you want."

He looked startled. Hermione felt a vague disconnected pleasure at the fact that she had been able to startle him. She leaned forward and very carefully laid the blue glass ring down on the floor between them. She heard him inhale softly and sharply, but she didn't look at him. She got to her feet and turned around and walked into her bedroom and managed not to turn around and look back at him before she shut the doors.

"Are you quite certain it is not my son?" Lucius said to the nervous-looking little secretary standing in front of his office door. Lucius wondered briefly if the man had some goblin blood in him - he was extremely ill-favored, and there was a certain lumpish cast to his nose that Lucius did not like. He resolved to fire him as soon as possible, and also to fire the assistant to who had hired him. "It is not Draco?"

The secretary shook his head. "It is not the young master."

"Some other boy? And he barged into my office and demanded to speak to me?"

"Yes. He said you would be glad to see him. He seemed quite certain of it."

"Indeed." Lucius' voice was dry. "We will see about that."

Lucius pushed past the trembling secretary and threw the door of his office open. He strode inside and cast about for the intruder. Who was not hard to spot - a fair-haired teenage boy lay sprawled across Lucius' desk on his back, his hands raised above him, tracing lazy circles in the air

with his fingertips. He turned his head as Lucius closed the office door behind him and smiled engagingly. "Hello there, Lucius," he said. "You are looking well."

Lucius blinked.

Are you quite certain it is not my son? he had asked the secretary, and the secretary had said, It is not the young master. And he had been correct: it was not. Whoever this was, he was a complete stranger to Lucius, although he seemed to have made himself so at home in Lucius' office that this fact would have come as a surprise to any casual observer. The boy was lying across Lucius' elegant rosewood desk, his dark school cloak wadded up and stuffed under his head to make a pillow. He was slender and tall and blond like Draco, although his features were much less sharply defined. A handsome boy. Open-faced, a conspiratorial grin, and, when he fixed his eyes on Lucius they were the color of dark blue water looked at through blue-tinted glass, and Lucius was somehow sure he had seen those eyes before.

He went rigid, cold all over. "You are trespassing in my office," he said coldly, biting off each word. "I hope you can explain yourself, boy. Do you know who I am?"

"I think," said the boy, straightening up slowly, "that the more appropriate question, Lucius, would be, do you know who I am?"

"Considering I've never seen you before in my life, I think the answer to that question is fairly obvious," Lucius snapped. "And please refrain from calling me by my first name. Whoever your parents are, they have taught you no manners." A horrible thought occurred to him. "Muggle-born, are you? I shall have to have my desk thoroughly cleaned if so."

"Oh, no," said the boy, softly, his eyes never leaving Lucius' face. "My mother was a witch. You used to tell me that that cancelled out my father's dirty blood, that I must be all her son, with none of him in me. But then you were always a past master at telling me what I wanted to hear. Even when you were just a child."

Lucius narrowed his eyes. "When I was a child, you wouldn't even have been born, my insolent young friend." He leaned against the closed office door. "I admit that your method of entry into my office initially intrigued

me. But you are proving tiresome. Either explain what you are doing here or I will have you ejected from this place and your parents notified."

The boy had slid himself into a sitting position now and had swung his legs over the desk. "Oh, Lucius, Lucius," he said, shaking his head. "You break my heart. Don't you know me, don't you know me at all?"

Lucius' tone was curt. "No. Who are you?"

The boy smiled, and his pale face lit up like a morning sunrise. But his blue eyes were as cold and dark.

"Retribution," he said, and stood up.

Lucius found that his voice had dried up in his throat. Those eyes - but it couldn't be. This was some child, some boy playing tricks or games, a friend of his son's -

"Do you remember," the boy said softly, his voice gentle, deliberate. "The day you were Sorted? The hat said 'Slytherin' right away, of course, and then you jumped down from the stool and came to sit with us. I'd already cleared a space for you, at my right hand... "

"What?" Lucius felt himself go cold all over. "How could you possibly know...?"

"You were such a little thing," said the boy. "You never thought I'd take much notice of you. But I knew what you'd become. What you *have* become. And now look at you."

Lucius shook his head numbly. "This isn't possible," he said. "You lie."

The boy paused in the middle of the room, a delicate smile on his mouth. "I am Tom Riddle," he said. "I am sixteen years old. Now and forever, sixteen years old. I was ink and paper. Now I am flesh and blood and fifty years have passed like a dream."

"The book was destroyed," Lucius said. "I threw it on the fire myself."

The boy's eyes widened. "Did you?"

"It was ruined already, my Lord," said Lucius quickly, without thought, "a precaution only -" He broke off and then cursed himself inwardly as a delighted smile spread across the boy's face.

"You believe me, then," the boy said. "You know it's me. Or are you not satisfied? Ask me, if you like, Lucius. Ask me something only we would know. Do you remember that seal ring of yours, with the griffin wings? And how when they named me to be Head Boy I took the sharp edge of a wing and cut words into my arm, do you remember what those words were?"

"I remember," said Lucius. "Do you?"

The boy's expression was grave. He lifted his left hand then, and with his index finger wrote on the air between them. Shimmering words appeared, tracing fiery paths in the air. *Non serviam*.

"I will not serve," said Tom, and Lucius remembered Tom looking down at his bleeding arm and remarking that when Lucifer had ridden to battle against Heaven at the head of a host of rebel angels, those had been the words written on his banner.

Lucius found that his knees had bent and he was kneeling on the floor at Tom's feet. "My Lord," he said, feeling himself half delirious with shock. "I remember you - I remember everything."

Tom waved a hand, and the shimmering letters vanished. "If only I did," he said, his boy's voice a little wistful. "I have spent the past two days reading histories of my life, Lucius. At first I could hardly believe it. Such a tale of defeat and betrayal it was. I was filled with rage. I wanted to destroy everything in my path. Then I realized that was foolish. There are those who deserve my condemnation and vengeance and they shall receive it. All my Death Eaters who left or renounced me - they will die." His voice was cool and certain. "One by one I will kill them all."

"But they are protected," said Lucius, stumbling slightly over the words. "They have been forgiven, and their houses warded by the Dark Lord -"

"Wards will not keep out the one who made them," said Tom. "And we are one and the same." His sharp teeth showed in a snarl. "Well, not precisely the same of course. As for him - my elder self - he above all is deserving of

my vengeance. I cannot understand how he has come to be what he is - old and insane and weak and ugly. I would never have allowed myself to become such a disappointment. Better to have died. And die he will. There is hardly room for two of me in this world," and a faint look of amusement touched his face. "In fact, I recollect you saying that there was hardly room for one of me. Do you remember, Lucius, the first time we ever met?"

Of course I do. "I was ten years old," Lucius said. "Perhaps I do not recall."

Tom took another few steps towards him. "You recall," he said. "You were with your father. I believe he was on a school inspection tour. The Headmaster introduced us, for your father always had an interest in Slytherin house and its best students. I was expected even then to be the next Head Boy. Do you remember what he said to me?"

"Yes," said Lucius, through numb lips.

"He said, 'I trust you will look out for my son,'" said Tom.

"And you did," said Lucius.

"I did." Tom spoke quietly. "You cannot desire to serve him. Not that mad old man, that sick and vile creature. Lucius - together we can start over. It is your choice."

For a long time Lucius did not reply. Finally, Tom touched him on the arm. He had to reach up to do it - not much, but just a little, as Lucius was taller than he was now. "Lucius," Tom said to him, and Lucius looked across the space between them at the blond boy who was regarding him through narrowed blue eyes and remembered that when those eyes asked something of him he could not say no. "Do you choose me?"

Lucius bowed his head. "I am, as always, loyal to you, my Lord," he said. "You and no other."

Hermione was nowhere close to asleep when he came in. She had crawled under the heavy covers and pulled them up around her shoulder and lay there in the bed, too tired to sleep. The French doors to the main room

threw barred squares of light against the pale, tiled floor. The bed smelled like a hotel bed: soap and too much starch. The sheets were rough against her skin but she didn't mind the light abrasion. It felt like a punishment, something deserved.

She did not quite remember how it had felt to kiss Draco. It seemed to have gone, like the memory of pain. She could remember that it had happened, but not the feeling of the specific moments. It had been like a storm of weeping after months of holding back tears. She felt strangely empty now, spent of emotion. When she closed her eyes she could feel his fingers as if they still touched her hair.

There was a click as the knob of the door turned. Hermione didn't move. Head pillowed on her wrist, she watched as the door opened and he came in. He shut the door behind him and leaned back against it.

Backlit by the faint illumination coming through the panes of glass, he was only a silhouette. The light outlined his thin body, the curve of his shoulders, the angle of his jaw. She could see the shadows pencilling his collarbones, his hair a negative halo, lit to a pale flare by the dim light. The dull gleam of gold chain sparked against his throat as he turned his head and looked at her.

"You're awake?" he said. It was a question.

She sat up. The covers rustled around her, the starched sheets crackling like a bed of dry reeds. She pushed her hair back behind one ear. It was still damp from tears. "I'm awake," she said, and drew the covers beside her back, clearing a space for him.

She heard him sigh, and his shoulders relaxed. It was an odd sort of sigh. It sounded like defeat. She could see exhaustion plain in the lines of his body as he crossed the room and sat down on the bed beside her, his bare feet making no noise on the carpet. He unbuttoned his cuffs and slipped his shirt off over his head and lay down beside her.

She turned slightly to look at him. He was flat on his back, his hands crossed on his chest, staring blankly up at the ceiling. His lashes cast long shadows on his cheeks, making him look younger than he was. She had always thought his long lashes were the only gentle thing about his face. No longer. Weariness had not destroyed his beauty, only softened it

somehow, all his sharp planes and angles gone to the curves of tired eyelids and downturned mouth. Only the hands on his chest were clenched tight with a sort of furious penitence.

She remembered the night she had slept in his room in the dungeon, how he had lain awake all night beside her, staring up into the darkness overhead, the thought of Harry lying between them like a drawn blade in some Arthurian legend. Harry lay between them now. He always would. He would be a part of Draco for as long as either of them lived, and if one of them died it would be an endless struggle for whoever was left behind not to follow. Love one of them and you loved the other; lose one, and you would lose them both.

She reached out then to touch him, reached across the space between them that was occupied and always would be. He turned towards her at the same moment and put his own arms out and drew her against him, under the covers, and in the darkness they curled together, around each other and around the ghost of what they both loved. Clutching each other like children, they fell asleep there in the dark.

References:

Odio et amo: quare id faciam, fortasse requiris.

Nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.: I love and I hate. You ask me why this is so; I do not know, but I feel it, and it torments me. (Catullus)

"I've always known my father was into some nasty stuff...dragon's blood bars, unicorn smuggling, polyjuice brothels..." Draco said this to Harry in DV9. See? Clue!

"... memorizing the liner notes on old Chöcolate Frög albums" : It's something of a fanon convention that there's a bad wizarding band called Chöcolate Frög. I think they're Swedish.

"Didn't they get to number five with *I Do Believe We're Naked?*" : This manages to be both a Red Dwarf **and** a Simpsons reference.

"I think that boat sailed with the..." *Frasier*.

"Either the fish goes, or Thursday morning" : courtesy of my friend Josh, upon being asked for "a very stupid sentence in French." Yes

Credit for the evil little doorkeeper fairy goes to my recent reading material, more specifically Holly Black's *Tithe*, which posits a lot of quite nasty little fairies indeed, along with some hunky fairy knights. Read it.

Floo Hub: Credit for the idea of Floo Hubs goes to Soz's fantastic fic *Russian Roulette*. Used with her kind permission.

Thanks to Kissaki, who gave me the title for this chapter a long time ago, and thereby the name of the Midnight Club itself.

Draco Veritas Chapter Thirteen: The Malfoy Family Code of Conduct

Part One: Home Country

"I would be happy enough, living in my home country, if Pelias would give his consent. May the gods see fit to free me from my labors," said Jason. And his voice is at once that of the ever-hypocritical lover trying to soften the cruelty of his desertion, and that of the hero who looks, weary and detached, over the scene where he is obliged to kill, cheat, travel, desert, and, finally, to be killed.

-Roberto Calasso.

"Master," said the house elf-nervously, "there is someone in the library."

Thaddeus Nott folded down the left side of the paper he was reading (*The Daily Prophet*, business section, *Wizarding Market Update: Wands Waver As Broomsticks Soar*) and glared at the elf over his spectacles. "Nonsense," he said. "There can't possibly be anyone in the library."

"Yes, sir. Binky is understanding that, sir. Except that, sir..."

"Yes?"

"There is someone in the library, sir."

Nott threw the paper down with a bark of exasperation. "Is it one of the children?"

"No, sir."

"Well, who the bloody hell else can it be? I haven't asked any guests here, Martha's off at the spa in Theamelpos, and the only uninvited person who can get through the wards is the Dark Lord..." He paused, and paled markedly. "It's not the Dark Lord, is it?"

"No, sir, it is not someone Binky is knowing, sir."

"Oh, bloody hell, I'll go see who it is," Nott snapped, propelling himself to his feet. He winced a little - his back hurt these days, more than it once had. Not enough exercise, that was the problem. Too much time spent slaving away in dark little rooms, plotting with Francis and the rest of them. "Get out of my way, you infernal bat-eared moron," he snarled,

aiming a solid kick at Binky that sent the little creature sailing across the room into the bookcase.

At least he still had his excellent aim, Nott thought with some satisfaction, setting off down the hall towards the library. In his day, he'd been one of the best Beaters Slytherin had ever seen. Tom Riddle himself had once congratulated him on a game. He'd never forgotten it.

If Malfoy Manor was both the oldest and possibly the grandest wizarding house in England, Notwick Estate was the wickedest. Its dungeons were the darkest, its gardens the most foreboding, and its corridors the most reliably unlit. The children were forever barking their shins on the legs of chairs but Nott refused to invest in more expensive torches or more powerful Illuminating Charms. His grandfather had liked it dark, and so did he.

He navigated the staircase to the third floor largely by memory, one hand guiding him along the rough stone wall. The library door was open slightly when he reached it, and pale light spilled out through the crack, throwing a narrow golden bar along the floor.

He stopped dead in the corridor and frowned. It wasn't that he hadn't believed Binky, but - well, perhaps he *hadn't* quite believed the daft little creature could possibly be correct. No one could get through the wards surrounding Notwick. *No one*. This had to be one of his children, playing a prank. He strode to the library door, threw it open -

The angry exclamation died on his lips. He stared around him in bewilderment. The library was full of light, a deep gold color like summer twilight, and like summer twilight it was tinged with a dark red. It poured from the walls, ceiling and windows and suffused the fire in the grate with layers of deeper color, as if thin sheets of hammered gold had been laid over the flames.

And in the center of the room a boy was standing, very still, his arms at his sides. He was wandless, in wizarding robes that hung loosely open to show dark clothes underneath. For a moment, Thaddeus Nott, who was hardly a man given to wild flights of fancy, wondered if he were seeing a ghost made corporeal. Those clothes, that looked as if they had been tailored fifty years ago, that posture, the easy tilt of his head. But this boy's hair was like luminous candlelight and his face was warm and open,

and he smiled as Nott hung in the doorway. "Thaddeus," he said. "You aren't glad to see me?"

"H-how did you get into my house? If you've tampered with the wards -"

"Wards cannot keep out the one who made them," said the boy.

"The Dark Lord Voldemort made those wards," barked Nott. "I am under his protection -"

"Voldemort," the boy mused. "I don't think I like that name very much. I suspect Lucius talked me into it. He always had a regrettable tendency towards the baroque."

"I don't understand," muttered Nott, dizzily, but he almost did understand. Even as the possibility loomed before him, monstrous, unbelievable, his mind rejected it. He flung himself forward into the room, and the door banged shut behind him. He could have sworn the boy had gestured at it with his left hand - "Stop that," Nott roared. "You brat - you meddle in what you don't understand. Do you really wish to risk the wrath of the Dark Lord?"

"The Dark Lord whom you betrayed? The Dark Lord whom you renounced and threw to the rabble? You would rather have accepted the bitter charity of your enemies than lay down your life in loyalty -"

"It is not for you to rebuke me!" cried Thaddeus Nott, forgetting for a moment that he was shouting at a child he had never seen before, seeing instead the accusatory face of his master, whom he had sworn to follow and obey, and whom he had betrayed. "It is for my master to do so! And he has forgiven me!"

"Has he?" asked the boy, his blue eyes reflecting the gold light in the room; and then, with a look of indolent amusement, he swept his left hand towards Nott. It described a shimmering silver arc in the air, which turned before Nott's eyes into a razor-edged silver disc. The disc launched itself across the room with unbelievable speed, spinning itself into a blur; it struck Nott in the throat, severing his head neatly from his body as cleanly as a razor might slice a scrap of parchment, killing him instantly.

Tom watched, one light eyebrow arched in amusement, as the decapitated body thumped to the Aubusson carpet. The bloody, severed head itself rolled across the room, fetching up at his feet.

With a cat's grace, Tom knelt and stared down into the dead face of Thaddeus Nott.

"Perhaps your master has forgiven you," Tom said. "But I have not."

As he reached to shut the staring black eyes with the tips of his fingers, a smile touched the corners of his mouth. He straightened up, and looked about himself in satisfaction.

"One," he remarked, to the empty room.

When Rhysenn finished telling her story, Ron stood up abruptly, detaching himself from her hands and her cloak, and went to stand on the edge of the roof.

It was like standing at the edge of the world. The sky was not properly black but a deep transparent blue like the water at the ocean's floor, five miles down. Charcoaled streaks of clouds touched the tops of the mountains in the distance and somewhere far below there was the sound of water crashing over rocks - a river? Or a waterfall?

He could hear Rhysenn behind him, getting to her feet. He turned around and looked at her. She looked smaller than he had first thought she was, and the wind took her black hair and whipped it across her face, hiding her expression. She had hair like Harry's hair, that black so black it looked unreal, as if each strand had been individually dipped in ink. Hair that made you think that if you touched it, the color would come off on your fingers. *Harry*, Ron thought, and felt that sharp slicing pain that came with thoughts of Harry, that was clean and sharp as the cutting edge of a piece of glass.

"Did my tale upset you?" Rhysenn said, pushing her hair out of her small white face. "If it did, then I am sorry. That was not my intention."

"No," Ron said. "No. It wasn't you." Hate that was once love is the strongest hate there is, he thought, and realized how close he had been to hating Harry and hating Hermione and damning them along with himself for the mistakes they had all made, the ways in which they were imperfect. "I was just thinking," he said, "that I'm a Diviner. So why can't I see what I should do? I don't know what to do. I wish I was more like - like Malfoy. Well, except for the being a giant arsehole part. It's just - it's easier when only one thing matters to you."

"No one is that simple," said Rhysenn. "Nor do you have many choices. You are a prisoner, after all."

"There are always choices," said Ron. "I could throw myself off the roof right now. You couldn't stop me. Splatter myself all over the rocks. Voldemort wouldn't have much use for me then."

"Is that what you want to do?" Rhysenn looked at him curiously, sidelong, her eyes gray and bright. "Kill yourself?"

Ron pulled his cloak close about himself and shivered. "No. I want to live. Does that make me a bad person?"

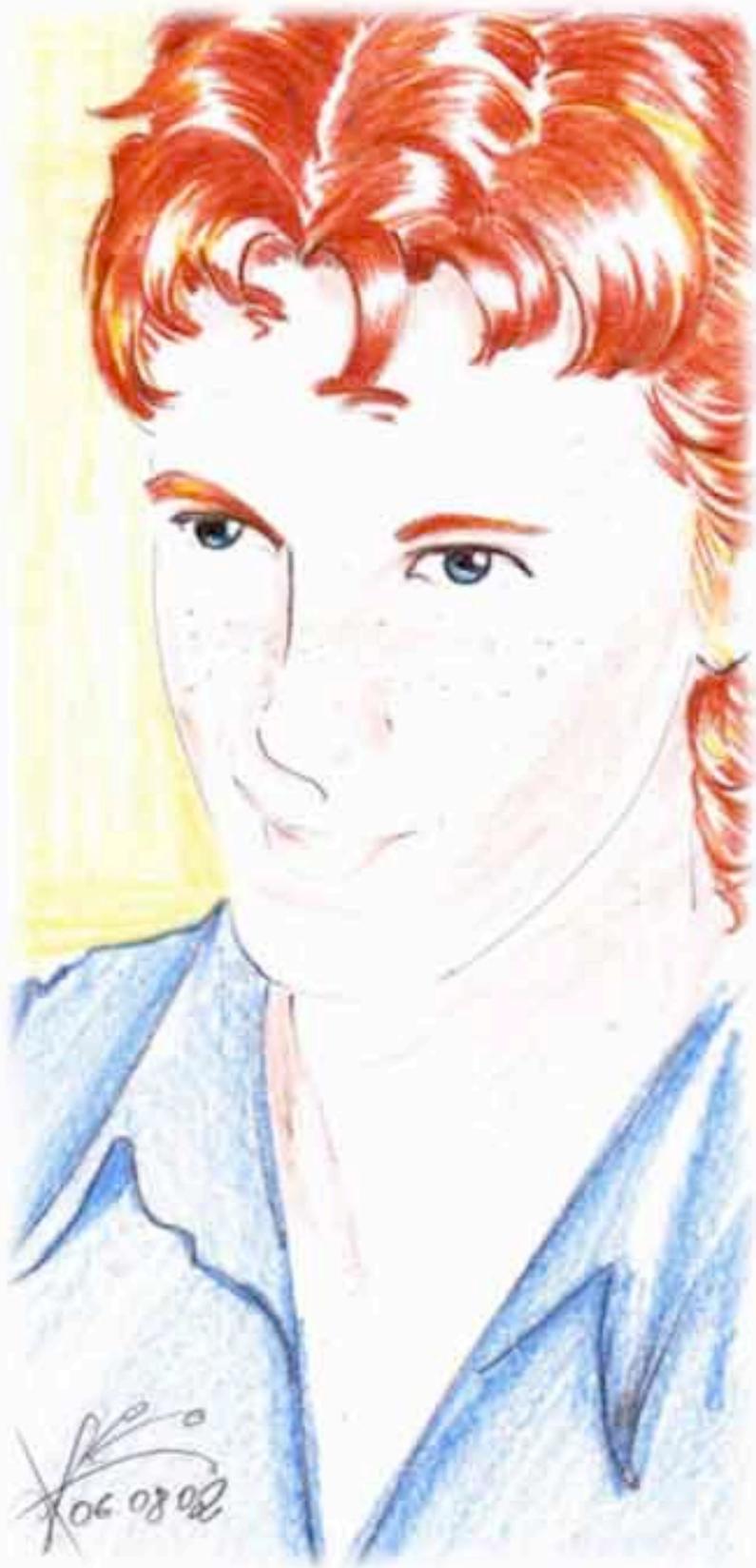
"I don't know," Rhysenn said. "I don't know very much about people. I have only ever known the Malfoys."

Ron snorted. "If you can call them people," he said. His hand was still at his collar, holding his cloak shut. The brooch Hermione-who-was-not-Hermione had given him, with its intricate design and winking single jewel, pressed against his hand. With a decided motion, he pulled it free and held it in his palm. *You are marked now twice*, Voldemort had said to him. *With my sign.*

She had never really loved him. Ron drew his hand back and flung the brooch hard; it arced out and tumbled down towards the darkness below, striking silver sparks from the air as it fell. Ron watched it go. The wind took his unfastened cloak and pulled it from his shoulders and it spun away from him as well, caught by the wind's edge, fluttering and falling.

"All your protections gone," said Rhysenn at his side. If he hadn't known better he would have thought she sounded sad.

"No," Ron said. He squared his shoulders resolutely. "Not all of them."



We interrupt Wake Up With Warbeck to bring you this emergency bulletin from the Daily Prophet. A surprise attack on a wizarding house in Devon during the night has left the magical community stunned. As of this report, there is one confirmed death. Information is sparse but it has been confirmed that a Killing Curse was not responsible for the death, although sources claim that a message was found written in blood on a wall inside the --

Hermione, groping blearily for the volume control on the Wizarding Wireless Alarm next to the bed, succeeded in knocking the radio to the floor. It made a sproinging noise, popped a coil, and fell silent. She gazed down at it for a moment, hanging off the edge of the bed. "Oh," she muttered under her breath, "*honestly*. What a way to wake up. As if we hadn't --"

She broke off, suddenly wide-eyed. *We*. Of course. She wasn't sleeping alone in this bed. She bit her lip, remembering the night she'd passed: falling asleep with Draco's arms around her, her hands knotted across his back, her legs flung over his, tangled together. They must have untangled themselves during the night, somehow. She had no memory of it. She'd slept like the dead.

Hermione pulled herself back onto the bed, cleared her throat, and turned around. "Draco, are you --"

The words died on her lips. Apparently, she'd been wrong. She *was* alone in the bed. The other side of the bed was unoccupied, the sheets pulled smooth, the pillow, jammed against the headboard, still crumpled where he'd slept on it.

A feeling of unease washed over her. Then she told herself she was just being silly. Surely he'd merely gotten up to go take a shower. He'd been sleeping badly lately, after all. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and padded, barefoot, into the living room.

It was empty. The fireplace was full of smashed glass. The wall was dented where the candlestick she'd thrown had struck it. Draco's jacket was on the floor, but his boots were gone. She could feel the blood rise into her face and hurried towards the bathroom, pausing only to pick up the

antidote flask she had thrown the night before. It had rolled to a stop beside the couch. For a moment, she cradled it against her chest. Then she tucked it into the pocket of her dressing-gown and hurried down the hall to the bathroom.

It was empty, although a damp towel flung over a rail showed her that he had, indeed, showered that morning, or some time during the night. The second bedroom was also empty, as was the kitchen. By the time Hermione reached the door to the balcony and flung it open, her heart was pounding.

The balcony was bare and the wind was icy - shivering, she slid her hands into her pockets. She picked her way over to the railings and gazed blindly down at the view of Diagon Alley below, its wheel-rutted streets glazed gunmetal gray with dirty snow. Crowds of black-clad witches and wizards, hoods up over their faces, hurried to and fro on the pavement. He could have been any one of them. Hermione tightened her grip on the flask in her pocket.

À la claire fontaine

M'en allant promener

J'ai trouvé l'eau si belle

Que je m'y suis baigné

Sous les feuilles d'un chêne

Je me suis fait sécher

Sur la plus haute branche

Un rossignol chantait

Il y a longtemps que je t'aime

Jamais je ne t'oublierai

Il y a longtemps que je t'aime

Jamais je ne t'oublierai

When he opened his eyes, she stopped singing, startled. He had been asleep so long that she had almost forgotten that she was waiting for him to wake up. When he stirred and exhaled and opened his eyes slowly, she broke off and leaned over him, her long hair brushing his hand, and whispered, "Harry?"

The green eyes looked up at her, leaded by their long black lashes. His sopping hair was pasted to his forehead in limp dark streaks. He had already sweated through four pairs of pajamas and the ones he wore now were comically oversized on him. "Hermione?" he said, squinting up at her. His voice was raspy-soft, vague with sleep. "Is that you?"

"No," she said, and reached for the glass of water on the bedside table. "No, it's not Hermione."

"I searched for you on the beach but I couldn't find you," he whispered, his eyes fixed on her but not seeing her. "I wanted to tell you I was looking for him -"

She halted with the glass in her hand, arrested by curiosity. "Who are you looking for?"

"Ron," he said, impatiently, as if she ought to know this. "I lost him, but I'm going to find him again."

She lowered the glass of water to his mouth. "Please drink," she said, but he turned his head away irritably and the water splashed down over his chin and onto his already soaked pajamas. His hand went to his throat and he closed his fingers as if he expected to find something there, but they closed on air. "Your Epicyclical Charm is gone," she said. "Have you lost it, Harry?"

He shook his head fretfully. "I left it for you," he whispered. "With my letters. You got my letters, didn't you? I told you to look after Malfoy. He's not well -"

He started to struggle up to a sitting position, but she put a hand on his chest and pushed him back down. Weak as a kitten, he flopped back onto

the pillows. "You're not well, *bébé*," she said. "It's not Draco that's ill, it's you. And you need your rest."

He turned his head into the pillow, his eyes shut. Across his chest, he held his left hand tightly with his right, as if it were injured, although, when she had looked at it earlier, she had found that the skin was unmarked. His breathing slowed, and he cried out a name. She wondered what he was dreaming.

Hermione was in the kitchen when she heard the door of the hotel room open and close. She had been making a new batch of the antidote -- *Add tisane of bloodroot, flower of antimony, wormwood infusion, powdered mandrake* -- when she heard the click of the lock. She dropped the pestle she'd been using to smash the mandrake to powder, and bolted out of the kitchen.

Draco was standing in front of the hotel room door, unbuckling the front of his cloak. His hood was down and there were flakes of snow caught in his hair. He looked up as she raced into the room, a startled expression crossing his face as she flung herself at him, almost knocking him back into the wall.

"I thought something *happened* --"

His arms went around her and for a moment he held her so hard that she winced as the buckles on the front of his cloak dug into her skin through her blouse. Then, as if suddenly recollecting himself, he pushed her away. "Be careful," he said. "There's ash all over my clothes."

Hermione glanced down at herself. The front of her white nightgown was smudged with dark gray streaks. "I see that," she said, irritation beginning to flood over her relief. "And where were you? You could have told me you were going out--"

"You were asleep. I didn't want to wake you." His voice was light, careless. He undid the last buckle on his cloak and threw it over the back of a nearby armchair. A pale cloud of ash rose from it, almost making Hermione cough. "Sorry," he said. There were streaks of soot on his face;

what she had thought was snow in his hair, she now realized, was ash.
"We went to bed rather late, if you remember."

His casual use of the phrase "we went to bed" threw Hermione briefly. She felt herself blush; Draco noticed, and smiled a blandly engaging smile at her.

"I remember," she said tightly. "That doesn't mean you should just go haring off without me, you know. I thought we were in this together."

"We seem to be in a lot of things together," Draco said, pulling off his jumper. He threw it on top of his cloak, and went to work on his shirt buttons. "Suddenly."

Hermione blinked at him. "Where did you go, Draco?"

"Floo Hub," he said, pulling his shirt off. He was wearing a t-shirt under it. There was ash around the collar.

"Looking for a lead on Harry?"

"No, I just have a kinky thing for fireplaces. Yes, looking for a lead on Harry."

"And you went *without* me?"

"Do you actually want me to respond to that or can we both agree the answer is fairly self-evident?"

"If you do that again, I'll -"

"You'll what?" He flung himself into the armchair, shedding ash all over the red leather, and went to work on the laces of his dragonhide boots.

"Or after I've spent a bracing morning getting knocked into various fireplaces by the security trolls at the Floo Hub while looking for your misplaced boyfriend, you'll stand there with your hands on your hips and glare at me like I just bashed your cat in the head with a steel-toed boot? Oh, wait. YOU'RE ALREADY DOING THAT."

Hermione glared at him. "Are you done?"

Draco glared back. "No. I'm just getting started. I'm considering it as a career. Whining for England." He yanked off his left boot and tossed it on the floor. "I need coffee."

"Not until you take your antidote," said Hermione automatically.

"Fuck my antidote," said Draco with great satisfaction. "Fuck it upside down and sideways."

"You really do need coffee," Hermione said. "As repartee goes, that was not up to your usual par."

Draco took off his second boot, and dropped it with a deliberate thud. "It's early yet."

"I don't suppose," Hermione said, "you're going to tell me *why* the security trolls threw you into a fireplace at the Floo Hub? Not that I can blame them, given your current mood."

Draco scrubbed the back of his hand across his eyes, looking exasperated. This was possibly not the best move, as it succeeded mainly in smearing streaks of ash across his cheekbones and forehead. "Because," he said. "I was trying to get the Transportation Clerk to hand over the travel records for yesterday. You know everyone who passes through a Floo Hub has to fill out the paperwork. I figured they'd have a record of where Harry Flooed to. Only--"

"Only he wouldn't let you see the records," Hermione guessed.

"He didn't even have them. I broke open his desk, so I know. He said he hands them over to his boss at the end of every day. Maybe he was lying - - what does it matter? He didn't have them, and I tried to get them and I couldn't, and that's the end of that, isn't it?"

"This," said Hermione, folding her arms, "is why you should have brought me with you."

"Right. Because the only thing more fun than failing is failing with an audience."

Hermione glanced sideways at him. He looked tired, and for Draco, filthy: black streaks in his pale hair, eyelashes clogged with soot. He met her gaze with a defiantly bitter one, as if daring her to say anything.

"Wait a second," she said, and disappeared into the kitchen. Her wand was lying next to a merrily boiling pot of water on the stove. She doused the flame and took the wand in her hand. A few simple spells later and she was back in the living room, a steaming mug of coffee in her hand. "Here," she said, shoving it at Draco.

He took it with a look of guarded surprise. "I thought you said --"

"I know what I said." She perched herself on the arm of his chair. When he didn't seem to mind, she relaxed slightly. "Draco, you have to stop thinking of this as something you can achieve by yourself."

Draco glanced up at her over the mug. The rising steam obscured his gray eyes, the expression in them. "Stop thinking of what as something I can achieve by myself?" he said lightly. "World peace? The ongoing search for a really intelligent Hufflepuff? House-elf rights? Not that they deserve rights, the nasty little vermin, did you know that right before Christmas one of them burned a hole right through my favorite dinner jacket? It was the size of a --"

"I was talking about *Harry*," Hermione said sharply, interrupting his tirade. "The fact that he's gone. You didn't let him go, Draco, and you're not solely responsible for bringing him back."

"I don't recall saying I was." Draco took a sip from the coffee mug and regarded her coolly over the rim.

"I know I made you promise to look after him," Hermione said. "But that's hardly what this is about."

Draco set his coffee mug down on the table with a bang. "You were *asleep*. I didn't want to wake you."

"The reason they didn't have any of the records in the Floo Hub is because they send them to the Transportation Department at the Ministry at the end of every shift," Hermione said. "Which I could have told you, this morning, if you'd *asked*."

"How do you -"

"I spent a summer interning at the Ministry," Hermione said, with some smugness. "After fifth year. I worked with Percy - it's actually kind of a funny story, he always used to -"

"Compose all his memos while sitting behind his desk nude except for a sweater set and a string of pearls?"

"No," said Hermione, crossly.

"Then I don't think your idea of a funny story about Percy Weasley is going to correspond very closely with mine."

"My point is that the records are at the Ministry. And I could have told you that this morning, *and* saved you a wasted trip, if you weren't so completely determined to treat this as your own personal quest. It's not, Draco. You're not the only person Harry matters to and you're not the only person who wants to find him. If I thought you could do a better job on your own, believe me, I'd let you try."

Draco's voice was softly sarcastic. "I know you would. I have every faith in *you* to choose the greater good over your own personal interests."

Somehow he managed to make it sound like an insult.

Hermione glared at him. "Boys," she said succinctly. "You just have to turn everything into these epic quests, these massive personal trials, you're -"

Draco snorted and picked his coffee up again. "We're retrieving the Boy Who Lived, Hermione, not a mislaid postal order," he said. "It *is* a quest -"

"*Just* like Harry," Hermione finished, as if he hadn't spoken.

For a moment she was worried he was going to choke on his coffee. He coughed, managed not to splutter (It was probably in the *Malfoy Family Code of Conduct: Malfoys Do Not Splutter*), and said, "Oh, that's creative. Harry runs away, I have to chase him, and that makes me just like him? What's next? 'You know, you're just like Odric The Mad Fat Wizard of Bavaria, he was left-handed, too.'"

"He was?" Hermione asked, interested.

Draco made a groaning noise. "So...not...the...point..."

"One day you're going to look back on all this and realize I was right," said Hermione.

"No, one day I'm going to look back on all this and plow face-first into a tree because I was looking the wrong bloody way. And I'll *still* be having a better day than I am today."

"Well, it's your own fault."

"Did you mix antidote into my coffee?" Draco asked abruptly. "It tastes *foul*."

"Probably because you already swallowed half a pint of ash earlier. It's all over your face."

Draco gave her a sideways look. "And you're barely restraining yourself from going at me with a wet handkerchief. I can tell from your expression."

"Not at all," Hermione lied.

"Well, leave it. I think it gives me a dashing, rakish look. A look that says 'Dangerous, yet irresistible. Not to be trifled with, yet oddly vulnerable.'"

Hermione knew Draco could go on about himself in this vein all day.

"Really? I thought it said 'Drunk house-elf.'"

"Perhaps not vulnerable so much as *sensitive*," Draco continued, as if she had not spoken. He took another swig of coffee before he went on.

"Boyishly handsome, yet with a dangerous, compelling allure - you *did* put antidote into this coffee, didn't you? It tastes *revolting*."

Hermione leaned close and looked him directly in the eye. "Yes, I put antidote in your coffee," she said. "Because I don't want you fainting on me later when we break into the Ministry and steal those transportation records."

Draco almost dropped the coffee mug. "What?"

"You heard me."

He looked at her with enormous, accusing gray eyes. "Could you *not* spring things like that on me when I'm holding mugs of boiling liquid? If I'd dropped it into my lap we'd have a national tragedy on our hands."

"Oh, give me that," Hermione said, and took the mug out of his hands. She deposited on the table and turned to look at him anxiously. "I wasn't joking, you know."

"I know," he said. He put his hand up and she took it, and leaned her head against his. She imagined him in the Floo Hub, by himself, making a scene, breaking the desk open, looking for those records, looking for anything, knowing he was standing in a place Harry had been standing hours before. She knew perfectly well why he hadn't brought her with him and it wasn't because she had been asleep. He simply couldn't trust his own reactions, and he couldn't bear being defenseless in front of anyone, even her. Perhaps especially her. She knew that looking at her made him remember Harry and that it hurt him even as he welcomed it, and perhaps sometimes he just had to get away - she could hardly blame him for that, could she?

She stroked his hand lightly with hers, and he let her. "You don't think it's a stupid idea?" she asked, gently.

"I think it's a very stupid idea," he said. "On the other hand, when has that ever stopped us?"

"You have a point," she said.

His hand tightened on hers. "All right then," he said. "Where do we start?"

When they came back into the place Ron thought of as "the chess room," Voldemort was there, and so was Wormtail. Ron paused in the doorway, Rhysenn beside him, looking from the Dark Lord to the small fat man who had once been his pet rat. Even now, he had a hard time wrapping his mind around the concept that they were one and the same.

"Proof, Wormtail," the Dark Lord was saying. His voice was a vibrant, unpleasant sort of purr. "If you wish to convince me that Lucius is treacherous, you will have to provide me some proof. I cannot rely upon your suspicions alone, much as I well know that treachery is something you know a good deal about."

"I *do* know about it, Lord," said Wormtail, his tone sharp with intensity. "I know the look on a man's face when he's lying. I know betrayal. Let me use that to make it up to you, my Lord - "

"I have learned to hate all traitors, and there is no disease that I spit on more than treachery," said Voldemort, and laughed softly. "Your agitation is very admirable, Wormtail. Be that as it may, I require proof beyond your assumptions. I would speak with Lucius."

"Shall I summon him, Lord?"

"Not quite yet," said Voldemort. He raised his left hand, and Ron felt himself suddenly stumble forward, his feet moving against his own volition. He went forward, half reluctant and half surprised. The Dark Lord had not really invaded his mind like this before. When Ron stood in front of him, Voldemort raised a hairless eyebrow ridge and regarded him thoughtfully. "You've been listening, boy?"

"Ron. My name is Ron."

"Not a very mellifluous name, is it?" The thin etiolated mouth smirked. "What has happened to your cloak and your pin, boy? And your clothes are torn and filthy."

Ron looked down at himself. His clothes were grimy with dirt from the roof, wrinkled and unpleasant from so many nights spent sleeping on the floor. He was fairly sure he smelled. "The wind came up," he said. "It tore my cloak off, and my pin."

Voldemort chuckled. "Some luckless traveler will find that pin, to his peril," he said, sounding as if the idea cheered him up. "In the meantime, it is disrespectful of you to appear before me in such a state."

"Sorry," said Ron. "If I'd known ahead of time that you were going to kidnap and torture me, I would have dressed spiffily for it."

Wormtail gave a small squeak. Voldemort looked away from Ron, towards Rhysenn, who was standing in the doorway. "Take the boy to the guest chambers," he said. "Find him some appropriate clothes. And give him a bath." Voldemort looked disdainful. "He smells."

"I knew it," Ron muttered.

It took much longer than Hermione had hoped it would for Percy to respond to her letter. Two days after she had sent the first owl, she received a terse response: *No. It's too dangerous.*

She hurled the letter into the fire and wrote Percy again, more imploringly this time. She invoked Ron and the danger he was in and the fact that Harry had gone to find him and both must be protected at all costs. She sealed the letter with wax and sent it on with one of the hotel owls.

She decided not to tell Draco about Percy's letter. He had been, despite their uneasily achieved peace, completely unstable since the morning he'd come back from the Floo Hub covered in ashes. He was sweet to her often, with a dangerous and peculiar and compelling sort of sweetness; he would hold her arm absently in the street, or she would catch him staring at her as if he were trying to see through her to something else, something just out of view. He was also bad-tempered, and would flare up and shout and snap and say awful things to her, and the fight to get himself back under control took a little bit longer each time. On the third day in the hotel they went to Gringotts to see if the goblins there knew if Harry had visited his vault since the previous week. When they were sent to the manager of the branch, a goblin who had been in charge of Draco's vault since he was seven years old, and the goblin refused to give them any news of Harry, Draco slammed him back against the wall so hard that the security trolls came running. The goblin choked and wheezed and turned purple as Draco throttled him and when the trolls threw them both out onto the street, Hermione was glad. Or at least, she was glad until Draco punched the wall beside the door so hard that he tore the skin off his knuckles and she had to drag him back through Diagon Alley, trying not to get translucent silvery blood everywhere.

Back in the hotel room, Draco was quiet, sitting on the edge of the bathtub while she bandaged up his hand with a Healfast poultice and bandage strips from the Basic Medi-Magic Kit on the wall. Draco had gotten blood all over his shirt and she had made him take it off, along with his cloak, and had dumped the lot into the sink, where they fizzed among the enchanted soap bubbles.

"You have to stop being so careless," she said, giving the bandage a hard tug that made him wince. "The poison slows your healing down."

"I am not entirely sure," he said, taking his hand back and examining the neat job she had done on it, "that punching one's hand into a wall counts as carelessness."

"Would you rather I said 'deliberately stupid'?"

"I'd rather you didn't say anything at all," he said shortly, and got to his feet, pushing past her on his way to the door. After it shut behind him, she stood for a moment with the Medi-Magic kit in her hands. She could see herself in the mirror over the sink, all huge dark eyes and translucent skin and her hair in tight braids because she didn't have time to spend to stop it frizzing up and then she flung the kit hard at the mirror. It bounced off and fell into the sink and the water splashed up and obscured her reflection.

When she went into the living room he was standing near the window, one hand on the white floor-length curtain. She could see the shape of him dimly through the curtain as it blew across him: the familiar angle of his head, the long legs and thin shoulders and compact waist and hips. He was just a silhouette, and could almost have been Harry; even his hair was untidy now. But then he pushed the curtain aside and looked at her and he was himself again. "I'm sorry," he said, "I'm sorry, I can't help it. You should just ignore me."

"So you're apologizing for what? Being a jerk?"

He shrugged. "Apparently. Apparently I don't even have the strength of my jerk convictions these days."

She sighed. "You would hate it if I just ignored you," she said. "You hate being ignored."

"Perhaps," he said. "Although I'd like to think that I've learned to differentiate between positive and negative attention since I was twelve." He smiled a little, and the faint light of the street lamps that came through the curtain lit the ends of his hair and his skin and she tried not to look at the narrow line of pale gold that ran from his navel to disappear into the waistband of his trousers. His stomach was very flat and she could see the lightly penciled line of his ribs when he shrugged and beckoned her to come stand closer to him. When she didn't move, he looked exasperated. "I *said* I was sorry."

Hermione looked at him narrowly. In a lot of ways, she thought, Draco often reminded her of a girl: there was a certain brittle femininity to his cruelty, and he used his physicality, his knowledge of the effect his looks had on people, to get what he wanted in a way that went beyond flirtation. It seemed to work a sort of charm even on boys who would never normally look at another boy twice: sometimes when Draco worked up one of his really blinding smiles, even Ron would look dazzled momentarily before seeming to recollect how much he loathed him - and she remembered how Harry, the first time he'd put on formal wizarding robes during fifth year and she'd tried to get him to brush his hair, had remarked that there was no point trying to get him all poshed up because everyone would be looking at Draco Malfoy anyway. She'd been mildly surprised that something like that would even have occurred to him but then Harry had never been blind, just unobservant.

Remembering Harry made her wish he was here again, although not for Draco's sake this time, but rather for her own. In the face of Draco's volcanic and mercurial changes of mood, she longed for Harry's gentle nature and flexible temperament even more. Perhaps he could have calmed Draco down, perhaps not; she had a feeling that he wouldn't know what to do any better than she did, but together they would have had a much better shot at it than either of them would have managed alone.

"There's an owl," Draco said, breaking her reverie, "outside the window. D'you think it's your letter back from Weasley?"

"Open the window and let's find out," Hermione said, and did come over to stand next to him as he flipped the latch on the window and let the owl in. It was carrying a letter from Percy, and it tried to bite Draco on the

finger before Hermione sent it on its way with an admonishment and a Knut.

"Bloody killer owl," Draco said crossly, "Weasley must have trained it to attack anyone without carrot hair and a billion mutated spots. What's the letter say?"

"It's a list of Ministry passwords," Hermione said, clutching the letter to her chest, "Oh, thank goodness for Percy!"

"He's a wonder all right. Let me see that." He took the parchment from her and whistled through his teeth as he scanned the page. "I take back what I said about the mutated spots. Passwords *and* a map. Weasley is a flame-haired sex god."

Hermione laughed and took the letter back, folding it carefully into her robe pocket. "And the Ministry will be closed half the day tomorrow, so it'll be a perfect time..."

"Closed?" Draco asked curiously. "Why?"

Hermione paused before replying. "Because," she said. "Tomorrow - is New Year's Eve, Draco."

"Oh," he said, his face very blank, and then, "Oh. I hadn't realized it had been so long."

So long since what? she thought, but didn't say it, instead she touched him on the arm and said, "We should get some sleep."

He nodded. "You go ahead."

They had a pattern now. Hermione would go into her bedroom and change into her nightgown with the door shut, and climb into bed. After a short interval had passed, Draco would knock on the door, barefoot in pajamas, and climb under the covers with her and would fall asleep with their arms around each other, but they never, after the first night, kissed each other and they never took off any of their clothes. Hermione had gotten used to Draco, to the way he slept, the scent of his sweat and laundry soap, the sound of his sleepy whispers, the way she had never imagined that she would ever get used to anyone but a lover.

When he came in tonight, his hair was damp and he smelled of Healfast and bandages. He lay down, and she curled up beside him. Draco wound a curl of her hair around his fingers and twirled it idly. "Do you think you'll be able to sleep?" he asked. "Or will you be anxious about tomorrow?"

"I didn't get back to sleep properly last night after you woke me up yelling," she replied, putting her hand on his chest, the fingers splayed out so that she could feel the beat of his heart through the thin cotton of his pajamas, steady and rhythmic against her palm.

"Oh?" He turned his head towards her and she felt his chin against her hair. "What was I yelling?"

"You were just shouting for someone."

She felt him tense up. "Who?"

Hermione hesitated a moment before answering. "Your father," she said, finally.

A long moment passed. When Draco spoke again, his voice sounded only bewildered. "Why would I shout for *him*?"

"Because he's your father," she said. "And you love him."

"No," he said, and turned his head so that her head fit under his chin. "I don't think so," he said, and his voice was soft and distant, falling away into sleep, falling and almost lost. "I don't love anyone anymore. Maybe not even you."

By the third day of fever, Harry's dreams had stopped making sense and had become an odd jumble of images. Some seemed like memories - watching Hermione run across the snow towards the Quidditch pitch, Ron with his orange hat pulled down, trying to fix a broken broomstick with Spellotape, Draco at his desk, writing industriously with his raven feather quill - and some were obviously dreams or nightmares. He dreamed he saw the corpses of Cedric Diggory and his parents tethered to posts under the lake, their hair drifting in the current like weeds. He dreamed he was a ghost, haunting the Manor. He dreamed he was sitting on a beach, and

that the tide had drawn far out, leaving bare wet patches where the sea had been, and that he could see a red plastic bucket being drawn out by the current. And he dreamed that he lay in a strange bed in a strange room, and that the room was full of flowers, and that Fleur Delacour was sitting in an armchair beside the bed, her long fair hair falling all around her and a quizzical expression on her face.

"You're awake," she said, leaning forward with a smile. "I had begun to think it would take an earthquake to wake you up."

Harry blinked at her. "I'm not awake," he said. "I'm dreaming."

Fleur leaned farther forward, and put her hand on his arm. Her fingers were cool against his skin. She pushed his sleeve up, her fingertips tracing the sensitive skin of his wrist lightly. Harry wondered if this dream was about to go in a very unexpected direction. He'd had the occasional dream about Fleur before, when he was much younger - okay, sixteen - but lately, he'd been much more likely to -

"OW!" Harry yelled, and jerked his arm back. "You pinched me!"

Her blue eyes danced. "I had to show you that you weren't dreaming, didn't I?"

"I..." Harry looked around himself wonderingly, startled all over again. He was in a pleasantly appointed bedroom whose walls were painted pale yellow. A fire burned in a small brick fireplace, and everywhere there were vases of flowers, on all the tables: lilies and gardenias, marigolds and poppies, tulips and asters and phlox. Colorful curtains were slung back over the windows, through which he could see a snowy landscape, dotted with bare trees, mountains in the distance. "I would ask 'Where am I?'" Harry remarked, "but that just sounds so stupid."

"You're in Bulgaria," Fleur said, and got up from her armchair to sit on the edge of Harry's bed. "This is Viktor's house, and these -" she tugged on his sleeve - "are his pajamas."

"Viktor Krum?"

"Do you know any other Viktors?"

"No, but - well, it's not as if I was expecting him. I was in the Floo Hub in London -"

"You fainted," Fleur said. "Viktor was there with his team, coming back from a match, and he saw you. You were very ill, Harry. You had quite a high fever when he brought you here and you were delirious. Do you know how long you've been here?"

Harry shook his head.

"Three days," Fleur said.

"Bloody hell," Harry said, startled, "I must have been really ill."

"You were. Can you get up and walk now?"

Harry considered. He felt drained and tired but not precisely ill. His muscles ached slightly, and his right hand hurt as though he had cut or injured it. He glanced down at himself, and blinked - the pajamas he was wearing were enormous on him, the sleeves dangling down over his hands.

He threw his legs over the side of the bed and stood up gingerly. For a moment he felt lightheaded, and reached for the bedpost. Then, realizing that his pajama bottoms were falling down, he grabbed for those instead. Fleur chuckled. "I've already seen it all," she said. "Someone had to get you into those pajamas, you know."



"Oh," Harry said, and, to his great annoyance, blushed. Nobody, to his knowledge, had ever seen him stark naked under good lighting conditions before - well, unless you counted Draco, who had inhabited his body after all, but Harry preferred not to count that, because it was weird. "Where's Viktor, anyway?"

"He is probably off writing," Fleur said. "This is his country house. We came here a few months ago because he wanted a quiet place to finish his

book. It has been very dull for me, although as you can see I've been experimenting with flower magic." She waved a careless hand towards an enormous vase of tulips, then reached up and pulled on a small tasseled bellpull next to the bed. "Viktor will be happy to see you up and around. He was worried." She pointed to a trunk at the foot of the bed. "All your things are in there," she said. "Your clothes, your little bag, your sword too - well, everything except *this*," and she drew the *Malfoy Family Code of Conduct* out of her pocket and held it up. "I was reading it. It's very amusing. Did you know Malfoys are forbidden on pain of death from wearing powder blue?"

"Hey!" Harry took a step forward and almost fell over the trailing legs of his pajamas. "That's *mine*. Give it back."

"How ungrateful!" Fleur exclaimed, and tossed the book at him. Forced to make a split-second decision, Harry let go of his pajama bottoms, and caught the book. The pajama bottoms fell down. Fortunately, he was wearing boxer shorts underneath them; less fortunately, the shorts were unfamiliar to him, and had a design of enormous interlocked D's on them. "What the...?"

"Those are my regulation Durmstrang boxer shorts," said a voice from the doorway; it was Viktor, who had come into the room very quietly and was looking at Harry with an amused expression. "They suit you."

"Viktor!" Harry grinned, dropped the book on the bed, and pulled his pajama bottoms up. "Fleur told me what you did, and I'm really -"

Viktor waved an ink-stained hand, looking acutely uncomfortable. "That's all right," he said, ducking his head slightly. He looked just as Harry remembered him - tall and duck-footed, although his hair was longer now, and fell to his shoulders in shaggy, unkempt locks. His brows still beetled, and he was dressed in a rusty black pullover, stretched out of shape, and worn Quidditch cords. There was ink on his sleeves, too. "Do not distress yourself."

Fleur got up from the bed, went over to Viktor, and put her arms around him. "You're so modest, darling," she said.

Harry boggled somewhat. He had, of course, already figured out what Fleur had to be doing in Viktor's house but it was still bizarre to see. Still,

if it meant Viktor was finally over his crush on Hermione, this could be nothing but a good thing. And it wasn't as if Fleur and Viktor didn't have anything in common: they were both wealthy and well-known in the European wizarding community. Of course, Harry couldn't think of anything they had in common beyond that, but he was sure there had to be *something*.

"I was hoping that perhaps you could read my latest chapter," Viktor said to Fleur, his voice gloom-ridden. "I am afraid that it is boring."

"You're always worried it's boring, and it never is." Fleur let go of Viktor and glanced over at Harry. "What about Harry, then?"

"He could read it too," Viktor said, brightening. "It is always good to get a fresh perspective."

"Er," said Harry.

"*Viktor*," said Fleur irritably. "I mean, what are we going to do with Harry? Now that he's awake, there are all sorts of things we must know - is he in danger, was he fleeing someone, where are his friends, should we notify them -"

"No," Harry said quickly, almost falling over again. "Please don't tell anyone where I am. Especially not Draco or Hermione. You haven't, have you?"

Viktor shook his head. "We thought it best not to."

"Promise me you won't," Harry said. "It's important. Please."

"I don't -" Fleur began.

"I promise," Viktor said, shooting his girlfriend a dark look. "What can we do to help you, Harry?"

"Get me to train station or a Floo Hub," Harry said. "And as soon as possible please." He looked at their blank expressions, and bit his lip. "I'm sorry to be like this, but it's important."

"But," Viktor said, looking confused, "Where is it that you are going? You were in the International Floo Hub, you must have been planning a journey of some distance."

"Romania," Harry said. "I'm sorry, but I can't tell you exactly where or why."

He bit his lip, suddenly miserable, and felt that he would hardly blame either of them if they bunged him out on his ear. He knew his secrecy must be annoying, and they must be worried, and -

"Is this to do with the Dark Lord?" Viktor said finally, breaking the silence. "Has the time finally come?"

With the smallest of movements, Harry nodded.

"All right, then," Viktor said with a resolute nod. "We will help you however we can. Get dressed, Harry, and then come down the hall to my study - I've got maps. If it is Romania you want, we will figure out how to get you there."

It was the second time that year that Sirius had stood looking at a murder scene and thinking, in a dazed sort of fashion, that the human body really did contain a surprising quantity of blood.

The body of Conrad Avery lay sprawled across the marble-topped desk in his study, as if he had been killed while in the act of sitting down to write a letter. Papers were scattered everywhere, ink bottles knocked over, their contents drying blackly on the rug. Sirius hoped fervently that Avery had been dead before the horrific wounds that laced his body had been inflicted. His clothes were slashed to threads and across his bare chest and arms and throat enormous gashes had been sliced, as if with the side of a scythe. Blood was drying in sticky pools below the desk, on the rug and the patches of bare floor. Avery's dead eyes bugged from his head and his mouth was twisted in a grimace of terror.

"Alastor was right," said Remus, breaking the unpleasant silence. "Look like a Vivisectus Curse. I've only seen those in history books..."

Sirius began pacing around the room. "Third murder this week, isn't it?"

"Fourth."

"Dark Mark?"

"No. I doubt it's the Dark Lord, Sirius. He always *incendio*-d the bodies, unless he was trying to provoke a response."

"Maybe he's trying to provoke a response now."

"What response would that be? Other than "eeew.""

"Maybe Avery betrayed him. Maybe this was about getting a message out to the rest of his group?"

Remus shook his head. "He would have taken to headquarters then, and tortured him in front of the rest of them. Voldemort isn't even given to making this kind of mess. *Avada kedavra* and get out, pretty much."

"I seem to remember he was more about the mess when he was younger," Sirius said, beginning a circuit of the far side of the room. The rug squelched wetly under his feet as he passed the desk.

"That's why the curse is in the history books," said Remus, pushing his sandy hair back from his forehead with a tired look. "Still..."

"Maybe it was suicide," said Sirius with a dark grin, moving around towards the back of the desk. "Maybe his house-elf killed him like in all those mystery novels."

"Alastor found the house-elf decapitated in the cellar."

"Maybe it was so horrified by its crime it cut its own head off."

Remus rolled his eyes. There was ink on his face where he had rubbed his cheek after using his Quik-Notes Quill. Sirius decided not to tell him about it. "Sirius..."

But Sirius was staring at the wall beside the desk, all jokes forgotten. What he had first taken from a distance to be indiscriminate splatters of blood

had suddenly resolved themselves into a recognizable pattern. "Remus," he said. "Come here."

Sirius stepped closer to the wall as Remus came to join him. Words, written in blackly drying blood and ornately scripted, ran along the wall just above the fireplace mantel. Take heed; for I hold vengeance in my hand, to hurl upon their heads that break My law.

"Alastor said there was writing in blood on the wall," Remus said. "But he couldn't make head or tail of it."

"Alastor's never read any Muggle literature," Sirius said. "Apparently, however, the murderer has. This is Shakespeare."

"The playwright?"

"He wrote Muggle plays as well. I recognize the quote. *Richard III*." He shook his head. "I don't think we're dealing with someone sane here, Remus."

"Because of the quote?"

"Because if he's using that quote to say that Avery broke *his* law, then it means he thinks that he himself is..."

"The Dark Lord?" Remus asked, looking confused.

"No," Sirius said. "God."

Viktor had exactly the sort of study Harry would have wanted had it ever occurred to him to want a study. First, it was messy. Stacks of parchments wobbled precariously atop teetering piles of books. All the desk drawers were pulled out, showing a colorful array of empty sweet wrappers, broken quills, ink bottles with interesting things written on them in Bulgarian, and crumpled pages of Quidditch magazines. Empty coffee mugs littered the top of the desk, along with teetering pyramids of cigarette butts and half-eaten containers of Bulgarian yogurt.

Second, it was cozy as well as messy. The chairs were heaped with colorful pillows, and a bright copper kettle hovered above the leaping flames in a small grate. The room smelled of smoke and unfamiliar spices. Through the curtained windows Harry could see a range of beautiful blue-shaded mountains in the distance. The sky above them was alive with massing clouds, heavy and dark with potential rain.

Standing by the window, Harry tried to imagine himself ever having a study like this some day, far in the future. He would take up pipe-smoking and collect old Quidditch books and maybe write his memoirs. *How I Saved the World, Except Not Really*. Although Hermione would have to help him write them, and Draco would make fun of him for smoking a pipe and Ron would borrow his Quidditch books and spill things on them.

Assuming they were all still alive, of course.

"Harry," Viktor said, waving a large, grubby hand in front of Harry's face. "Are you paying attention?"

"Yes. Er...Romania," Harry said. "It's right there."

He poked the map with his finger, right in the center of *Romania*. Immediately Romania expanded to fill the surface of the map, leaping into alarming detail. Mountain ranges, towns, the blue veins of rivers sprang into life. Harry's eyes widened. "Cool," he said.

"Don't Muggle maps do that?" Viktor asked.

Harry shook his head. "No."

"What do you do if you need a more detailed map, then?"

"Oh, Muggles usually carry around a whole bunch of different maps for the same place, all different sizes and levels of detail. My uncle had eight or nine maps just for England."

"How terribly inconvenient," said Fleur, who was leaning back against the windowsill, her eyes on Harry. "Muggles are so stupid."

Harry was gazing, fascinated, at the map. Tiny blocks of text moved across the parchment, telling him: *Here are dragons*, and *Here are vampires*, and *Here there is dark wizardry*. "I need a map like this," he said.

"You can have the map," Viktor said. "And whatever else you need, I will give you. Food, money if you need it, a safe place to stay until -"

"I can't stay here, though," Harry protested. "It isn't safe for you."

"I have a secret flat," Viktor said. "In Prague, in the wizarding city center. I'll take you there, and -"

"Isn't Aiden staying at the flat now?" Fleur asked, her tone curious.

"Yes, but he will clear out if I ask him. I'll take the Portkey there now and send him off," Viktor said, rolling the map up, "and I shall come back for you, Harry. Take anything you like from the house - books, if you want any of the weapons from the weapons room -"

"Weapons?" Harry said faintly.

"Swords, pikes, hatchets, maces, crossbows, daggers - I collect old Muggle weapons," said Viktor, causing Harry to entertain a sudden mental vision of himself attacking Voldemort with a hatchet. "Take whatever you like."

"I have a sword," Harry said, "already."

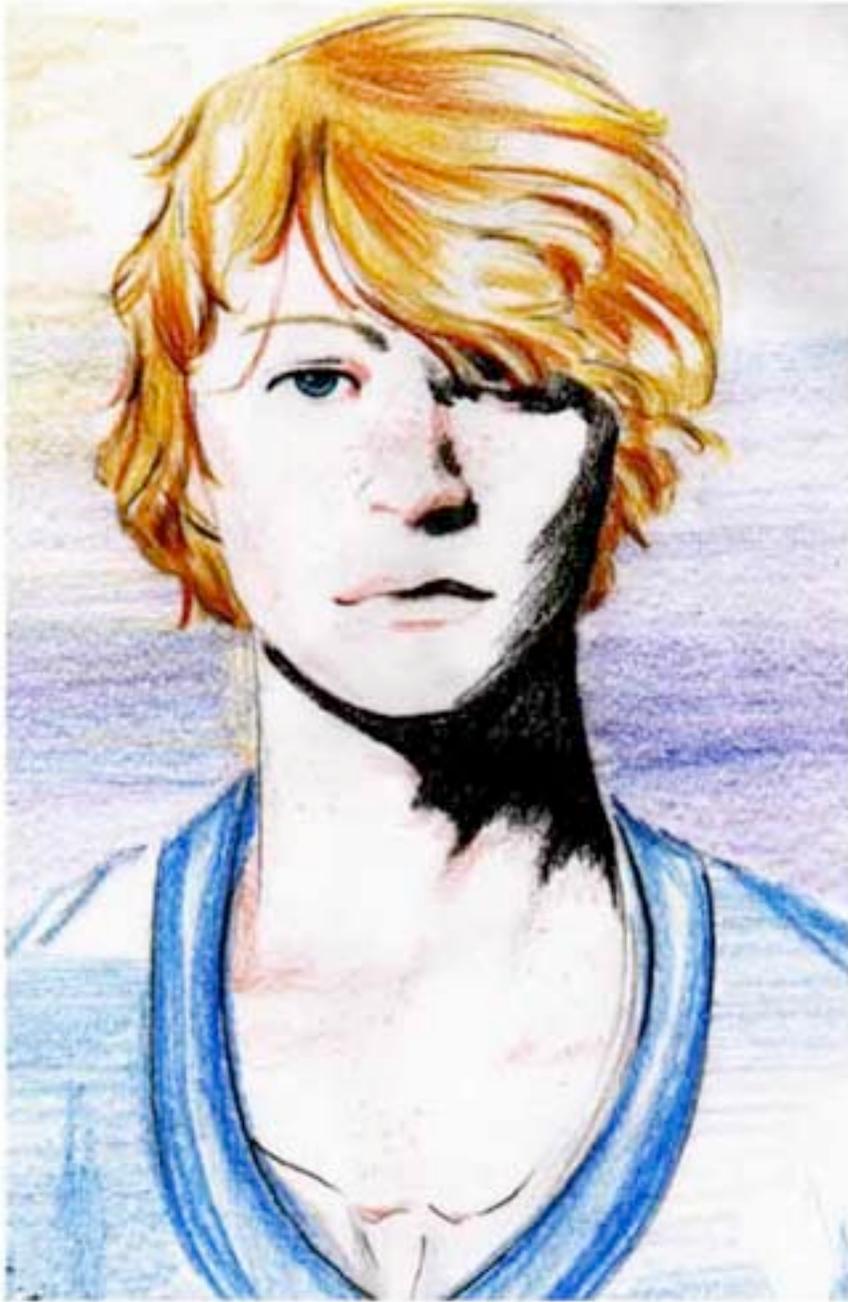
"You may need more than that," said Viktor, and snatching up a dark red cloak from a peg by the door, he banged his way out of the study.

"There's blood on the water," said the blond boy, in a meditative tone.

Lucius looked up from his desk. Tom was standing on the ledge of the bay window that looked out over the Ministry gardens and in the distance, the Thames and the dome of St. Paul's. Clouds had begun to gather, and the shadows deepened on the floor of Lucius' office. Against the dark green of the floor-length curtains Tom's slender hands stood out stark and white.

"It's just Muggle cars passing over the bridge," Lucius said. "Come away from the window."

Tom turned his head and looked down. The light had turned to a sallow gray color, and it lent a ghostly cast to his face and hair. He was dressed in clothes that Lucius had given him; clothes that Lucius himself had worn when he was a teenage boy. They were, of course, fifty years out of date, but wizarding styles changed slowly. They lent to Tom a certain oddly formal air, especially the high boots and the elegant jacket lapels under the heavy winter cloak. The clothes had been made for Lucius' icy coloring, and Tom's sunny blond hair and blue anthracite eyes were distracting and even a little odd against all that black. "I like it up here," Tom said, "I would prefer not to come down."



"I am sure you wouldn't. But I need to give you something."

"Come here then," Tom said.

Obediently, Lucius rose to his feet and crossed the room to the window. Tom looked down at him, smiling malevolently. His hair was still very golden, but it had begun to curl around his head the way that Tom's once had, close against his temples and at the nape of his neck. All in all,

despite all the differences of coloring and appearance, he was beginning to resemble the Tom he had once been in a way that sent a shiver up Lucius' spine. *Sic oculos, sic ille manus, sic ora ferebat.*

"I can see everything from here," Tom said, putting his hands against the darkening window glass. "I can look down upon the world."

"Just London actually," said Lucius.

"London today. The world tomorrow," said Tom, and laughed, throwing his head back.

"I wish you would be a bit more careful," said Lucius. He had cast a Silencing Charm on the room when they came in, so he knew perfectly well that they could not be overheard, but Tom's presence in his office made him anxious nonetheless.

"What makes you think I'm not careful?"

"Because," Lucius said. "There's blood all over your shirt."

With a scowl, Tom glanced down. It was true. Although his hands were spotless, the cuffs of his white shirt were spotted all over with blood, as though he had been paddling his hands in red ink and some had splashed up. "Careless of me," he said.

"Well," said Lucius. "Murder is a messy business."

Tom leaped down from the sill and landed lightly on his feet. Standing, he was a few inches shorter than Lucius. "All this killing," he said. "Three wizards in three days. It has reminded me how alive I am, Lucius. Do I look alive to you?"

Lucius looked at him, at the feverishly flushed cheeks, the damply curling hair, the hard delicate mouth. "I wanted to give you something," he said.

"Just one thing?" Tom asked, his voice silky.

"I would give you everything," said Lucius, "If I had everything to give. But I wanted you to have this," he said, and held out his hand. There was a ring in it, the twin of the one he had once given his son: the griffin with

its wings outstretched, the Malfoy sigil on its back. "Twist the ring three times around your finger, and it will bring you to my side. If there is ever a time you need me..."

"Thank you, Lucius," said Tom, taking the ring. "Always the knight errant. Like your son, or so I hear. Or is it that I remember?" His brow furrowed, a crease appearing between his blue eyes, and he slipped the ring on with a frown.

"My son is of no concern," Lucius said. "To either of us."

Still thoughtful, Tom walked past him to the desk, and picked up one of Lucius' paperweights. It was a small glass frog, and it waved its translucent arms and legs as he gripped it. "Yet you seem concerned, Lucius. What is it?"

"Well," said Lucius, "it had occurred to me that if you kill Francis Parkinson, we will be needing a new Minister."

Tom frowned. "Is that a problem?"

"It *is* inconvenient."

"Vengeance does not wait upon convenience, Lucius." Tom squeezed the paperweight tight in his fist and the frog let out a glassy screech; Tom smiled, like a little boy teasing a kitten. "They are all so afraid of me, Lucius," he murmured, letting his lids droop to veil the fierceness of his gaze, "at the last moment, when they realize who I am. I feel their terror as it passes through them, into me. It feeds me, Lucius. It soothes the ache in my soul..."

Lucius looked up at that. In the time he had known Tom, in all his various stages and permutations, he had never gotten the impression that Tom spent much time thinking about his soul, whether it ached or not. "You are discontented, my Lord?"

The frog was still struggling in Tom's grasp. He dropped it to the carpet. There was a fretful expression on his face. "I feel my heart," he said. "I feel its bitterness. Although it is not my heart but his, and the feelings his, still the pain remains with me like the ghost memory of a hand or arm that has been cut away. It is a phantom pain, but no less real for all that. I

thought to kill this hunger by feeding it, but it is worse now that it was before."

Lucius was bewildered. "My Lord, I don't quite..."

"I cannot stop thinking of her, Lucius. She preys upon my thoughts. I am reminded of her everywhere I turn: a stranger's gesture on the street, a whispered word, the color of sunset that is very like her hair. It is like a *disease*."

Lucius' felt his eyebrows disappearing up into his hairline. "You're in love?"

"Certainly not," Tom snapped, looking very teenaged for a moment. "I am - in hate, if such a thing is possible. Yes, Lucius," he said, looking as if the phrase pleased him, "I am in hate, and there is only one cure for what ails me."

"You want her killed?" Lucius asked.

"No," Tom said, and the heavy lids lifted, unveiling the eyes that burned like blue poison. "Not killed. I want her broken." His lip began to curl. "And I know just how to do it."

"You've barely left your room for three days, Ginny," Charlie said. Sitting on her bed among the teddy bears and stuffed pillows, he regarded her with his elbows on his knees. "Mum's worried. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Ginny tried to keep the tense impatience out of her voice. She was sitting in front of her mirrored vanity table, brushing her hair. A hundred strokes on one side, a hundred on the other. She found the repetitive motion soothing, and certainly her hair wasn't suffering for the attention. It lay along her shoulders and down her back like a smooth sheet of copper. "I just needed to sort my head out alone for a bit."

"I understand, but this is a little extreme. You've barely come downstairs except to eat, you stay locked in here, you haven't owled any of your friends -"

"I owled Professor Snape," Ginny muttered. This was true; she had. She'd sent him a sprig of the *flora fortis* Ben had given her, asking him if there was any chance it, or something like it, could be in the antidote for Draco's poison.

He'd owled her back almost immediately, a short message: *Thank you but it is not what we are looking for*. She'd gone to bed and pulled the covers over her head and stayed there for hours.

"I said *friends*, not professors you don't actually like," Charlie said. "Look, Ginny, It's not like I don't understand why you'd be even more upset than the rest of us -"

Ginny went still. "About Ron, you mean?"

"Well, you were always the closest to him." Charlie's voice sounded young, uncertain. "It's always been like that - me and Bill, Fred and George, you and Ron..."

"Percy and Errol?"

"Percy is his own man," Charlie said diplomatically, but he smiled a little.

"Charlie, I cry every night about Ron, you know that. But so do we all -"

"I know. It's just - look, Ginny, when I asked you to come back home it was with the understanding that you were going to be helping out Mum -"

Ginny whirled around on him, brush in hand. "And why do I have to be the one who helps out Mum? What about Fred and George? All they do is hang about the kitchen making smart remarks. Is it because I'm a girl? That's hardly fair, Charlie!"

"I didn't say that," Charlie protested, surprised at her vehemence. "Is there something else you'd prefer to do?"

"Couldn't I help out Sirius and Professor Lupin?"

Charlie expelled an exasperated breath. "Ginny, what they're doing is dangerous. You know where they are this morning? Investigating a murder scene with Mad-Eye Moody."

Ginny blinked. "A *murder*? Who was murdered?"

"No one we know," Charlie said. "One of Voldemort's followers, a man called Avery. Probably just a Death Eater dispute. Still, hardly the sort of thing you should be -"

"I can take care of myself, Tom."

Charlie froze, his hand halfway to her shoulder. "*What did you call me?*"

Ginny could see them both in the mirror, frozen in tableau. Her brother's blue eyes were wide and astonished. "Charlie," she said in a small voice. "I thought I said Charlie."

Before he could respond, there was a knock on the bedroom door. It swung open, and Mrs. Weasley popped her red head around it. She smiled very faintly when she saw Charlie there. "Ginny, love," she said. "There's someone here to see you, downstairs. One of your friends from school."

Ginny dropped the brush and twisted around to look at her mother. "Is it -"

"It's not the Malfoy boy," Mrs. Weasley said quickly. "It's a red-headed girl with a rather peculiar name. Sounded like a boy's name -"

"Blaise," Ginny said. "Blaise Zabini."

"Yes," said Mrs. Weasley. "A friend of yours?"

"Not exactly," Ginny said. She looked at Charlie, who looked as surprised as she did. "I wonder what on earth she wants?"

Once inside Viktor's weapons room Harry, to Fleur's amusement, proved himself to be a typical boy. It was a lovely room, probably the nicest in the house, with a set of huge bay windows giving out onto a view of a lake, and a ceiling enchanted to show the movement of the stars as streaks of silver against a coal-blue night sky. But Harry ignored all that; he went across the room immediately to the rack of swords that hung against the far wall, and ran a hand reverently along the gleaming blades.

"Can I take one out?" he called over his shoulder to her.

Fleur draped herself on the arm of a blue leather sofa and nodded.

"Viktor said you could have anything here you liked, you heard him."



Harry nodded, and promptly seemed to forget that she was there entirely. He took down one of the swords - a slim-bladed one with a chased silver hilt - and began to examine it. Weapons bored Fleur; she sank back onto the sofa and began to read Viktor's latest chapter. It was, as usual, full of spelling errors. She frowned, and Summoned her red-feathered quill.

At least twenty minutes had passed when she looked up again. The light in the room was not good, and at first all Fleur could see of Harry at the far side of the room was his shadow, and the blade crossing his shadow as he moved, a silver streak against the dimness. She set her stack of parchments down and got to her feet. She was halfway across the room to him when he caught sight of her coming towards him and paused, lowering the sword he'd been holding. "Hey," he said. "I was just fooling around."

She waved her right hand absently at the unlit torches on the walls and the room filled with a diffuse golden glow that lit each of the individual dust motes in the air. Harry was suddenly standing under a rain of particles of light, like Danae under her shower of gold. Fleur smiled at him. "Just fooling?" she said. "You are very good."

"Good with this?" He glanced at the sword in his right hand. The sleeves of his jumper were rolled up and over several times so that they bulked out over his slender arms. His damp hair curled in dark tendrils over his forehead and at the nape of his neck. "I'm not, really," he said, "it's just Draco. *He's* good at this."

"It was you I was watching just now, was it not?"

Harry gave a little shrug. "He taught me," he said. "I fight like he does. And I'm not bad. But just like I'll always be a little better at Quidditch than he is, he'll always be a little better at this than I am. I mean, he started learning when he was about eight. I just started in June."

"In that case I retract the compliment," she said in a dry tone.

For a moment she thought he was going to be angry, but he just smiled wryly. "I believe in credit where it's due, is all," Harry said. He leaned the sword against the wall behind him and glanced around. "Viktor has an awful lot of weapons for a Quidditch player," he remarked.

"But not a lot of weapons for someone in the resistance movement," Fleur said. "Quite a few are enchanted, although Viktor believes it is worthwhile for wizards to learn to use some Muggle weapons. He's been working on convincing the others in the Order to use them - oh, come, Harry you did know Viktor was in the resistance movement, didn't you? You're a bright boy."

"Not really," Harry said. "Hermione's the smart one."

"You miss her," observed Fleur.

Harry said nothing, but reached out and picked up the jewel-hilted dagger that sat on the nearby mantel. The blade was sheathed in tooled leather into which the initials VK had been burned. "Nice knife," he said.

"It's a throwing knife," Fleur said, and held out her hand. "Give it to me."

Harry handed it over and watched as she unsheathed the blade and took aim at one of the circular targets against the far wall. It resembled a standard dartboard: a ring of concentric circles on corkboard, the largest blue, then red, then black. The knife left Fleur's hand with a faint hissing sound, flew through the air, and stuck firmly in the red circle, its hilt vibrating with the force of impact.

"Nicely done," said Harry, sounding as if he really were impressed. "You must have trained to do that."

"Not really," Fleur replied. "I only had Viktor show me how to do it about a month ago. The first time I almost took off his ear. After that..." she shrugged. "Easy."

"I guess you just have a knack."

"No," Fleur said crossly. "It's nothing like that, Harry. It's because I am a Magid. And so are you, although you hardly act like it."

"What, because I got kicked out of Magid school? That wasn't my fault."

Fleur made an exasperated noise. "*Idiot!* That's not what I meant." She snapped her fingers, and the knife flew back to her hand, the hilt smacking her palm. "How did you think you got so good with that sword

in just a few months? Did you think it was because Draco was just such a wonderful teacher?"

Harry looked slightly baffled. Obviously he had thought something very like that. "Well," he said hesitantly. "Ever since the Polyjuice mixup, I can feel some things he feels, and I know some things that he knows -"

"Yes, and that does account for some of it." Fleur relented slightly. "But of course, that connection is because you are both Magids as well. It is an important part of you, Harry, this quality of yours - this talent you possess."

"I don't possess any talents," Harry said flatly. "Except for Quidditch and not dying. I'm good at not dying."

Fleur handed him the knife. "Throw it," she said.

He took it, but stared at her blankly. "I don't know how. I'll just break a window or something."

"Then I'll *reparo* it," Fleur snapped. "Really, Harry. You know what Magids are? They are not just talented wizards, although they are that. They are *warriors*. Why do you think you're so good at Quidditch? Speed of flight, agility, swiftness and fierceness and strategic thinking, that is what makes an exceptional Seeker. And many can train to do it, like Viktor did, but you can do it naturally. It came to you as simply as breathing, didn't it? And so did the sword, the first time you picked it up. You were born to stand up and fight, Harry. Not to drown your talents in self-doubt and waste your spirit in flying around on broomsticks."

"I *like* Quidditch," was all Harry said, but there was a certain gleam in his eye as he looked at the knife in his hand.

"Throw it," Fleur said.

Harry threw it. It sailed across the room and stuck in the very outer part of the corkboard, at the edge of the red. "Bugger," Harry said. He snapped his fingers as Fleur had done, and the knife returned to his grasp. "I told you I wouldn't be any good."

"You are trying the wrong way," Fleur said severely. "Remember the first time you got on a broomstick and flew? It was easy, wasn't it?"

"Well, I wasn't thinking about whether it would be hard at the time," Harry said. "I was thinking about -"

Fleur cocked an eyebrow curiously. "What?"

"Malfoy," Harry said, and smiled as if he couldn't help it. He drew his hand back, ready to throw the knife again. "I was thinking about knocking Draco off his broom."

"He is all right, isn't he, Harry?" Fleur asked, her tone serious. "Draco, I mean."

Harry didn't look at her. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, I couldn't imagine that if he were all right he would have let you go off to kill the Dark Lord on your own," Fleur said, "nor would Hermione. Since they care for you so much."

The knife flew out of Harry's hand, sailed across the room, and hit a small Tiffany lamp. It went over in a shower of shattered multicolored glass. "I told you," Harry said, looking aggrieved.

"Oh dear," said Fleur. "Viktor's favorite lamp."

Harry snapped his fingers and the knife flew back to him; he caught it gingerly this time. "I'd rather not talk about Hermione or Draco," he said, "if you don't mind."

"Well, I do mind," said Fleur. "I have not sat beside your bed for three days and listened to you raving in your sleep for nothing. Why are they not with you when you need them so desperately? I cannot imagine anything you could have done to drive either of them away, they care for you too much."

"Maybe they ran off with each other," Harry suggested.

"If you are going to lie to me," said Fleur, "you are going to have to think of a better lie than that."

Harry sighed. "All right, if you must know," he said, "I left without telling them where I was going."

"You did *what?*"

Harry took a wary step back. "You're not going to slap me, are you? I remember when you slapped Draco."

Fleur took a deep breath. "No, I am not going to slap you, although I won't say it wouldn't do you some good if I did." She shook her head.

"Dumbledore must be so disappointed in you, Harry."

Harry's face changed at that; his green eyes went wide and stunned as if she really had slapped him. "I didn't have a choice," he said. "It was the only way to keep them safe."

"Safe from *what?*" Fleur demanded, and held up her hand before he could reply. "I know what you're going to say, Harry. You're going to say it's the only way to keep them safe from Voldemort. But Harry, if you fail, if you die, who will keep them safe? Who will keep us all safe?"

Harry's mouth opened a little at that. There were bruises on his lower lip where he had bitten it during the fever. He looked very young. "Well," he began. "Dumbledore might..."

"Albus Dumbledore has put his faith in you," Fleur said. "But who have you put your faith in, Harry? Is there no one worthy? Are you so arrogant that you must stand alone?"

"It isn't *arrogance*," Harry snapped, his voice suddenly hot with anger. "I - I couldn't bear it if anything happened to either of them. I wouldn't be any good to anyone if it did."

"And how selfish is that?" Fleur demanded. "That is hardly about them; that is about you and what you need and your own fear of weakness. I can tell you now, Harry, if either of them died, you could bear it. You would bear it, for as long as you had to, until you were done, because that is your nature and that is *why* Dumbledore has put his faith in you. You were not given to us so that you could save your friends and the ones you love, you were given to us that you might save us all. And if you save them in doing so, then we can all be glad for it, and you will have

preserved your heart as well as your life. But you cannot expect that you could be willing to sacrifice one without being willing to sacrifice the other."

"So what are you saying?" Harry's eyes flashed. "That I should let my friends lie down and die for me, for my own personal, pointless quest?"

"Your quest is neither pointless nor personal," said Fleur. "And if they want to lie down and die for you, if they must lie down and die for you, then *you have to let them*. There is a reason you have the friends you do, Harry. There is a reason you chose them all: Ron, Hermione, Draco as well, and it is not just because you love them, but because you need them. You need them as much as all of us need you."

Harry looked at her, and the bright angry light faded slowly out of his eyes. "I'm prepared to die," he said. "I've thought a lot about it. But I'm not prepared for *them* to die."

"And were you prepared for Cedric's death? Death comes, Harry, whether we are prepared for it or not. You above all people should know that."

"I dreamed I died," Harry said. "Last night. I dreamed I was a ghost in the Manor, and that ten years had passed, and I had done everything I had set out to do, I'd won the battle, and I'd died, but they were still alive. Everyone was still alive but me. And they'd forgotten all about me. It was like I had never existed at all." He looked down at the knife in his hand. "Maybe I'm more selfish than I thought," he said, and flung it at the wall.

It whipped through the air and struck the target dead center, driving through the corkboard and into the wall behind it. Split by the force of the impact, the corkboard cracked and the two split halves fell to the floor. The knife, driven up to the hilt in the wall, vibrated gently.

"Don't tell me," Harry said. "That was Viktor's favorite wall."

Fleur giggled, and waved her hand at the target board. It sailed back up into the air, the pieces joining smoothly to each other, and re-affixed itself to the wall, just to the left of the knife. "Your skills are not only warrior's skills, Harry," she said, her tone gentle for the first time. "You can use them as well to fix what you have broken."

Harry gave her a crooked smile. "Maybe you should be the one saving the world," he said.

"I would not want to," she said. "And I am sorry for you, that you must be the one to do it."

"It's all right," Harry said, his green eyes sharp and focused and even a little cold; Fleur fought the urge to shiver. "At least now I know what I have to do next."

Before Fleur could reply, the double doors to the weapons room opened, and Viktor came in. His ears were red from cold, but he seemed pleased. Fleur could tell he seemed pleased, because he was beetling slightly less than usual. "Come, Harry," he said. "It is time for us to go."

The back Ministry entrance Percy had directed them too was through the gardens, and so that was where they went, slipping around the building through the rose bushes that grew, high and laden with unseasonal blossoms, up to the lower windows of the building. Thorns caught at Hermione's jeans and her wool jumper and she swore under her breath as Draco pulled her forward, his hand clamped around her wrist.

He turned back and looked at her, amused. "Language, sweetheart."

"Draco, your jacket -"

He pulled up short as a two-inch thorn ripped its way through the sleeve of his black suede coat. "Bloody *damn*," he said, and went on to mutter something that sounded like "clucking clam it all to clucking bell."

Hermione giggled.

The back entrance turned out to be a pair of tall black doors set impressively between two carved marble pillars. The same roses twined up the pillars and across the top of the door. "Roses in January," Hermione whispered, rubbing her cold hands together. "Rather romantic for the Ministry."

Draco, brushing fallen pale-red petals out of his hair and off the shoulders of his coat, made a face. "My heart is going pitter-pat as we speak. Have you got the passwords?"

"Mmm-hmm." Hermione took the parchment out of her pocket. She was about to hand it to Draco when she paused.

"Yes?" he said, impatiently.

"Just looking at you," she said, and she was - partially because he looked healthier than he had in days. The cold had flushed his pale cheeks. Under the long coat he wore a dark green jumper and the color lent a greenish cast to his eyes. "I don't know why, but I was thinking that despite what he said, Harry would be proud of us for doing this."

Draco cocked an eyebrow. "*Hermione*," he drawled, drawing out the "i" in her name. "I think it has been well established that Harry is an idiot, and therefore your comment, while doubtless *intended* to encourage, is not exactly filling my heart with complete confidence in this plan of ours. So chop-chop, or I'll think better of all this, vault over the railing and flee into the night."

"Harry is *not* an idiot," Hermione said.

Draco cast his eyes heavenward. "Oh Lord," he intoned, leaning back dramatically against the doors. "Why didst thou smite me with these Gryffindors? What have I done to deserve this fate? I mean, all right, so there was some envying going on, and plenty of lusting and not nearly enough sex, but does that make me a bad person? I ask you -"

"*Vera Prima Materia*," Hermione snapped, and the doors flew open. Draco, who had been leaning against them, yelped as his feet went out from under him and he fell backward into the corridor. Shoving the parchment back into her pocket, she sauntered through the doors and stood over Draco, who was just sitting up, wincing slightly. "I said the password," she said innocently. "Did you notice?"

Draco rubbed the back of his neck and eyed her resentfully. "Slytherin," he said.

"You say that as if it were a bad thing," Hermione said, and smiled at him sweetly. "Get up, Malfoy. We have work to do."

"Promise me, Harry," Viktor said, looking very stern with his brows beetling and his mouth set in a glower, "Promise me you won't go outside the flat after sunset."

"Er," Harry said. They were standing in the entryway of the flat in Prague, and Viktor had his cloak thrown over his arm. They'd carried everything into the bedroom (where a very annoyed note from Aiden Lynch, apparently more than slightly cheesed off at being told to clear out of the flat immediately for no apparent reason, was stuck into the frame of a mirror), and left it all piled on the bed. Viktor, seeming anxious and withdrawn, had exhibited no desire to show Harry around, which, Harry thought, was just as well - all he wanted at the moment was to be left alone. "I won't, but - is there any food in the flat?"

"Probably not," Viktor said. "Aiden seems to survive entirely upon lager, chocolate, and hand-rolled cigarettes. Do you smoke?"

"No," Harry said. "But I do think I'll probably get awfully hungry before tomorrow, you know. Is it that you're worried I'll be recognized?"

"Partly," Viktor admitted. "I suppose it is all right if you go out briefly - but promise me you will come back before the sun sets."

"All right," Harry said, "I will - but why?"

"The agents of Voldemort often prowl the streets after dark," Viktor said. "I do not want them seeing you, and besides, they are dangerous." He glowered again. "Swear it," he said.

"All right, all right," Harry said. "I will, on one condition."

Viktor's glower deepened. "What?"

Harry told him.

Viktor looked relieved, or at least, slightly less glowery. "I can promise that, easily, and I do. And will return tomorrow, with all the aid I can bring you," he added. "Money, transportation - everything."

"Viktor, I don't know how to thank you, or Fleur -"

"We do not do this for thanks," Viktor said. "You know why we do it."

Harry remembered his conversation with Fleur in the weapons room at Viktor's house. *If your friends want to lie down and die for you, then you must let them.* "I know," he said.

Viktor didn't smile at that - he almost never smiled - but he nod gravely at Harry. "Happy New Year, Harry," he said, and Apparated away, leaving Harry staring after him in surprise.

Ginny sent Charlie downstairs ahead of her to greet Blaise while she changed into her nicest robes. When she arrived in the kitchen, Blaise and Charlie were already seated at the table, among the plates and cups that had not yet been cleared away from breakfast. Blaise wore an elegant set of patterned green robes over a dark red shift, and was gazing across the table at Charlie as if she were very hungry and he was a buttered crumpet.

"You are going to come back and teach us after Christmas, aren't you, Mr. Weasley?" Blaise was saying, her chin propped on her ringed hand. "You're the best Care of Magical Creatures teacher we've ever had, by far."

"That's very gratifying to hear, Blaise," Charlie said, toying with the side of a teacup and looking acutely uncomfortable. "It depends on what happens with my brother."

Blaise blinked. "With Percy?"

"With *Ron*," Charlie said, with emphasis. "The one who was kidnapped by the Dark Lord."

"Oh," said Blaise. "That brother."

Ginny cleared her throat. Blaise swung her head around, her earrings bobbing. "I'm here," Ginny said. "You wanted to talk to me, Blaise?"

Charlie looked relieved. "I suppose you two want to talk," he said, getting to his feet and heading to the door. "I'll be in the living room if anyone needs me."

Ginny took the chair her brother had vacated and sat down opposite Blaise. "Are you actually here to see me, or did you just want to gape at my brother?"

Blaise allowed herself a cursory smile. "Well, he is nice to look at, but that's not why I'm here." She dipped a long-fingered hand into the bodice of her robes, drew out a rolled piece of parchment, and handed it to Ginny. "Draco sent me," she said. "Draco Malfoy."

"As opposed to the other Dracos we know," muttered Ginny, "it being such a popular name and all," and she opened the letter without looking at Blaise. She tried to not to let her heartbeat quicken at the sight of the familiar handwriting, but it was impossible.

Dear Ginny, I hope this letter finds you well and that you have so far withstood the ravages of your dimwitted agrarian kin. I'm sending this letter with Blaise; I assume you remember her? I know you're not too terribly fond of her, probably because she's really very attractive and has seen me naked on a number of occasions. However, I'm hoping you two can put personal differences behind you, as she has some rather important news. Please sit down with her and have her explain to you, in this order 1) What Pansy's been up to 2) What she knows about the Slytherins and their secret plans 3) What she knows about your brother and what happened to him.

She knows why you fell off your broom during that match, too. Have her tell you. I'd tell you myself if I felt safe putting it down in a letter. I owe you that much.

Signed,

Draco Thomas Hephaestus St. John Vivian Augustus Malfoy, III, Esq.

Ginny's head jerked up, and she stared at Blaise, all the words in the letter temporarily forgotten except seven: *your brother and what happened to him*. "What do you know about Ron?" she demanded, her voice suddenly gone thin and very high. "If you know where he is -"

Blaise, looking absolutely shocked, pushed her chair back from the table. "I know nothing of the sort!"

Ginny thrust the letter across the table accusingly. After a moment, Blaise took it and smoothed it out on the table. With a wary look, she bent to read it. After a moment, she sat back and looked at Ginny with a blank expression.

"So?" Ginny said. "Is it true?"

"Yes," Blaise said. "I have seen Draco naked on a number of occasions."

Ginny banged her fist down on the table and the cutlery rattled. "I mean about Ron. What do you know about what happened to him?"

Blaise let out a long breath. "Damn Draco," she said, her voice very flat. "Damn his little black heart to hell."

Ginny blinked. "What..."

Blaise put the palms of her hands against her eyes. "I don't know where your brother is," she said. "All I can tell you is what I told Draco. I can't do any better than that."

"Then tell me what you told him," Ginny said quietly.

Blaise nervously twisted a curl of red hair around her index finger. "It started at the end of the summer," she said, in a monotone. "Maybe even as far back as the end of last year, for some of us, but not for me. Some of our parents - not all of them, of course, not everyone in Slytherin is one of our group - started warning us that something was coming, and we'd better be protected. They had protection charms to dispense. They were Transfigured - jewelry for the girls, cufflinks and buttons for the boys. We had to wear them all the time. We were told not to give them to anyone else, or there would be dire consequences. I knew Draco wasn't to have any, or to be told what was going on. So I didn't tell him."

"You didn't tell him?" Ginny burst out angrily. "How could you? He was your boyfriend!"

Blaise laughed drily. "That's what Pansy said. Of course, at that point, she was sleeping with your brother."

"I know," Ginny said. "And *why?* I mean," she added loyally, "not that there's anything wrong with my brother..."

"She wasn't supposed to sleep with him," Blaise clarified. "She was supposed to disguise herself as Hermione and get information from him. Pansy always was a little overzealous. I doubt her father's very pleased with her at the moment. Especially since she developed a perfectly ridiculous crush on your brother and insisted on giving him one of the protection charms."

"I thought she wasn't allowed to do that."

"She wasn't, but she asked anyway, and of course she was told it was impossible. So she decided to make her own. And that," Blaise said, with some relish, as if she were telling a particularly gruesome ghost story, "is pretty dark magic, let me tell you."

"But they're just protection charms," said Ginny.

"The only way to protect against dark magic is to engage in dark magic," Blaise said; Ginny wondered privately if this was actually true, but held her tongue. "And this type of protection charm requires some part of a Dark creature - acromantula feet, kelpie hair, incubus blood. Pansy decided to make a charm out of basilisk eyes. It was the strongest kind of charm there was."

Ginny suppressed a shudder. Her experience with basilisks had not been a positive one.

"For that," Blaise went on, "she had to have a basilisk. So she made one."

"She MADE a basilisk?"

"Well, all you really need is a chicken egg, a toad, and a strong stomach."

"A toad?" Ginny goggled. "Oh! *Trevor!*"

"Terrible name for a toad," said Blaise dispassionately. "Anyway, so she made a baby basilisk, and killed it before it got large enough to be dangerous. She took its eyes and mad a cloak pin from them, and gave it to your brother."

"She's completely mad," Ginny said. "She ought to be locked up, she - she gave my brother a pin with basilisk eyes in it? Isn't that *dangerous?*"

"It was only a baby, and the charms on the pin were very strong," said Blaise. "It shouldn't have been able to harm him, or anyone. But then it started to malfunction. She was never sure why. Maybe there was something unusual about your brother -"

"He's a Diviner," Ginny said in a blank voice.

"Maybe that was it," Blaise said, although she sounded dubious. "Or maybe the charms she put on it to bind the power of the basilisk's eyes weren't strong enough. Either way, it started acting up whenever Weasley felt threatened, although I doubt he knew what was happening. Because the Basilisk was a baby, the charm couldn't kill, but it Stunned Malcolm, it knocked you off your broom -"

"That's ridiculous! My brother would never feel threatened by me!"

"I didn't say he did. I doubt that it was even directed at you, you just happened to look across the pitch at that moment. It was probably directed at Draco or one of our Beaters."

Ginny pressed the heel of her hand to her forehead. "I'm getting a headache," she moaned.

"Pansy tried fixing the pin after that - she was always having your brother meet up with her and forcing him to help her brew up all sorts of odd concoctions. Our whole room was covered in mugwort and rue and all sorts of nasty things. I've no idea if it helped - it must have, since as far as I know he hasn't Stunned anyone since. But you lot found out the truth about him and Pansy pretty soon after that, so that's all I know. She never talked to him again."

"You mean he never talked to her again," Ginny muttered.

Blaise waved a dismissive hand. "Whatever."

"I thought you were friends with Pansy," Ginny said.

"I am - I mean, I was. Until I found out she was the one who shot Draco with that arrow."

"She *what?*" Ginny reeled and gripped the table.

"Well, her father ordered her to, and I think Lucius Malfoy was the one who told him to in the first place. Look, I really don't know much about it, and I can't tell you much more. I don't want to get anyone else in trouble besides Pansy."

"Well, if you can't tell me anything why did you even come? Just because Draco asked you to? I thought you didn't care about him."

Blaise's eyes snapped wide open. "Not care about him?" she said. "How dare you? You don't even know him!"

"I know him," Ginny retorted angrily.

"You *don't*." Blaise's voice was firm. "He's just some blond Harry Potter in your head. Practically a Gryffindor. And maybe he's happy enough playing that part; it isn't like I don't know what he gets out of it. But that's not who he is. He's not some sweet uncomplicated fair-haired hero who's going to carry you off into the sunset. He's flawed and damaged and *unfeeling* ...you Gryffindors, you don't understand capriciousness or complications. Everything's so straightforward for you. You expect simple love from someone who's never even learned to *like* things properly."

"He's different than he used to be," Ginny began - but Blaise cut her off.

"How can you say he's different when you never knew him before? *I* knew him. Not the Draco you all know, but the way he was. I remember when Moody turned him into a ferret, and you all thought that was so funny. He came back to the dungeons covered in bruises - great big bruises the size of tea saucers. One of the bones in his hand was broken. And did you know he used to get so nervous before every game with Gryffindor he'd

be sick? Sometimes on and off all day? None of the other teams, just Gryffindor."

"You can't ask me to pity him the way he was," Ginny said. "I can't even pity him now."

"I'd never ask a Gryffindor to pity a Slytherin." Blaise's head went up. "Never mind. I can see you don't understand. I've told you what I know." She began to rise to her feet. "It's up to you what you do with it."

"Wait." Ginny got to her feet so quickly she almost knocked over her chair. She moved to block the other from the door, and Blaise stopped and looked at her angrily. "I want you to stay and tell Sirius and Professor Lupin what you just told me."

Blaise looked horrified. "Run to a *teacher*? I would never -!"

"It's not running," Ginny said hurriedly. "They'll be here any minute anyway. And they're not just teachers - they're Aurors. They'll know what to do. And they're friends of mine."

Blaise's chest was rising and falling swiftly. "I didn't come here to betray all my friends to you -"

"Then why did you come here?" Ginny said softly.

The other girl replied without looking at her. "I don't know."

"Sirius and Lupin will know all sorts of questions to ask you that I couldn't possibly think of," Ginny said. "Especially about Pansy and about whatever it was she was getting Ron to cook up with her, with the mugwort and the rue, and about her dad, and about Draco being poisoned, and if you really want to help him, then you have to stay. Because I know this is hard for you to do, Blaise, but if you only do it halfway then you might as well not have done it at all."

Blaise's eyes were full of angry tears. She swiped at them hastily with the back of her hand, smearing her eye makeup. It just made her look prettier. "Fine," she said. "I'll stay. But -"

"But what?"

"I need a drink," Blaise said, and sniffled.

Ginny started to laugh. "There's a bottle of Ogden's Old Firewhiskey in the cabinet. Will that do?"

Blaise smiled. It was the first time Ginny had ever seen her really smile, and the difference was pronounced. When she really smiled, she had dimples. "That'll do fine."

Not too terribly surprisingly, once they found themselves inside the offices of the Department of Transportation and Floo Travel, Hermione found herself going through the stacks of files alone. Draco's contribution was to sit on the edge of the desk, swing his feet, and clean under his fingernails with a heavyweight silver letter-opener with a handle in the shape of a sea serpent.

"You're no help," Hermione remarked, pushing her hair behind her ears. The files for even one day's worth of Floo Hub transport were extensive. Long blue columns of names and destinations showed who had left, while corresponding red columns indicated arrivals. So far she had not recognized any of the names.

Draco's shoulders lifted in a faint shrug. "I feel my purpose here is largely ornamental," he said.

"Only because you're not doing anything. You could at least move the parchments I'm done with."

Draco looked as if he were considering this. "Nah," he said, finally. He hopped down off the desk, and looked consideringly around the room. Then, with an air of gentle determination, he began to scratch words into the soft wood paneling of the wall with the tip of the letter opener.

"Draco?" Hermione asked. "What are you writing?"

He stepped back so they could both admire his work. It was a limerick.

There was a young wizard from Bournemouth

Who claimed that his wand was enormous

Two naughty young witches

Ripped off his britches

And found -

"Really," Hermione said, exasperated, "what *have* you got against the Department of Transportation?"

Draco shrugged. "What have I got *for* them? Besides, they'll enjoy it. A whole new look for their mundane office decor."

Hermione turned back to sorting through the files. She was beginning to despair. There was a stack of parchments as thick as her wrist, and while the lists of names seemed very complete, the times scribbled next to them were in no particular order. "If we don't find anything..." her voice was hesitant, "Do we have a backup plan?"

"I have a backup plan," Draco said. He had moved on to the opposite wall, and was busy carving rude hieroglyphics under the windowsill. "It involves going back to the hotel bar, drinking sixteen Slow Comfortable Skrewts, drunkenly staggering upstairs and collapsing into bed, where I will pen an epic nine-stanza poem entitled 'Man, That's Grapefruit.'"

"You hate poetry," Hermione protested.

"Have you ever *had* a Slow Comfortable Skrewt?" Draco waved the letter opener expressively. "They're so powerful that two sips will make you hallucinate. Four sips and everyone else in the bar hallucinates right along with you. Eight sips and you wake up a week later in Milton Keynes, naked and tied to a radiator while a bloke named Bradley wearing a pair of your undershorts tells you that two days previously you turned his prized collection of Muggle lawn ornaments into a bowl of suet pudding and if you don't turn them back posthaste, he'll break both your kneecaps with a toffee hammer. Not," Draco added, lowering his long-lashed eyelids demurely, "that this has ever happened to me."

"Draco, you couldn't possibly break someone's kneecaps with a toffee hammer. It would be like trying to decapitate them with a nutmeg grater. Toffee hammers are about an inch long."

Draco eyed her resentfully. "That's not the point."

"I know," Hermione said, shoving papers aside. "You were being funny. But I'm not in the mood."

Draco hopped back up on the desk. "You could at least pretend you still find me amusing, you know," he said.

"To what purpose?"

Draco had subsided into a full-on sulk. "You are tired of me," he declared. "Obviously, you have found someone more dashing, more alluring -"

"Viktor Krum!" Hermione exclaimed.

Draco let out a wail and dropped the letter opener. "I was *joking!* Not that slack-jawed Slavic gorilla! His *knuckles* brush the ground and he walks like a duck! I never walk like a duck. I prowl, I strut, I slither, I *glide* -"

'BE QUIET," Hermione thundered. "And don't scream like that, someone will hear you. Honestly, Draco. What I was trying to say is that I found Viktor's name in the files. Draco, around what time was it that Harry Portkeyed himself out of the club? Did you come straight to the office afterward?"

For a moment, there was no answer. Finally, Hermione glanced up. Draco was staring at her, his exaggerated playacting and tipsy mirth quite gone. "I did," he said. "I left straightaway to find you."

"Then it looks like about a half an hour later, Viktor Krum left the Floo Hub with the rest of his Bulgarian teammates. Their names aren't listed but there were seven of them. Eight, counting Viktor."

"Too many for a team," Draco said, sitting up straighter. "One too many."

Hermione's hands tightened on the parchment. "Viktor. It has to have been Viktor. Harry knows, him, trusts him -"

Draco leaped down from the desk and came to stand beside her. Together they stared down at the words inked in blue: *Viktor Krum (D, Blg. Capt.) & Teammates (7) London - Sofia*. "They went to the Floo Hub in Sofia," he said. "From there I assume Viktor would Apparate or Portkey home?"

Hermione nodded. "His family's home is outside Sofia. If we had a fireplace we could try to call on him at his house - there's plenty of Floo powder here -"

"But we can't Floo internationally without a Hub," Draco protested.

"From the Ministry you can Floo anywhere," Hermione said quietly. "No restrictions."

Draco inhaled a startled breath. "Floo Powder," he said. "There must be some in here -"

"In the cabinets," Hermione said. "Don't take too much - they'll know we've been here. Although," she added dryly, looking around at the mess Draco had made of the walls, "I suppose they're not likely to miss that, are they?"

Draco already had his hand inside the cabinet on the wall. "They'll think it was burglars," he said.

"Burglars who broke in and redecorated?"

"Gay burglars," he said, and with a fiendish grin, retrieved a canister of Industrial Strength Floo Powder from the cabinet. "Got it," he said. "Now, I know where there's a fireplace. A huge one. Upstairs, in my father's office." He slammed the cabinet door shut. "Come on, I'll show you."

Furiously, Rhiannon tossed back her mane of honeyed silken hair, glaring at the man who stood before her - the man who had killed her father, dishonored her mother, driven her brother mad, and doomed her true love Tristan to a lingering, painful imprisonment deep beneath the dungeon moat. "You cannot break my spirit, Morgan," she hissed.

The Dark Wizard Morgan chuckled, a deep low rumble like a bassoon. His laugh, like everything else about him, was ineffably manly - from the muscular forearms revealed beneath the foaming lace of his sleeves to the coal-blue eyes and tangles of raven hair, he was a gorgeous slab of masculinity. He was, she reminded herself hastily, also Evil. "You will cooperate," he said to her. "Or your lover Tristan will die by my hand - although not before I have tortured him sufficiently."

Rhiannon gasped, and her milky bosom heaved beneath the thin gold satin of her gown. "You wouldn't," she moaned.

"I would," Morgan asserted, leaning back against the enormous ornate stone fireplace in a satisfied manner, an action which caused his satin breeches to tighten across his narrow hips and flat, muscular abdomen. "I'd enjoy it, too. I am evil after all, and take great pleasure in acts of dastardly, if pointless, sadism."

Rhiannon averted her eyes. "What is it you want from me, Morgan?"

"That should be obvious," he purred. "You, my sweet." He began to move towards her, his lean graceful form like a panther's. Rhiannon trembled - truly he was Evil, but since the moment she met him he had stirred her passions as no other man had, before or since -

"Goodness, this book is trash," Blaise said, tossing *Trousers Ablaze* onto the nightstand and settling back against the pillows heaped against Ginny's headboard. "Did Draco really give it to you?"

"Mm. For Christmas," Ginny said, leaning her head back against the wall. Her head was spinning rather - she'd never gotten drunk for absolutely no reason before, but it felt good. They drunk the remains of bottle of Firewhiskey and half a bottle of spiced Mermish wine, and Ginny felt pleasantly lightheaded.

"More wine?" asked Blaise, holding the bottle in one hand and a slim-stemmed glass, very delicately, in the other. Her long hair had come out of its velvet ribbon and it slipped in thick heavy locks over her shoulders.

"Just give me the bottle," Ginny said, and Blaise handed it to her with a chuckling laugh.

"The whole bottle?" she said. "You Gryffindors never do anything halfway."

Ginny made a face. "You sound just like Draco, the way you say 'You Gryffindors'," she said. "Like you were saying, 'You sacks of Bubotubercus.'"

Blaise flopped back among the cushions - well, flop wasn't really the word, like Draco, she was far too graceful to flop. She leaned, and bent a discerning gaze on Ginny. "So that book was pretty racy," Blaise observed. "I'm surprised Draco would give a girl a book like that - how far did you get with him, anyway?"

Ginny choked on her wine. "How far did I what with who?"

Blaise frowned. "Must I spell it out?"

"Yes," Ginny said, ungraciously.

Blaise spelled it out. Ginny felt herself blush. "Oh," she said, weakly. "No, we never, I mean, I never -"

"With Draco or with anyone?"

"With anyone," Ginny said.

Blaise smiled. Her green eyes sparkled. "Innocent," she said. "Aren't you?"



Ginny blinked. Innocence conjured up in her mind images of ribbons and sunny days and hide-and-seek and Seamus smiling down at her with steady blue eyes. She remembered Tom kissing her with her own blood on his mouth and looked away from Blaise.

"I suppose I am," she said. "And what about you, have you -?"

Blaise shrugged. "Yes, but never with Draco," she said. "Although not for a lack of trying."

"Er," said Ginny, tactfully.

"I always wondered how he'd be," Blaise said thoughtfully. She looked up at Ginny, and grinned. "Haven't you?"

"Oh, he strikes me as the sort of boy who sends candy and flowers afterwards to show his appreciation. Only he sends them to *himself*."

Blaise laughed. "If it went really well, he'd probably buy himself diamond earrings."

"Then he'd get his feelings hurt because his ears aren't actually pierced."

"And he'd break up with himself."

Ginny was giggling so hard she choked on the wine. "Of course then there's always make-up sex with himself."

Blaise smirked, running a delicately manicured finger along the rim of her glass. "Of course, that doesn't change the fact that he would probably be a lot of fun," she said. "You can tell a great deal about the way a boy will be in bed from the way he plays Quidditch, you know."

Ginny thought of Draco playing Quidditch. She had certainly played opposite him for enough years to have observed him fairly closely. Where Harry was grace in flight, Draco was controlled stillness exploding into perfectly disciplined action. "Oh," she said, a little weakly, "I see what you mean."

"All that passion and control," Blaise said, showing her small white teeth in a curled smile. "He's always so precise and so careful. I used to wonder what it would take to make him lose that control..."

Ginny licked her dry lips. "What do you think it would take?"

"Love," Blaise said. "Odd, isn't it. He's a cynic, not a romantic. But there you go. I think he'd have to be in love. If he even could be." She looked up at Ginny. "Did he ever tell you he loved you?"

Ginny shook her head, but before she could say anything there was a knock on her door. Blaise drew her wand and Banished the wine bottle to the rubbish bin, then sat up, smoothing her hair, while Ginny went to the door.

It was Professor Lupin, looking very tired. "Charlie said you'd wanted to talk to me," he said. "Is it important, or can it wait?"

He sounded brusque, Ginny thought, but in a way she appreciated it; neither Lupin nor Sirius ever talked down to her, as if they thought she was a little girl. "I'm afraid not," Ginny said. "It's not me that needs to talk to you. It's Blaise."

She stood back from the door so that Lupin could see into the room. Blaise, sitting on the bed with her legs over the side, met his gaze with a cold look. Ginny thought for a moment that Blaise was going to snap and back out of their arrangement, so she stood up quickly and laid her hand on the other girl's shoulder.

"It's about Draco," she said.

Blaise gave her a wry look. Ginny ignored it.

"All right," Lupin said, looking surprised, "If you want to talk to us, Sirius and I will be downstairs in the living room, going through some paperwork."

"We'll be right down," Blaise said smoothly, cutting off Ginny, who had been about to say that they would come downstairs with him.

As soon as the door shut behind Lupin, Ginny rounded on Blaise. "You're not thinking of backing out, are you?"

Blaise looked amused. "What would you do if I was? Duel me?"

"Certainly not, Draco would be far too pleased if he ever found out. I don't want to fight with you, Blaise, it's just - why did you send Professor Lupin away?"

"So we could do *Sobrietus* charms, silly," said Blaise, drawing her wand. "You really aren't very devious, are you?"

"Well, I am a Gryffindor."

"And so we have nothing in common," Blaise twirled the wand gently. "Other than the red hair, of course."

"And that neither of us has ever gotten lucky with Draco Malfoy," Ginny added.

Blaise burst out laughing. "Well, we have that in common with the rest of the *world*," she said.

Ginny's eyes flew open. "We do?"

Blaise was still laughing. "Yes," she giggled, "didn't you *know*?" and this time, when Ginny started laughing too, Blaise reached out a hand to help steady her on her feet, and Ginny let her.

They climbed the back stairs to a wing of the Ministry Hermione had never seen before. She was accustomed to the slightly used look of the Ministry's lower floors, but here, where Draco had taken her, everything was polished mahogany and heavy velvet curtains and massive marble vases spilling unwatered, undying flowers. Draco looked at home here. She had no idea if he actually knew where he was going, or if it was merely that the sight of expensive things relaxed him.

At the end of the corridor were a set of polished ebony doors bearing a silver nameplate. *Lucius Malfoy, Chairman in perpetuity*. Draco set his hand to the latch.

"Ahem." A sharp little voice interrupted them. "Did Lucius give you permission to come to his office when he was not here?"

Both Draco and Hermione whirled around, surprised. Standing in an alcove to the left of the door, in front of a diminutive desk, was a small man, as bent as a goblin, with large bat-like ears. He wore the yellow-banded robes of a Ministry official.

Draco tossed his hair back out of his eyes and frowned. "I'm going into my father's office," he said. "And who's asking?"

"Your father -?" The small man blinked and stared. "It's *you*? I - I thought - Lucius didn't say anything to me about a visit from you, Master Malfoy," he stammered.

"How upsetting for you," Draco said. His voice was cold but polite. "However, my father is not generally very free with personal matters when it comes to total strangers."

"I'm Archibald Mortenson," said the small man, tightly. Mister Malfoy's secretary."

"And I'm his only son," said Draco, "can't you tell?" He leaned back against the door, relaxed and arrogant. "Look at me," he said. "And look at this," and he raised his hand with the Malfoy seal ring on it. "Do you really think I'm not who I say I am?"

"I know who you are," said Mortenson, showing yellowing teeth in a smile. "Nevertheless, I am in your father's complete confidence. He treats me as if I were a member of his family.."

"As, so he alternates ignoring you with occasional bouts of verbal abuse? Sounds like a hostile working environment to me. I'd ask for a raise."

"I had heard," said the secretary, "that you and your father were estranged."

"We made up," said Draco. "If you don't believe me..." he trailed off, his voice gone very languid, calmly thoughtful. "You could owl my father. Only it's quite late and he's doubtless asleep. If you wake him, I can't answer for his temper." He smiled, pleasantly.

Mortenson looked at the floor, and then at Draco, hard. It was obvious that he did not find Draco at all charming, and there was something about

his expression that Hermione did not particularly like. "Do you know when your father was last here?" he asked Draco. "Since you two are so close now."

Most people, Hermione thought, would not have noticed the slight tightening in Draco's shoulders, his infinitesimal hesitation before answering. "Four nights ago," he said. "He would have asked you to pull all the files on the Midnight Club."

Something flickered in the small man's yellow eyes. "Very well, Master Malfoy," he said. "If you need anything to assist you in your business, I will be here at my desk."

He retreated back into the shadows of the alcove. Draco's shoulders relaxed, and he flipped the latch on the door and pushed it open. Hermione followed him inside and shut the door hard behind her, aware of the secretary's lamprey-like gaze on them both.

Lucius Malfoy's office was the size of a professional Quidditch pitch. From the vast windows, hung with green brocade curtains, she could see across the river to the dome of St Paul's. The Ministry itself cast a ghost reflection into the Thames, its spires and turrets rippling on the water. Muggles, Hermione knew, would see only a formless shadow. "Draco," she said, turning away from the window, "was that absolutely necessary?"

Draco was standing by the desk, which was a mahogany affair roughly the size of a Hogwarts dinner table. A number of expensive toys littered the polished surface: a clear glass globe in which a tiny, perfect miniature of Malfoy Manor hung suspended, a strangely misshapen paperweight in the shape of a frog, and a heavy silver box sitting atop a stack of folded parchments. "He keeps the Summoning powder in here," Draco said, picking the box up and fiddling with the lid, without looking at her. "Was *what* necessary?"

"That business with your father's secretary. I mean, we could have gone back to the hotel. I'm sure they have international Floo portals -"

"Which we wouldn't be able to use until morning," Draco said. He had gotten the box open. He turned it on its side and tipped a handful of sparkling powder into his open palm. Crossing the room to the fireplace, he tossed the powder into the empty grate. There was a sound like a soft

implosion, and fire leaped up in the grate, illuminating the room, turning the edges of his hair to unlikely gold. "I'd no desire to wait, had you?"

"It's nothing to do with waiting," Hermione said, glaring at his back. She felt very angry suddenly, without being able to quite understand why. "You just wanted to prove you were still a Malfoy."

"I am," Draco said, "still a Malfoy."

"You don't have to be anything you don't want to be," Hermione said.

"*Deny thy father and refuse thy name,*" Draco said, with gentle mockery. "And to what purpose? Don't try to make me into something I'm not, Granger. I'm a Malfoy. I'm proud of it. I'm proud of my blood."

"Your blood's full of poison."

"Well," Draco said, "at least it's pure."

God, don't you even want to live, just a little bit? she thought furiously, but didn't say it. She doubted he even meant his words to be stinging; probably he didn't, because for him, this was simply the way things were. But it sparked a sudden bitterness in her, a small corrupting rage against someone she loved very much. "And you wouldn't give that up, would you?" she said, "Not even to live a little longer?"

"No," he said. His hands were in his pockets; he was facing away from her, but she could sense the tension in his posture.

"Would you give it up to have Harry love you the way you want him to?" she asked.

His shoulders stiffened and he turned to look at her. "Because you don't think he does?"

"No," she said. "I don't think so. Do you?"

The flame in the grate turned a dark red, signaling its readiness. "Why are you so angry at me?" he said, and he sounded a little bewildered, as if he couldn't quite take in what she'd said. "What have I done?"

Hermione bit her lip, unsure if she knew the answer to that question. She was already beginning to feel that she had just done something horrible. Without looking at him, she went past him to the fireplace and knelt down and drew her wand. She held it out towards the flames. "*Auditori*," she whispered.

There was a distant crackling noise that reminded Hermione of the static on a telephone line. She looked up at Draco, standing behind her. "Something's happening," she said.

He didn't reply.

There was another distant crackle, and then a familiar voice said something Hermione didn't understand. She struggled to remember the bits of Bulgarian she'd picked up fourth year. "Viktor," she called, "It's Hermione. Hermione Granger. "*Chuvash li me?*"

"*Koi e?...*" A moment passed, and then Viktor's head appeared among the flames. His thick black hair was tangled and there was what looked like soap on his face. He glowered at her. "Hermione," he said. It still sounded like Her-my-own when he said it, but she let it go. "Is everything all right? Is there an emergency?"

"We're looking for Harry, Viktor," Hermione said. "It's very, very important that we find him. I know he was in the Floo Hub with you the other day, you must have seen him. Did he come through with you?"

Viktor looked at her. His expression was entirely blank. "I have no idea what you are talking about," he said. "I have not seen Harry since the summer. I am afraid, Hermione, that I cannot help you."

When Ron finally awoke, it was to the sound of giggling. He rolled over in bed and groaned.

Having spent several days sleeping in filthy clothes on a hard marble floor covered with smashed chess pieces, Ron had been relieved to find that the quarters Rhysenn brought him to were extremely well-appointed. Thick rugs covered the stone floor, and incense smoked in a claw-footed gold brazier next to the four-poster bed. There was a bathtub behind a screen,

filled with scented water. There were no windows, but it seemed a small complaint considering that he had been expecting something a little more like the deepest dungeon under the castle moat, and a little less like a nice hotel.

The first thing Rhysenn did was order him to undress and pass his clothes out to her through the door. Ron complied, muttering to himself. He was left with nothing to wear but a long silk robe printed all over with gold and red dragons. It had obviously been made for someone shorter, as it barely reached his knees. "I resemble a scarlet woman," Ron muttered, glaring at his reflection in the gigantic gold-backed mirror that hung opposite the bed. "I wonder if this is the dark lord's idea of psychological torture?"

Wondering if Voldemort was using the mirror to spy on him, Ron took the opportunity to open his robe and do a brief and disrespectful naked dance. Then he bathed, and went to bed.

Later he would realize that he had underestimated the toll that several days spent badly frightened, with little sleep and less food, coupled with the immense stress of his Divination visions, would take on his body and mind. As soon as his head hit the pillow, Ron fell into a profound death-like sleep that lasted for two days. He awoke at intervals, found food placed on the table near his bed, gobbled it down, and fell back asleep, curled in a tight ball, the coverlet dragged over his head.

He had no dreams at all.

When he awoke for good on the morning of the third day, he found Rhysenn stretched catlike along a nearby velvet chaise. She was wearing an apple-green transparent outfit barely held together with black ribbons and a pair of thigh-high stockings. "Why hello, darling," she said. "Did you have a nice sleep?"

"Don't call me pet names," Ron muttered, pushing himself into a sitting position. His head felt muzzy from sleep. "We're not ... friends."

"I never said anything about wanting to be friends with you," she said with a throaty chuckle, and with a wave of one long slim hand, pointed to what looked like a stack of folded fabric on the table next to the bed. "I brought you clothes. The Dark Lord wants to see you."

Ron looked at her resentfully. "Don't you get tired of being half naked all the time?"

"Not as tired as I get of you being dressed all the time," she replied, examining a blood-red nail for imperfections. "Now get out of bed."

Ron pushed the covers back, still glaring at her. "I'm not getting changed with you watching."

"Then you're not getting changed at all. The Dark Lord asked me to stay here and make sure you dressed yourself properly. Anyway, it isn't as if I haven't seen it all already." She waved her hand airily towards the mirror. "That was quite a performance. I especially enjoyed the high kicks."

Blushing furiously, Ron flung himself out of bed and snatched up the clothes. He retreated to the other side of the room to get dressed with his back turned, ignoring Rhysenn's giggling. "Keep your eyes closed," he snapped, positive she was peeking over her shoulder at him.

"I promise you," she purred, "I can't see a thing."

The clothes were complicated, not quite like any he had seen before. The trousers were a very thick, supple material that laced up the front; then there was a shirt with ribbons woven through the sleeves and lace around the cuffs, a jacket that went over it, and a long cloak that went on over the whole thing. The cloak was a heavy dark blue velvet with a gilt lining, and fastened in front with a number of complicated brass clasps. He had been fiddling with it for a good five minutes when Rhysenn, with an exasperated clucking noise, stalked across the room and batted his hands away from his throat. "You're doing it all wrong," she muttered, flicking the clasps closed with her agile fingers.

'And you're acting like my mother.'

Rhysenn backed away, looking profoundly insulted. "I am nobody's mother." She tossed her hair back. "I will wait for you in the corridor."

She flounced out. Ron wondered what had happened to her promise to the Dark Lord to keep an eye on him while he dressed, then decided that since it didn't matter to her, it hardly ought to matter to him. He pulled

the cloak a little tighter around himself and crossed the room to look at his reflection in the mirror, expecting that he looked ridiculous.

He paused, staring at himself. The dark blue cloak brought out the color of his eyes and hair, and the boots made him look even taller. Of course his ears still stuck out, but thanks to the cut of the clothes, the rest of him looked - well, elegant, not so much skinny as slender. Even his posture was better. He had never understood why Draco spent so much money on clothes, but it was beginning to make sense. If they could make you look like this - maybe Draco wasn't all that attractive after all, Ron mused, maybe it was all attitude and a really good tailor. He leaned against the back of a nearby chair, gazing at himself through lowered eyelids, then frowned. Draping himself seductively over furniture and sneering did not have the effect of making him look like Draco; it had the effect of making him look like an enormous prat. It appeared that what worked on a willowy blond aristocrat with languid eyes and a voice that sounded like Galleons clinking together did not work on the red-headed son of a minor public official from Ottery St. Catchpole.

A soft chuckle made him turn around. He was not at all surprised to see Rhysenn standing behind him, twirling a ribbon from her corset in between her long fingers. "You like how you look?" she asked.

"I look all right," said Ron.

She took another step closer to him. She swayed when she walked, he had noticed it before, as if her tendons were made of elastic. The candlelight threw a shining net over her black hair and her skin glowed through her thin clothes. Ron half-closed his eyes. "Don't," he said. "I know what you're trying to do."

"I just want you to help me pick out what *I* should wear," she said, her low voice vibrating through his bones.

"I don't care what you wear."

"I'm sure I could change into something you'd like," she said, and there was something different about her voice now. Ron opened his eyes and started and stepped back, almost stumbling into the mirror.

Hermione stood in front of him, in her school blazer and short skirt, her hair escaping from a black velvet ribbon. "Ron," she said, her voice familiar and a little uncertain. She took a step towards him. "It was always you, really, that I loved," she said, and her dark eyes searched for his, held them. A delicate flush stained her pale cheeks. "I just never realized it before..."

"Stop," Ron said, his voice uneven.

Hermione laughed, and shook out her hair from its ribbon. It spilled bright silver over her shoulders and suddenly she was Fleur, all moonlight skin and diaphanous robes and the first girl he had ever thought was beautiful. "Ron," she said throatily. "I should never have said no to you when you asked me to the ball," and she drew the material of her robes tightly around her. "Let me make it up to you..."

"Quit it, Rhysenn," Ron snapped. "You can't get to me this way."

She smiled again and pushed her hair back and straightened up, and suddenly she was Draco, in his Slytherin Quidditch robes, looking cool and expensive and scornful and very, very blond.

'Yeeaaargh," said Ron, almost knocking the mirror over in his haste to scramble backwards. "Okay, now you're really barking up the wrong tree, you do know that?"

'There are ways and ways to seduce someone," Draco said to him, with Rhysenn's smile. "You can hit me, if you like, now. Call me names, cough up all those clever retorts you thought up five minutes too late to use them because I was already walking away. You hate me, Weasley. You know you do."

"Stop it, Rhysenn," Ron said, his voice sharp and dangerous.

'Or what?" Draco tipped his head back, and Ron had to marvel at the perfection of the imitation, the accuracy of the insouciant posture, the cool disdainful smile. Although he had really liked the fake Hermione a great deal better.

'Or I'll tell you your future," Ron said.

Draco gave a sharp little intake of breath at that, his pale cheeks flushing, and the illusion was broken. With a toss of hair Rhysenn was herself again, only the gray eyes the same, and murderous. "Don't you dare," she said.

"Don't try to seduce me then," Ron said.

"It might be all the comfort you get," she said, "false comfort is better than none."

"I don't want it," he said.

She gave him a look. It was an angry look, but there was something else under it, as well. Grudging respect. "No illusions then," she said.

"None," said Ron.

"Very well," she said, and swept out of the room. She paused in the corridor outside, waiting, and after a moment he followed her.

"Viktor," Hermione whispered. "Viktor, *please...*"

Viktor sounded pained. "I have not seen him, Hermione. I am sorry."

There was a rustle, and Draco dropped to his knees beside her. Hermione cut her eyes sideways. She could see his face in silhouette, outlined sharply by the firelight. Because his features were so sharp and his mouth so unusually shaped, he had a very distinctive profile. "Why is it," he said, staring at Viktor, "that every time we meet, you're telling lies about the whereabouts of a friend of mine? Keep it up, Krum, and I'm going to start to think that you have something personally against me."

"I have nothing against you," Viktor said, recovering quickly from what had looked like surprise at seeing Draco. "But I cannot tell you where Harry is."

"You mean you won't." Draco's hands were open on his knees, his fingers relaxed, but Hermione could hear the tension in his voice. "Are you quite sure that's wise?"

Viktor glowered even more heavily. "Are you threatening me?"

"Maybe," Draco said.

"With what, exactly?"

"I'm not sure," Draco admitted. "I thought it would be more effective if I kept it vague."

"It is not effective," said Viktor somberly. "For the last time, I cannot help _"

He broke off, looking suddenly alarmed. The sound that had reminded Hermione of crackling telephone static returned, louder than before. His head whipped around as if he were suddenly aware of a presence behind him; his mouth began to form words, and then, with a flailing yelp, he vanished, jerked downwards as if by some invisible, inexorable force.

"Crikey," said Draco into the silence which followed Viktor's abrupt disappearance. "Looks like your erstwhile Bulgarian suitor got himself eaten by a shark. The mind boggles."

"Oh dear," Hermione said, but before she could get really worried, there was another explosion of movement inside the fireplace, and a head replaced Viktor's. A familiar waterfall of silver-blond hair, enormous blue eyes, and full red lips stretched into a superior smile shone out from the flames. "*Fleur?*" Hermione exclaimed. "What are you -"

But Fleur was staring right past her, at Draco, her eyes sparkling. "Draco!" she shrieked. "Draco, *mon petit!* I have missed you so very very much!"

Draco sat back on his heels, his mouth twitching into a grin. Fleur had much the same effect on boys that Draco had on girls, and no one with Draco's vanity could fail to be moved by Fleur's enthusiastic admiration. "Hello, Fleur," he said. "How's that house I bought for you working out?"

"It is lovely," she enthused. "Viktor and I enjoy visiting it very much."

"Viktor? You're living with Viktor?" Draco's eyebrows shot up. "Why?"

"Do not be insulting," said Fleur breezily. "Our love is pure."

"You love is mercenary," said Draco. "You're either using him for his money or his fame, woman. Certainly you can't be in for his looks. It's the whole professional Quidditch thing isn't it? Wait till all the guys find out you can get laid just for owning a stripy jumper and a pair of regulation undershorts and they'll all want to be on a team."

"You're on a team," Hermione said darkly, feeling ignored.

"I don't need the help getting laid," Draco said. "Or the regulation undershorts. They bunch up and spoil the line of your trousers." He examined his nails. "I usually wear nothing under my Quidditch cords."

Hermione was stricken speechless by this piece of information. Fleur just laughed. "Viktor and I have an understanding," she said. "Although we often disagree. Now, for instance. He felt we should not tell you that Harry was here."

Draco's head jerked up and he went rigid all over. "*Harry's there right now?*"

"No," Fleur said, unexpected gentleness in her tone. "He left this afternoon. He was very ill when he arrived -"

"Is he all right?" Hermione interrupted anxiously.

"He is fine," Fleur said. "Quite recovered."

Draco had shut his eyes. Hermione spoke for him, knowing what he wanted to ask: "Do you know where he went?"

"Yes," Fleur said. "We sent him to Viktor's apartment -" She broke off with an exclamation, and shot a reproachful look behind her. "Well, we *did*," she said. "He was to remain there until Viktor could rejoin him - Viktor, *stop it*. They have a right to know! They are his friends and they love him very much!"

"We do," agreed Hermione, fervently.

"Speak for yourself," Draco muttered.

Hermione shot him a look. "We just want Harry to be all right," she said, turning back to Fleur. "There are things he doesn't know, things that could put him in danger -"

"Tell us where he is," Draco said. When he spoke again, it was with a certain amount of effort. "Please."

"He's in Prague," said Fleur. "More than that I cannot tell you. I would have to give you a Portkey."

"Please," said Hermione, saving Draco from needing to repeat the word. "We haven't much time."

Fleur took a deep breath, and then her hands appeared from the flames, stretching themselves out towards Hermione and Draco. "I could bring you through," she said. "But the restrictions - the alerts might be triggered -"

"We're in the Ministry," Hermione said quickly. "There are no restrictions." She looked at Draco. "Can we?"

He nodded. He looked a little dazed, as if events were transpiring too quickly for him to process. "Yes."

Hermione held her hand out, and Fleur's cool slender fingers closed around it. She could feel the heat of the fire but it seemed distant and not frightening. It lapped against her skin like hot water, scalding without burning. She shut her eyes as Fleur pulled her forward, and felt herself weightless for a moment, sliding down. Then her feet found purchase and she stumbled. Fleur righted her, and she looked up, opening her eyes.

She stood in the center of a small, furnished room, its walls lined with books. She was facing an empty fireplace, the bricks that formed the back of it gone transparent. She could see through them - as if she looked through a window, they gave a clear view into Lucius' office, without any wavering distortion. She could see Draco kneeling there, looking at them through the fire. The flames seemed to lick up around him, darkening the fine pale skin to bronze.

Fleur held her hand out to him. "Draco, come along now."

But he had gotten to his feet. For a moment Hermione could see only the lower half of his body as he stood in front of the fireplace. He was reaching up for something; his jumper rode up as he raised his arms, showing the bare skin of his flat stomach. He lowered his arm and backed away and Hermione saw that he was carrying one of the lighted tapers from the top of the mantel. He turned away and walked across the room, away from her, and then he held the flame of the candle to the bottom of the brocade curtains and waited for them to catch alight.

"Draco!" Hermione half-screamed. "What are you *doing?*"

But Fleur had caught at her arm. "Let him," she said.

The curtains were burning now. Hermione could smell the reek of singed fabric. Draco stood where he was, watching the flames lick up the velvet, the glow so bright that the city view was no longer visible through the windows. There was an absorbed, intent, delicate look on his face, as if he were mastering a tricky Quidditch move. Abruptly, Draco flung the burning taper to the floor and turned away. He came quickly back towards the fireplace, stopping only briefly to seize something off his father's desk. Then he was on his knees in front of the grate, reaching his hands out, and Fleur had taken him by the wrists and pulled him through.

No Malfoy may have red hair. Colors Malfoys are forbidden to wear include canary yellow, powder blue, and pale pink. No Malfoy may use pastel stationary, nor accept letters written upon pastel stationary. At teatime, all Malfoys must pour milk into their cup before the tea is added, especially inside the Manor. Upon the birth of a Malfoy the child's name must be chosen from the following lists; for a boy: Octavian, Lucius, Vladimir, Augustus, Alexander, Darius, Draco...

Harry sat back in his chair, being very careful not to spill any coffee from his full cup onto the thin parchment pages of the *Malfoy Family Code of Conduct*. He wasn't entirely sure why he'd brought it with him when he'd left the flat looking for a quiet place to buy something to eat. Partially perhaps because all the books in Viktor's flat had been in Slavic languages he didn't recognize, but there was probably more to it than that.

The parchment was so old that it felt as frail and thin under his fingertips as moth wings. He let his hand trail across a page, looked up and stared out the window. The *kavarna* he had found was as close, he imagined, to the Leaky Cauldron as he was going to get in this unfamiliar city of cobbled streets and colorful, gabled old buildings. Where Diagon Alley looked as if time had stopped for it a hundred years ago, the wizarding section of Prague looked as if it had drifted out of a fairy tale. The small coffee shop he was in now was half-timbered, with a soft mellow glow emanating from hovering golden globes that floated overhead. Rows of pastries as gorgeous as jewelry gleamed under a glass-fronted counter top - if jewelry had been decorated with whipped cream, chocolate, cherries, and sugary slivers of almond. It was beautiful and strange and everything looked delicious and it made Harry so horribly lonely that he wanted to crawl under the nearest chair.

He had never really been out of England before, and he had always thought that when he did go, it would be with friends. He'd vaguely imagined accompanying Ron to visit Bill in Egypt, taking some romantic trip to Italy with Hermione. Draco had traveled all over the continent and they'd spent all of an afternoon's detention together once talking about where they would go if they could go anywhere; Draco had been animated, talking about all the places he'd been that he would like to show Harry: ice palaces in the mountains of Switzerland, the glass houses of southern France, the sky over St. Petersburg burned green by the midnight sun. "We were always on business, and my father never wanted to stop to look at anything," he'd said, "but it would be fun to go again, if I went with you."

Harry had been pleased by the offhand compliment, but then that was the only way Draco ever did compliment him - offhand, as if he himself had forgotten what he was saying.

Harry brought his coffee cup up and stared unseeingly into it. He was remembering the dream he'd told Fleur about. In it, he had been a ghost inside the Manor, walking its empty halls. He had wandered them until he'd found Draco inside the library, which had looked just as it had the last time Harry had seen it, but Draco had looked ten years older, and he'd sat behind the desk just like his father, and regarded Harry with an emotionless surprise. *There are so many ghosts in this Manor*, he had

said, *but I never thought you would be one of them. What brings you back?*

You, I think, Harry had replied. *Did you call for me?*

Draco had shaken his head. His face had been young still, lineless, but his eyes had been old. *I would never call for you,* he'd said. *You couldn't be bothered with me while you were alive, why would you be bothered with me after you were dead?*

The library door had opened then, and Hermione had come in. She hadn't seen Harry at all, but had crossed the room to Draco and put her arms around him and kissed him, and he had accepted the kiss with the ease of long familiarity. Even in the dream, the nausea of jealousy had been a physical thing; Harry felt it now, like a knot in his stomach, and wondered what it meant. *Old ghosts keeping you up?* Hermione had asked, and Draco had smiled up at her, and said, *Only the kind that come back too late.*

A sharp pain in his hand made Harry jump; coffee had sloshed out over the rim of his cup and burnt his fingers. He set the cup down hastily on the polished surface on a small table and glanced towards the front of the shop. The late afternoon sun streamed through the tinted glass window and through it Harry could see the shadows of robed wizards hurrying by on the street outside. It could almost have been Diagon Alley, if not for the ornate gilt letters that he could still read, backwards, across the window: *Malostranksa Kavarna*. Harry wondered if he were just homesick for England, or sick with a more specific sort of longing.

No owls, Viktor had said, but he hadn't said anything about Harry not being allowed to write letters he had no intention of sending, or at least not today. Harry felt in his pocket for his self-inking quill, found it, and began looking, in a desultory fashion, for a bit of parchment to write on. It was hours till sunset anyway, he told himself; he had plenty of time.

Draco landed lightly on his feet next to Hermione inside the circle of wavering flame. He turned to her, breathless, his eyes full of light and defiance. "Go ahead," he said. "Scream at me."

Before Hermione could say anything, Fleur stepped in between them. "There will be no screaming," she snapped, holding her hands up imperiously. She was a slight girl, but taller than Hermione, and when she drew herself up to her full height, she was imposing. No longer panicked, Hermione had leisure to look at her: she was expensively attired in a clinging pastel dress, her pale hair brushed neatly behind her slightly pointed ears. Her blue eyes glowed as she flung her arms around Draco's neck and kissed him on both cheeks. Hermione rolled her eyes. Fleur's Draco-favoritism was so extreme as to be almost funny. "It is lovely to see you," Fleur declared. Hermione suspected this statement was not at all directed towards her. "You look different. Taller."

"Not likely. Perhaps I was standing in a hole last time we met."

Fleur smiled. "Do you like my dress?"

He drew back and regarded her at arm's length. "Tighter than a Parkinson's pocketbook and briefer than a Weasley's bedroom stamina," he drawled. "What's not to like?"

Fleur punched him affectionately on the shoulder. "You're such a tease."

Hermione made a vomiting noise.

Fleur turned and looked at her. "Did you say something?"

"No," said Hermione blandly.

"Viktor will be here any minute," Fleur said. Her little voice was coolly amused. "I'm sure he'll be very happy to see you, Hermione."

Hermione said nothing. Even now Fleur always managed to make her feel grubby. She slid her hands into the pockets of her jeans and let her gaze trail around the room. She had been here before, of course, the summer after fourth year. She remembered it as a sizeable, pleasant manor house, with a bit of a sprawling design and a lovely view of the sea. She had spent many pleasant hours in this study, despite the fact that all the books were in Bulgarian and she couldn't read them. Viktor had read out loud to her while she rested her bare feet on the firescreen. Of course, there had been no fire in the grate then, and now there was, not to mention the ash she and Draco had trailed all over the Turkish carpet.

"...won't be very pleased," Fleur was saying to Draco when Hermione snapped back to the present. "But I couldn't just *leave* you there all alone, now could I?"

Draco had disengaged himself from her embrace and was leaning against the wall next to the fireplace, brushing soot off his sleeves. "No one can ever leave me alone," he said. "It is an unfortunate side effect of my devastating charm."

"Viktor's going to be awfully angry," Fleur said, sounding as if she were looking forward to it. "All he wanted was to come away quietly to the country and write his book. All this excitement..."

"Bother the excitement," Hermione said shortly. "I think we ought to talk about Harry."

The doorknob rattled.

"Viktor!" cried Fleur, theatrically.

"Ah," said Draco. "Something hulking and Bulgarian this way comes."

The door flew open. It was indeed Viktor, swathed in a red traveling cloak and looking livid with fury. His gaze swept from Draco to Hermione to light upon Fleur. "*Qu'est que tu as fait?*" he snarled.

"Speak English in front of the guests, dear," said Fleur. "They are uneducated."

"I told you not to bring them here!" Viktor shouted, as if Draco and Hermione weren't there. "I gave Harry my word!"

"I didn't," said Fleur.

"How Slytherin of you," Draco said approvingly.

"I should have known when you sent me away to have a private word, you were lying," Viktor went on, his black eyes snapping. "Fleur, you are -"

"My father always told me it was vulgar to call women names," Draco observed.

"Please do not address me," Viktor said coldly to Draco, although his eyes remained on his girlfriend. "This is between myself and Fleur."

"There is no point protesting now that they are here, you know," Fleur said, crossing her arms over her chest. "What do you propose to do about it?"

"Send them back where they came from," Viktor snapped.

"It's on fire where we came from," Draco pointed out.

"You really have only yourself to blame for that," Hermione said.

Draco glared at her. "Whose side are you on?"

"Be quiet, all of you!" Fleur cried suddenly. Even Hermione had to admit that Fleur was magnificent in a rage. Her silver hair flew and her face sharpened, echoing her veela ancestry. "Viktor, you have absolutely no right to send them away! They have come a great distance, seeking their friend -"

"Who has no wish to see them," Viktor grated. "I gave my word, Fleur. The word of a Krum is not given lightly."

"I won't let you do this," Fleur protested furiously. "I forbid it!"

Viktor's craggy brows drew together, shadowing his deep-set eyes. "And you plan to do what about it?"

"You could withhold sexual favors," Draco suggested. He was still leaning back against the wall as if he hadn't a care in the world.

"That will just make him angry," Fleur replied, eyeing Viktor with scorn.

"True," Draco said. "I've been withholding sexual favors from him for years and look how angry he is at me."

Viktor gave him a withering look. "I told you not to talk to me."

"You didn't say I couldn't talk *about* you," Draco pointed out. He smiled with feline satisfaction. "God, I love technicalities. They give me a warm, tingly feeling right in my -"

"I've got it!" Fleur crowed.

Everyone looked over at her in surprise. While Draco and Viktor had been arguing, she had slipped behind Viktor's desk and was holding up a handful of parchment.

Viktor let loose an anguished cry. "My book!"

"Oh, Viktor, you finally wrote your book!" Hermione cried. "I'm so proud of you!"

"It is almost five hundred pages," said Viktor distractedly, staring at Fleur, who was holding the manuscript above her head and looking determined. "It is a painstakingly researched account of the rise of the Resistance movement in the Bulgarian countryside."

"Well, that sounds like a bestseller," Draco observed. "Right up there with 'Harry Potter's Guide to Hairstyles' and 'Arthur Weasley's Big Little Book of Birth Control.'"

"Promise me that they can stay!" Fleur cried. She flexed her right hand, and bright small flames appeared at her fingertips. *Of course*, Hermione thought, *she's a Magid too*. "Swear Hermione and Draco can stay or your book is ashes, Viktor!"

Viktor made a guttural sound of protest. "No!"

"Payback's a veela, Krum," Draco observed, and grinned, a little painfully. Hermione shot a sideways look at him, and realized, with a thumping sense of horror, that he had gone a very odd dirty white color. And he was leaning so hard against the wall -

"Draco," she said, her voice an urgent whisper. "Is that wall all that's holding you up?"

"Be quiet," he hissed back, but it was too late, Fleur and Viktor were staring at them both, arrested mid-argument.

Fleur lowered her hand. "Draco, are you all right?"

"He's not all right," Hermione said, scrabbling at her belt for the antidote flask. "He's very ill - he needs medicine -"

"I do not," Draco said, through his teeth. "I'm fine."

"Prove it," Hermione said. "Move away from the wall, then."

Draco bent his head, his fair hair falling forward, and gave a look from beneath his veiled lids that made her think of sharp silver knives. It was a look meant to cut the skin off her bones with its disdain, and she flinched back a little. "Fine," he said, and took a step forward, and then another, until he stood in the center of the room.

For a moment Hermione thought he had been telling the truth, and he was fine. He stood with his back very straight and looked at her, and then a greenish color flooded up into the pallor of his face and he pitched forward without a sound. Viktor, dashing across the room with a Seeker's speed, was just in time to catch him as he fell.

When Ron walked into the chess room, followed by an uncharacteristically silent Rhysenn, he saw that for the first time since he had come to the castle there were other people there.

Not, he supposed, that they could all precisely be called people. A long table had been set up in the center of the room -it was a deep reddish mahogany, and ranged alongside it were low-backed armchairs upholstered in dark green silk and metallic thread. The table was scattered with empty silver plates, wineglasses half full of red wine, and dishes of expensive-looking candy. Voldemort sat at the head of it, with Wormtail at his left hand. The seat at his right hand was empty - waiting for Lucius, Ron suspected. A number of watchful, wide-eared goblins sat in the high-backed chairs along one side of the table, and at the far end was seated a tall man with very dark hair whose deep-set, glittering black eyes regarded Ron with flat malice as he approached the table.

"Gabriel," said the Dark Lord, inclining his head towards the black-haired man. "This is my Diviner." He swept a hand towards Ron.

The man he'd called Gabriel looked Ron up and down, his gaze considering. "He's taller than I would have thought," he remarked, and smiled.

Ron almost fell over. Gabriel had fangs. Not just sharply pointed canines, but *fangs*. The slid down over his bottom lip when he smiled, lending him a predatory air. Ron stared in fascination. "You're a *vampire*," he exclaimed, more astonished than frightened.

Gabriel arched an eyebrow. "I hope that wasn't meant to be an example of your Divinatory powers," he remarked. Now that Ron knew what to look for, he could see the signs of vampirism: the very pale skin, red mouth, and blackly burning eyes. Gabriel's gaze slid past Ron to Rhysenn. "Hello, sweetheart," he said.

"Gabriel," she said, and went across the room and sat on the vampire's knee. He tipped up her chin and kissed her mouth. Ron watched in sickly fascination, wondering if anyone was going to get bitten anytime soon.

"I never get kissed," Wormtail remarked, to no one in particular.

"Silence, Wormtail," said Voldemort coldly. "We are not here to discuss the particulars of your romantic successes, or lack thereof. You claimed earlier that you had news for me?"

"I do," said Peter Pettigrew. He turned to the small creature on his left who, Ron saw now that he was looking more closely, was not actually a goblin, just a very small, very ugly, human man with enormous ears and lamprey-yellow eyes. "You were at the Ministry tonight, Mortenson?"

"I was at my customary place in the Malfoy wing," said Mortenson complacently.

Voldemort raised a pale eyebrow ridge. "A spy in the house of Lucius, Wormtail?"

"I am not a spy," said the little man, "I merely watch Lucius Malfoy and report on his activities to Mr. Pettigrew."

Voldemort lifted a piece of Turkish delight out of the box at his elbow and ate it thoughtfully. It was the first time Ron had seen him eat anything

other than dice. "Clearly not a spy then," he murmured. "Tell me, have you learned anything useful from your observations? Because if you have not," and he bent his gaze on Wormtail, "someone clearly asking for a matched set of prosthetic silver appendages. Only this time, perhaps, Wormtail, you'd like to lose a leg? Or even your head?"

"I can't live without my head," Wormtail whined.

"No system is perfect," said Voldemort.

"I want to know about Lucius," said Rhysenn in a breathy voice. She was leaning back against Gabriel's shoulder. He had one hand in her hair and the other hand held a wineglass full of dark red fluid. Ron doubted that it was merlot.

"Mr. Malfoy did not return to his office today," Mortenson began. "Neither did his companion -"

"The blond young man I was telling you about," Wormtail said eagerly to Voldemort.

"I recollect," said Voldemort. "I believe I told you that if Lucius wants to take up with underage boys that is his lookout."

"It's probably just Draco," Ron said, then clamped his mouth shut. What on earth had possessed him to speak?

"I know what Draco Malfoy looks like," said Mortenson, aggrieved. "I know because he came by the office today."

Voldemort looked almost interested. "Did he?" he asked.

"He did. And- he brought his girlfriend with her."

Rhysenn arched an eyebrow. "He has a girlfriend?"

I can't believe this, Ron thought. I've been kidnapped by the forces of evil, dragged hundreds of miles to a remote mountain fortress, I'm surrounded by demons and vampires, and everyone is still discussing bloody Draco Malfoy's bloody sex life. There is no justice.

"A girl with long brown hair," the little spy clarified. "He called her Hermione."

"She's not Draco's girlfriend," said both Ron and Rhysenn, simultaneously, although where Ron had blurted out the words in fury, Rhysenn sounded merely as if she thought the supposition was very funny. "She's Harry Potter's girlfriend," Rhysenn clarified, with a disdainful little smile in Ron's direction.

"Actually, they broke up," Ron felt compelled to point out.

"Did they?" asked Wormtail, looking curious. "I really thought they were going to get together. All that time I was a rat, I remember thinking..."

"Shut up," Ron said.

"I suppose Potter was womanizing," Gabriel said, his hand still resting firmly on the upper part of Rhysenn's thigh. "Teenage boys, especially when they are famous and can do what they like..."

"Actually, she broke up with him," Rhysenn gossiped merrily. "She felt he wasn't being entirely honest with her about his emotions -"

"SILENCE," Voldemort bellowed. "Have you all gone mad?" His flat eyes were glittering. "Have you forgotten -"

"The Cup, my Lord?" said Mortenson, and there was something eager and ingratiating in his voice that Ron did not like. "The fourth of the Worthy Objects?"

"What," said Voldemort, his voice deadly, "of it?"

"She had it with her," said Mortenson. "It was Transfigured into a flask that she had belted to her waist. But it was the Cup. I recognized it instantly, my Lord."

Part Two: Heavens are Shallow

*into that world inverted
where left is always right,*

*where the shadows are really the body,
where we stay awake all night,
where the heavens are shallow as the sea
is now deep, and you love me.*

- Elizabeth Bishop

Hermione sat on the edge of the bed in Fleur and Viktor's room, turning the silver antidote flask over and over in her fingers. She had managed to wake Draco up and get him to drink some of it before he'd sunk back into unconsciousness; Viktor had carried him to the bedroom, and laid him down on the bed before Fleur had shooed him out, muttering, "This is *all your fault*."

The bedroom was suffused with a soft, mellow light, a light that made Hermione think of warm autumn evenings and sleeping cats. The torches on the walls burned with a rosy, shaded glow and there were fine red openweave curtains all around the bed. The light that came through them was tinted and threw a deceptive, healthy flush across Draco's sleeping face.

"He's not getting any better," Hermione said, in a small dull voice. "I'd thought the antidote was going to fix things, but it hasn't. I just don't know what to do."



Fleur was sitting on the bed beside him, her head inclined. Her long hair spilled down and over her shoulders and veiled Draco's face behind a

curtain of white silk. When she raised her head and looked at Hermione, her blue eyes were very dark. "Poison, you said?"

"Poison," Hermione confirmed.

Fleur put her slim fingers against the pulse in Draco's throat, her expression thoughtful. Hermione watched the two of them, so similar in looks, the torchlight burning up their pale hair. A matched set of fair-headed Flemish angels. Hermione had had plenty of occasion to watch Draco sleeping over the past few days, but the change in his face when he was not awake never failed to surprise her and catch at her heart. In sleep, all his malice was stripped away, all those carefully cultivated manners and graces, and he was just an ordinary boy, eyes blue-hollowed with tiredness, the soft pulse of his breath stirring the hair that fell across his cheek in uneven strands like pale unraveled thread.

"Is everything all right?" Hermione asked, concerned by Fleur's intent expression.

The other girl said nothing, only let the tips of her fingers glide down his throat to his collar. Hermione fought back the urge to protest, even when the older girl's hand slipped into the collar of Draco's shirt, and drew out the Epicyclical Charm on its chain. "So here it is," she said, her tone reflective. "I asked Harry what he had done with it, but he was so feverish..."

"He gave it back to Draco," Hermione said.

"Typical," said Fleur. "As if such a gift, once freely given, can so easily be given back." She let the charm fall and sat back, drawing the covers up absentmindedly over Draco as she did so. It struck Hermione as odd to see Fleur being so gentle, but then she remembered Fleur's little sister, and the fierce mothering possessiveness Fleur seemed to feel towards Gabrielle. "I watched over Harry like this," said Fleur, "just last night."

"Thank you for taking care of Harry," Hermione said. "And for telling us he was here. I know Viktor didn't want you to -"

"Viktor is honest to a fault," said Fleur. "But he did not sit with Harry while he was feverish; he did not hear him shouting out in his sleep for you...Both of you." Her blue eyes, tracing Hermione's face, looked nearly

black. "I did not do it to be compassionate," she said. "I did it because Harry is our one chance against the Dark Lord, and if he does not accept that truth then I will accept it for him."

"I know he is," Hermione said. "But I also love him. I'm thankful that you took care of him, whatever your reasons. I know we haven't always gotten along -"

"True, we have not," Fleur admitted cheerfully. "You have always been jealous of any girl who came near the boys you love."

"Right, and then there was that whole business where you were evil," Hermione reminded her with some asperity.

Fleur had the grace to look slightly embarrassed. "That is true," she said.

"And you tried to take over the world," Hermione added. "And nearly got Harry killed."

Fleur sighed. "What would you have me say, Hermione? I could speak as Draco might, in mannered phrases, I could say *I have done a great wrong, and seek to undo it*. But that would not bring back any of them, these boys you have lost to dreams and divination and death. It will not make your journey shorter or your pain less, or the road to Romania any less dangerous -"

"Romania?" Hermione interrupted. "Is that where Harry is going?" A sudden realization forced a squeak from her lungs. "That Romanian coin! He must have taken it from the Manor! Oh, I'm a fool."

Fleur looked at her dryly. "You're an idiot all right." She looked down at Draco again. "If you wish to discuss Harry's destination, Viktor knows more about it than I do."

"As soon as Draco wakes up," Hermione began.

Fleur shook her head. "I would prefer it if you would go now. I would like a few moments alone with your Draco."

"He's not my Draco," Hermione said, although she hesitated. She didn't want to trust Fleur - she *really* didn't want to leave Fleur alone with Draco

- but Fleur had healed Harry and Viktor had helped him and she owed them both.

"I believe Viktor is in the kitchen," Fleur said. Her tone was dismissive and final. "It is where he usually goes to sulk."

Hermione looked again at Draco. "If you hurt him," she said, not looking at Fleur, "I'll kill you," and she walked out, closing the door carefully behind her.

Fleur looked after her, and then with a sigh, turned back to the boy in the bed. "Hurt you?" she said. "You have, I think, been hurt enough." She leaned over him, and her bright hair fell down around Draco like a veil and mixed with his own. He did not move, but, reaching out with her mind, she could feel his soft and steady breath, the beat of his heart, the course of blood in his fragile veins. *I have done a great wrong and seek to undo it*, she whispered against his cheek, and began to unbutton his shirt.

Voldemort did not look pleased - he never looked pleased - but a small, gratified hiss escaped through his teeth. "The cup," he said, "she has it, then? You are sure?"

"I'm half goblin," said Mortenson. "I am trained to recognize objects of worth."

"I must have that cup," said the Dark Lord. His gaze slid to Ron, and lingered on him meditatively. "I had trusted Lucius to procure it for me, but perhaps there is a more expedient plan..."

"My Lord," Wormtail put in eagerly, "I would be happy to -"

Voldemort waved a silencing hand. "Where are they now," he asked, "Lucius' son and the girl?"

"They spoke to someone named Viktor," said Mortenson, looking a little unsure, "and another girl, and there was some talk of an apartment in Prague..."

"That would be Viktor Krum," said Rhysenn. "He is the Seeker for Bulgaria's Quidditch team."

"And he does indeed have an apartment in the city center," Gabriel added. "We keep an eye on him. He's in the resistance, it is believed, although it has never been proven."

Voldemort's gaze flicked to the vampire. "Sunset is coming," he said. "Gather your... people to you. How soon can you be in Prague?"

Gabriel looked mildly irritated. "It is a great distance, and it is too early for them to have fed, my Lord -"

"*Denn die Todten reiten schnell*," said Voldemort, and smiled unpleasantly. "Or so I have heard."

Gabriel stood up, dumping Rhysenn off his lap. She landed, barefoot, with a vexed look, and hurled herself irritably into a nearby armchair. "And what am I to do to, exactly, when I get there?"

"The girl," said Voldemort. "Find the girl -"

"No!" Ron, surprising no one so much as himself, slammed his fist down on the table. It shook. Gabriel's half-empty goblet tipped over. A thread of thick red fluid seeped from it, onto the tabletop. "You leave her alone," he said, his voice sharp and carrying. "You touch her and I'll never divine anything for you again, never!"

The room fell instantly, deathly silent. Wormtail stared down the table at Ron, something approximating horror on his face. Rhysenn's expression was bleak, and the small goblins all appeared to be looking elsewhere. Only Voldemort looked amused. "But, dear boy, I need that cup," he said. "And she has it."

"I don't care." Ron's breath felt thick in his chest. "If you hurt her I'll never divine anything for you again. I'd rather die."

The Dark Lord templed his long thin fingers under his chin. "Very well," he said. "If you don't want her hurt..."

Ron's mouth fell open. "What?"

The Dark Lord turned to Gabriel, who stood poised by the table, his face half-hidden by his long black hair. "Bring her back alive," Voldemort said. "And with the Cup."

The vampire bowed his head. "As you wish, Lord."

Voldemort stood up. For a moment he and Ron regarded each other from either end of the long table, Voldemort as tall and pale and unmoving as a pillar of bone. Ron felt his hands shaking and stuffed them into his pockets. He could feel Rhysenn staring at him, as if she were entreating him to do something, but he had no idea what.

When Voldemort finally spoke, his voice was almost without inflection. "After all," he said, "I'll be bringing her here, little Diviner. You'll like that, won't you, seeing her again?"

Ron said nothing, only bit down into his lip.

"You could see the end of the world, my boy," said Voldemort in a voice that was at once so soft and so carrying that Ron felt sure that everyone had heard his words, and that at the same time Voldemort was speaking only to him. "But can you see yourself ever having what you want? It is not so impossible as you might think."

Ron cleared his throat. His chest still felt tight. "Just don't hurt her," he said.

"Indeed," Voldemort said. He turned to Gabriel. "You heard the boy," he said. "Bring her to me unharmed. Now, all of you -" and he waved his hand towards the crowded table, at which all the little goblins made an alarmed chattering noise and began hopping to their feet - "get out of my sight. Yes, you too, Wormtail. Rhysenn, you will remain, but inside your cage. And as for you, little Diviner," and at that, looking directly at Ron, he smiled, "I wish to play a game of chess. Are you ready?"

"I'm ready," said Ron.

When Hermione walked into the kitchen she found Viktor sitting at the end of a long wooden trestle table. A single candle illuminated the gloom,

throwing crazily tilting shadows against the walls and cupboards. He didn't look up when she let the door fall shut behind her, only pushed his straggling hair back, and muttered, "*Ou sont les cigarettes?*"

"Viktor," Hermione said, slightly uncomfortable. "It's me."

He looked up. His dark brows were drawn together over his deep-set black eyes and he was frowning. "Where are the others?" he asked.

"Fleur's looking after Draco. She said she'd be here in a minute." Hermione pulled out a chair and sat down opposite Viktor. "I wanted to thank you for helping -"

"I have not helped you," Viktor interrupted. "I do not approve of you being here or of Fleur having told you Harry's whereabouts. I feel it is a betrayal of the trust he placed in both of us."

"I just want what's best for Harry," Hermione protested.

"And you are so sure you know what that is?" Bitterness laced Viktor's tone for a moment. "You always did think that you knew everything, Hermione. And of the fact that you are brilliant there is no doubt. But it is not given to any one person to know everything. Not even you."

"He can't do this alone," Hermione said in a small voice.

"He cannot do it at all, it is a task impossible," said Viktor, his grasp of English deserting him along with his grip on his temper. "He loves you - he is in love with you - the least you could do is respect his wishes -"

Before Hermione could interrupt, the door swung open and Fleur came in, followed by Draco. Through the dimness, they were visible only as silhouettes; Fleur lifted her hand and gestured quickly, and light leapt up all around the room as the torches on the walls lit themselves to flame. Hermione could see now that they sat in a pleasant, medium-sized kitchen. Stacks of clean dishes sat on the sideboard, and a small pantry was visible through a curtained archway.

"There," said Fleur, smiling. "Much better." She looked over her shoulder. "Draco, sit down. I'll find us all something to eat."

Draco stepped out from behind her and went to take a chair; Hermione sucked her breath in as he sat down and smiled at her. There was bright color in his cheeks and he looked healthy, alive, almost normal. His mouth curled up at her flabbergasted expression and he leaned back in his chair. He had swapped his soot-covered jumper for a black-and-red Quidditch jersey that Hermione assumed belonged to Viktor. It was too big on Draco; the sleeves dangled down over his slender hands and the neck fell away from his delicate collarbone. She could see the collar of his own white t-shirt underneath. "Hermione, darling," he said, "you look as if you just caught Dumbledore administering a naughty spanking to a group of unruly fourth-year girls. Why so scandalized?"

"I'm not scandalized. It's just - you look *good*."

"Well, that's hardly headline news. I always look good."

"Don't be deliberately obtuse. I meant you look as if you're feeling better."

"Better is such a relative term," Draco murmured delicately, and leaned back as a loaf of bread Fleur was in the midst of Summoning flew past his head and landed on the table. It was followed by a wedge of white salted cheese, a pitcher of cold milk, a selection of plates, and a pack of Lucky Snitch! cigarettes for Viktor. "Thanks to Fleur, however -"

"Do be quiet, Draco, and eat," interrupted Fleur, taking the seat next to Viktor's. "Both of you."

Hermione fell to the food, trying not to eat too ravenously and make a spectacle of herself. Draco ate more slowly; food had never been something that interested him much. He pulled the bread apart with long careful fingers and dunked the crusts in his milk and then either ate them or swirled them around until they dissolved. Hermione forbore from telling him that this was disgusting. She was too busy being deathly curious. What *had* Fleur done? Surely she didn't - she couldn't have -

"I didn't have sex with Fleur, if that's what you're worried about," said Draco.

Hermione went scarlet. "*Draco*."

"There may have been some nudity," he said pensively. "But it was scientific and not recreational in nature."

Viktor looked enraged. Fleur put a hand on his arm. "You really can be terribly rude sometimes, Draco," she said with a frown.

"I can be terribly rude all the time," Draco said. "I happen to be restraining myself at the moment. You should be appreciative."

Viktor said something loudly to Fleur in what sounded like a sputtering mixture of Bulgarian and French. Fleur replied to him soothingly, her hand still on his arm. Draco took the opportunity to pinch one of Viktor's cigarettes, and used the candleflame to light it.

Hermione shot him a look. "You took off your clothes in front of her? Why?"

Draco pretended not to have heard the question. "Sex magic isn't about healing anyway," he said. "I'd think with your extensive reading background, you'd know that." He inhaled and blew smoke at her across the table. "Although I suspect you're just cranky 'cause you're jealous."

"I'm NOT jealous," Hermione snapped. "I just don't like the idea of her seeing you naked."

"I see I should have gotten you a dictionary for Christmas," Draco said dryly.

Fleur interrupted. "Nobody saw anyone naked," she said crossly. "I created a power transference. It is something Magids can do. I gave a little of my energy to Draco."

Both Hermione and Draco stared at her. "Does that mean you're my Source now?" Draco asked finally. "Or - am I yours?"

Hermione looked at him in surprise. "You didn't know what she did?"

He shook his head. "No. I was just joking." The cigarette was burning away between his fingers, forgotten. "Fleur -"

"I am not your Source," she said. "Nor are you mine. I gave you a small bit of my power, encapsulated, to replace your own flagging energy. It will not last forever but it will help you for a short time. Certainly long enough for you to find Harry. Then perhaps, if necessary, you can ask him to do for you what I did -"

Draco's tone was clipped. "I'm not asking him for anything."

Fleur pushed the ashtray towards him. "As you like."

"And how long is it going to take us to find Harry? Are you going to tell us where he is?" Hermione asked, looking past Fleur at Viktor.

"He is at my apartment in Prague," Viktor said. His face obscured by smoke, Hermione could see only his jutting black eyebrows and craggy, furrowed forehead. "I sent him on ahead, and intended to meet with him there tomorrow. I was going to bring some of my friends in the resistance with me, for backup."

"An apartment in Prague? Those endorsements must be paying off," Draco commented, finally abandoning his half-smoked cigarette in the ashtray.

"He'll be safe there," Viktor said. "Well, as long as he doesn't go out at night," he added as an afterthought.

Hermione and Draco both started. "What do you mean, as long as he doesn't go out at night?" Draco demanded.

Viktor's dark eyes narrowed. "You really know nothing, you English," he said, managing to make both words sound insulting. "I would have expected no better from Lucius Malfoy's son, but Hermione, you at least -" Viktor broke off, and shrugged. "The situation here is not what it is in England. We are not protected by our Ministry as you are. The Dark Lord's control has been steadily spreading these past months. His minions walk the streets freely at night; many are *wampyr*, the undead -"

"Vampires," Hermione said.

Draco half rose from the table. "You sent Harry somewhere where there are *vampires*?"

"It was the safest place I could think of," Viktor said.

"Safer than your own home?" Draco's voice shook. "What, you didn't want him here because he's a liability, is that it, he'd draw the Dark Lord's gaze onto you -"

"I could not make him stay. He wanted to go."

"I bet you threw him out."

"Did *you* throw him out? He left you. Could you have made him stay?" Viktor shrugged his heavy shoulders. "There are not many, I think, who could make Harry Potter do anything he does not want to do."

Draco opened his mouth to reply, but Hermione cut him off. "Stop it," she said. "Both of you. Draco, apologize to Viktor - and Viktor, don't bait us, it's unkind."

Viktor, still glowering, shrugged again. Draco turned his eyes on Hermione - a cold, ice-water gaze- and then looked at Viktor. "I regret if my ill manners have offended you," he said tonelessly. "It was not my intention. Well," he added, more thoughtfully, "it was my intention, actually. But you are, after all, my host. I repent my trespass against your courtesy," he said, with a modicum of grace this time, and sounding very much like his father. "It will not happen again."

"I do not care about you, or your ill manners," said Viktor. "We have, all of us, more important things to think about. I was going to suggest that you come with me tomorrow to join Harry but I realize now that you will refuse to wait that long. I have no desire to fight with stubborn children over the best dispensation of their energies. I must gather my colleagues and ready them. Do what you like."

Fleur stood up. "Shall I give them a Portkey, Viktor?"

He nodded. "I see no way around it."

Hermione flew around the table and hugged him. "Thank you, Viktor."

Seemingly gratified, he returned her embrace. He still smelled the way he had when he was eighteen: like cigarette smoke and black pepper and wool sweaters. He patted Hermione on the back. "There, there," he said.

Draco cleared his throat. "*Hermione*. Sometime in the next century, please."

Detaching herself, Hermione went over to where Draco was standing next to Fleur. Fleur had a pale eyebrow arched; Draco looked as if he were vexed and trying to hide it. "Was there a really pressing need to apply yourself to him like a coat of glue?" he muttered. "It did rather undercut our whole 'need to leave right now' argument. I do wish you'd think about these things before you do them. Rash and impetuous, that's your problem."

Hermione allowed herself a small smile. "Looks like I'm not the only one who needs a dictionary."

"Shut up, Granger."

"You'll find 'hypocrite' in the H section, I believe."

"I do not understand your relationship," Fleur said gloomily, glancing from Draco to Hermione and back again.

"That makes three of us," said Draco, and Hermione did not contradict him.

The Portkey deposited Hermione and Draco in the anteroom of a large, well-appointed flat, presumably somewhere in the middle of Prague. The walls were white, hung with colorful paintings, and down the long hallway Draco could see doors leading off into various rooms. There appeared to be a kitchen at the end of the hallway, if the checkerboard linoleum was anything to go by. The lights had been left on: several shaded lamps were burning and there was a lit candle atop the small table near the door. On a peg near the table hung a dark red jumper, the cuffs of its sleeves frayed and pulled out of shape. Draco couldn't count the times he'd watched Harry absently pull his sleeves down over his hands and worry at the cuffs with his fingers. It was a nervous habit he had.

Hermione put her hand against the jumper. "He's here," she said.

"He's here," Draco agreed. "But he isn't *here*."

"What do you mean?"

"He's not in the flat." Draco began walking down the corridor anyway. He sounded remarkably calm even to his own ears. Inside, his stomach was knotting and he felt as if he were going to throw up. He wasn't sure what he was more afraid of: that Harry wasn't here, or that he was. "I can tell."

"Well, is he nearby?"

"I don't know." Draco stopped and peered into what looked like the living room. Viktor, he had to grudgingly admit, actually had pretty adequate taste in furniture. Either that, or he'd had someone else design the place. Fleur, possibly. The room looked both comfortable and elegant. A low fire burned in the grate of a large marble fireplace, elegantly carved with a pattern of leaves. A wingback chair was drawn up to it. There were several sofas, and a low table. Other than the fire, the place appeared untouched.

The kitchen and study also showed no sign of occupation, but when Draco pushed open the door to the bedroom, they found Harry's things scattered haphazardly around the room, an almost comforting display of his habitual careless messiness. His clothes were flung across the bed, his bookbag, half inside-out, hung from a peg on the wardrobe, his boots were upended on the rug and all over the floor was scattered a motley pile of weapons - long-bladed daggers, sharp pikes, several swords, even a crossbow. "Now we know what happened to Harry," Draco said dryly. "He exploded."

But Hermione had gone pale. "Didn't Viktor say he wasn't supposed to go out after dark?"

"It's not quite dark yet." Draco looked pointedly at the window, where the sky was darkening to sapphire. He could see the angled roofs of the nearby buildings, the gabled windows hung with colorful curtains. Soon, outside, the Lighting Charms would go on and the sky would darken and Harry would come into the apartment, shutting the door behind him, opening his mouth in surprise when he saw Hermione and Draco there.

And maybe he would be angry and maybe he would crumple in resignation and maybe, just maybe, if he was caught off guard enough -

Draco broke off the thought and turned away from the window. Hermione was sitting on the bed, and she had taken one of Harry's shirts - it was his old Puddlemere United shirt that he usually wore to bed and that had a rip in the left shoulder, just below the collar - and was stroking it absently, plying the worn cotton between her fingers.

In his head, Draco heard his father's voice, those clear familiar cadences. *A Malfoy does not want for anything, Draco. There should be nothing beyond your reach that you desire and cannot have, for you are what you are, and if you cannot have it, it is likely not worth desiring. Desire is a tyrannical master. You are a Malfoy and you should never let yourself be mastered by anything that is unworthy of you.*

Draco wondered if his father considered himself to be a worthy master. Very probably he did.

"I'm going into the other room," Draco said abruptly. Hermione looked up, surprised, but before she could inquire further, he had walked out, and slammed the door behind him.

"And Pansy masterminded all this? Pansy *Parkinson*?" Sirius said, for what, Ginny thought irritably, had to be the sixth time.

She had no idea why this was so difficult to believe. She had never liked Pansy and had always assumed her to be a bad lot. That Pansy would attempt to kill Draco while simultaneously seducing Ron for nefarious purposes seemed to Ginny to be par for the Slytherin course.

"Yes, Pansy Parkinson," said Blaise, whose frightened expression had given way to one of slight impatience. She was sunk deep into Mr. Weasley's favorite worn green armchair, regarding Sirius and Lupin across the coffee table with a warily defensive expression. The table, like every other surface in the living room, was strewn with books and papers and Lupin's discarded chocolate wrappers. "Never trust a girl who wears green and orange together, I always say."

"I'll keep that in mind," said Lupin, dryly. "Do you have any idea how many other students knew what she was up to?"

"Malcolm, maybe," said Blaise thoughtfully. "They were close. Millicent might have known something. Other than that, I don't think most of us had more than a general idea that something bad was coming."

"And you didn't think it necessary to tell anyone this?" Sirius asked. His tone was edgy.

Blaise, curled deeply into the armchair, raised her chin. "Why would I?" she said shortly. "You treat us Slytherins like second-class citizens, you know you do. You think we're all liars, untrustworthy. You would only have thought it was some kind of plot, and Pansy would have thrown the blame on me, and I'd have been expelled. And then when the Death Eaters came to punish my family, who would have stood up to protect us? Your precious Harry Potter? He only looks after his own."

"But you're telling us now," Lupin said, more gently.

Blaise glanced down, but before she could respond, the door opened and Charlie came in. Ginny suspected he had been doing the washing up; his sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, and his hands and shirt with splashed with water. "Ginny," he said. "I need you in the kitchen."

"Charlie, not now -" Ginny began.

He quelled her with a look. "NOW, Virginia."

Sulkily, she unwound herself from the sofa, and followed him into the hall. "Can't I help with the washing up later?"

Charlie snorted. "You think I called you out here for the washing up?"

"Didn't you?"

"Only if you define 'washing up' as 'a tall blond obnoxious Slytherin you seem to cherish an unlikely fondness for'."

Ginny stopped dead. "*Draco?*"

"No, the *other* tall blond obnoxious Slytherin -oh, what's the use." Charlie broke off with a sigh. "In the kitchen," he said.

Ginny ran down the corridor, then stopped in front of the kitchen door, and composed herself. She would not run to talk to Draco Malfoy. He did not deserve it. Also, he would make fun of her and she was not in the mood. She pushed the kitchen door open and glided inside.

It took her a moment to realize the kitchen was empty. She stared around in surprise. Was Charlie playing a joke on her? If so, he would pay. She had some of Fred and George's prototype Rodent Ripples in her room. If this was Charlie's idea of funny, he could spend the next week gnawing the furniture and trying to build a dam out of chair legs.

"Over here, Weasley." Draco's voice came from behind her, slightly tinged with exasperation. "Didn't Charlie tell you...?"

Ginny whirled around. *Oh, of course.* The fire in the grate was low, and there in the fireplace, visible from the waist up, was Draco. He was wearing a thoughtful expression and a vastly oversized black jumper with red stripes around the sleeves.

"Is there some reason you're wearing a Bulgarian Quidditch jersey?" Ginny asked him, keeping her voice determinedly casual.

He squinted at her. Little flames were licking up engagingly around his face and hair, making him look as if he had been outlined in metallic ink. A golden boy. "Come over here," he said. "I can hardly see you."

She went over and knelt down next to the grate. "Where are you?" she asked.

"Prague," he said, and she knew from his tone that that was all he was going to say about it.

"And have you found Harry?"

He shook his head, and sparks flew around his hair. "Not yet, but we're close."

"So you're what? Just popping by to say hello?"

"Maybe I wanted to see you."

"No, you didn't. You want something. What?"

"My, you've become a cynic," he said. "Whither all that charming optimism of yours? You sound like me."

"Don't evade the point," Ginny said. "I'm too tired to go back and forth with you."

"Fine," Draco said with a shrug. "I wanted to know if you'd heard any news about Tom."

"*Tom?*" Ginny shook her head. "No. We don't exactly have the sort of relationship where he sends me postcards."

"Well, given that he's dementedly obsessed with you, I thought he might have made some attempt at contact."

Ginny flushed. "He's not dementedly obsessed with me."

"Yes, he is," Draco said. "Trust me, I know a thing or two about demented obsessions."

"I suppose you do," Ginny said dryly. "Anyway, no, I have no idea what's happening with him, and if you think that isn't bothering me -"

"I think he might have gone to see my father," Draco interrupted.

Ginny gaped. "What?"

"I was at my father's office today," Draco said. "His secretary did a double-take when he saw me. I think he thought I was someone else, someone he recognized. Now, I suppose there could be a plethora of blond teenage boys making their way in and out of my father's office at all hours, but that's a troubling and I must say, rather unlikely scenario. I think he assumed I was..."

"Tom," Ginny said, her voice wavering. "But why would he go see your father? Why?"

"They knew each other at school," Draco said. "They were friends. Perhaps he was looking for help. Maybe he needed a golfing partner. Who knows?" He shrugged. "Also, on my father's desk, I found this." He reached a hand out from the flames, a small piece of parchment held between his fingers. "It's not my father's handwriting."

Ginny took it and was about to unfold it, when the kitchen door swung open. It was Blaise. She stood in the doorway, her hand on her hip, regarding them both with an expression of dry incredulity. "Well, well," she said. "Black and Lupin sent me to see what you were doing, Ginny. I had no idea I'd be interrupting some further permutation of your bizarre love triangle."

"It's more of a love square," said Draco, thoughtful. He grinned at Ginny. "Wouldn't you agree?"

"Well, Harry does have that illicit passion for Ron," Ginny said.

Draco looked greenish. "Ginny! I just *ate!*"

"Ron's not unattractive, really," Blaise observed thoughtfully. "He has a sort of lanky charm."

"I thought you two were going to fight with each other," Draco said disconsolately. "Not team up against me."

"We fought already," said Blaise. "You missed it."

Draco looked from one of them to the other. "You look remarkably unharmed."

"Well, we had to change clothes after Blaise tore my blouse off," Ginny said sweetly. "She fights dirty."

Blaise examined her fingernails. "So says the girl who thinks spanking is a perfectly acceptable defensive tactic."

Draco looked pained. "You're trying to hurt me, aren't you?"

Ginny chuckled. "Yes, but you deserve it. Honestly, like we'd fight over you."

"We may have exchanged a few sharp words," Blaise said. "But then we resolved our differences peacefully." She smiled sweetly.

"And that's it?" Draco asked dubiously.

"That's how girls fight, Draco," said Ginny.

"Damn," he said. "Another perfectly good prepubescent fantasy ruined."

"Reality is cruel," said Blaise. She put her hand on the doorknob. "Ginny, I'll tell them you're busy. Draco -" Her voice was bright, brittle. "Good to see you're still in one piece." She turned to leave.

"Blaise," Draco said.

Blaise turned slowly and stared at him. For a moment, Ginny held her breath. Draco was looking at Blaise, and Ginny knew that look: for just those few moments, Blaise was all he was thinking about, and his eyes were telling her that. "Thank you," he said. "I wasn't sure you'd do it."

Blaise met his gaze steadily. "Neither was I," she said. "I guess you're right. I am like you."

She turned and went out, and the sound of her high heels clicking on the wood floor of the hallways faded into the distance. Draco looked after her thoughtfully. "That," he said, "is a hell of a girl."

"I like her," Ginny said, and realized, after saying it, that it was true.

"As do I," said Draco. He returned his gaze to Ginny. "I have something else for you. I almost forgot."

"What is it?" she asked.

"The other half of your heart," he said, and for a moment she stared at him, uncomprehendingly, until he held his hand out to her. In the center of his palm was a small and sparkling thing: the other half of her glass heart charm. "I found it," he said. "But please don't ask me where. I don't want to have to tell you."

Ginny hesitated. Draco so rarely said please. "All right," she said, against her better judgment. "But then I want you to do something for me."

"All right." He raised his eyes to her. The harsh light of the fire spilled up, casting his face into bright relief, throwing the elongated shadow of his eyelashes down across his high cheekbones. "What?"

"Keep it," she said.

He closed his hand around it. "But it's yours," he said.

"No," she said. "It's not. Maybe someday."

He bit his lip. "I can't -" He cocked his head to the side, then, half-looking away from her. The fire sparked up behind him, the color wavering from gold into a paler yellow. Ginny knew that meant he was about to disappear. "Hermione's calling me," he said, his voice sounding suddenly tinny, as if it was coming from a great distance. "I have to go."

"Please be careful," she said. "When you find Harry, don't let him talk you into anything stupid."

Draco looked almost amused. "It's nice that you're concerned."

Ginny's next words came out of her mouth without any foreknowledge on her part that she was about to speak them.

"I am concerned," she said. "I love you."

His head jerked up and he stared at her, an expression of absolute astonishment on his face. She stared back. She would have thought she would be fighting to keep her expression neutral, but really she only felt very calm. She had said it. Let him do with it whatever he wanted. Although really, he must have known. How could he not?

When he replied, it was with only one word, and not the one she was expecting.

"*Why?*"

Before she could respond, the fire sputtered. The flames changed color again, from pale yellow to blue and then to green; Draco looked surprised for a moment, and then vanished. Ginny was not sure if she was glad or

not that she had been unable to respond to his question. After all, if he wanted to talk to her, he knew where to find her.

She realized she was still holding the folded parchment in her hand, tightly clenched. With a sigh, she unfolded it slowly, and felt a hammering jolt against the inside of her ribcage: somehow, she had not expected Draco to be correct about Tom, but this was his writing, here his curling r's and workmanlike, careful a's and o's. *My orphan's alphabet*, he had said, amused, of his cautious scrawls. And what a surprise, it was a list. Tom had always been so fond of lists. This one was a list of names: *Thaddeus Nott, Eleftheria Parpis, Charles Travers, Linton Avery.*

For several long moments, Ginny stared blankly at the list. It meant absolutely nothing to her. With a shrug, she folded it up and slid it into her pocket before getting to her feet and heading back to the living room.

The last dark red streaks of sunset were fading out of the sky (heavy with clouds, Harry had half-expected to be rained on at any moment) when Harry turned the corner of Viktor's street, almost running. Several wrong turns down narrow cobblestoned streets and a nearly sprained ankle had contributed to his lateness, although they were not the cause of it. *Point me* only worked when you knew where you were relative to due north, after all, and Harry had no idea. He swore under his breath, pulling his cloak tight around him, as the lamps all up and down the street suddenly lit themselves, casting shallow pools of light at intervals along the deserted pavement.

Viktor's building was easy to spot. It had a colorfully painted façade, and Harry could see the gabled window of the living room from the street. The lights were on; he must have forgotten to *Nox* them before he left. At this rate, pretty soon he was going to start forgetting his own bloody name. Unless - well, Viktor *had* said the building employed a staff of house-elves. Perhaps -

Harry's footsteps slowed. A moment before, the pavement in front of Viktor's door had been deserted. Now, just to the side of a pool of light cast by a street lamp, a group of cloaked figures was standing, so closely huddled together that Harry could not immediately tell how many of them there were.

He knew immediately, without knowing how he knew, that they were aware of him, and that they were not friendly.

It never occurred to him to turn around and walk away. Instead he kept moving, slowly and steadily, towards them, while at the same time his hand was creeping into his robes, under his jacket, looking for the hilt of the Gryffindor sword that was strapped to his side.

He was almost to the door. He had begun to wonder if perhaps he was mistaken when one of the figures detached itself from the group. Harry caught the impression of someone tall, wearing a long black robe, when suddenly he found his way blocked. A tall man with long black hair and a stark-white face was standing between Harry and the door to Viktor's building. He wore a black robe, and the front of it was held together by a pin made out of a finger bone. His deep-socketed eyes glittered black and devilish under the faint lamplight, and he was smiling. The smile revealed two canines as long and sharp as the points of daggers.

"Well, well," he said, and his voice was a softly accented hiss. "If it isn't the famous Harry Potter himself. This *is* a surprise."

Sitting on the bed after Draco had banged his way out of the bedroom, Hermione realized that she was desperate for a change of clothes. Fleur had promised to make sure that the hotel sent their bags on from Diagon Alley to Viktor's apartment, but in the interim period, she couldn't help feeling miserable and dirty: there was ash caked on her shirt where Fleur had pulled her through the fire, and thanks to Viktor and Draco she smelled like cigarette smoke. With a sigh, she unbuttoned her blouse, shrugged out of it, and traded it for Harry's old Puddlemere United t-shirt. She had fond memories of this particular shirt, which Ron had given to Harry when they were all fifteen. It was a sort of pale brown color with black lettering and didn't suit Harry at all, but Harry had never minded and had worn it until the cotton was as supple and thin as tissue paper. Hermione rubbed her cheek against the sleeve. It was soft and smelled like Harry.

Who, theoretically, she would be seeing again any minute. She stopped and glanced at herself in the mirror by the door before she went out into the hallway, checking to see if she looked terrible. Her hair, of course, was

escaping from its braids already; she tugged it free and ran a hand through the tangles before giving up and going to look for Draco.

She walked down the hallway calling his name. The flat looked just like the sort of flat she would have expected Viktor to own. Neat, European, decorated in primary colors. Draco wasn't in the kitchen or the study either, but when she walked into the living room he was there, sitting on the wide sill of the bay window. He had his knees drawn up and looked as if he were chewing thoughtfully on the sleeve of his shirt. He had taken off his oversized jumper and flung it over the back of a chair.

"Didn't you hear me calling you?" she said.

"It's dark," he said, as if he hadn't heard her.

"And Harry isn't back," she said. "I know." She went over to the window and sat down opposite him. "Is that what you're fretting over?"

"Not exactly." He stopped gnawing on his sleeve and looked at her over his arm. His blond hair fell forward into his eyes; he looked very young. "Is there any acceptable response to 'I love you' besides 'I love you, too'?"

"'I know' is generally frowned on," Hermione said. "Although it's an improvement on 'Oh, no, not you too' and 'well, that makes one of us.'"

"You're laughing at me," he said, and looked at her with a half-smile that belied a certain level seriousness under his words.

"Well, why are you asking?"

"Research purposes."

"Oh, all right," she said. "Seriously? It depends how it's meant. Is the person saying they love you as a brother or a son or a friend or a lover or a family member or what? Harry always used to write 'I love you' in his letters to me when we were just friends. Of course," she added, "I used to try to read into it, but I don't think he meant anything romantic by it actually."

"Have you ever asked him if he did?"

"No." She looked at Draco curiously. "What's this about, anyway?"

He tugged moodily on a bootlace. "Nothing."

"Liar," Hermione said. She reached out and took his hand; he let her turn it over, and she stroked her index finger across the ragged double cross-shaped scar that disfigured the palm. He shivered. "I'm sorry about what I said to you in your father's office," she said. "That was pointless, and mean."

"You shouldn't apologize for saying things that are true," he said.

"I wish you wouldn't let it make you bitter."

"*You're* not bitter," he said. "He left you, too, and you're not bitter. How do you manage that? Is it some Gryffindor thing I'll never understand? I thought maybe," and he looked back down at his shoes, "maybe you didn't care about him anymore."

"I do care," she said.

"But what if he isn't worth it?"

She sighed. When she leaned back against the window, the glass was cold against her skin. "He is worth it. But even if he wasn't, that wouldn't mean I was wrong or foolish to love him, or that my loving him had been a mistake. We don't love people because they *deserve* it. In the end what's important is what that love says about you, that you're capable of loving someone like that -most people aren't capable of a tenth of that kind of real love, a hundredth of it. Most people would be terrified of it, if they could even imagine it. But *you* aren't - you weren't. You broke that bottle of antidote without thinking about it -"

"Not entirely," said Draco, "without thinking about it."

She looked at him, leaning there against the dark window glass, looking like a fair-haired angel except for that diabolical mouth. "You have always compared yourself to him," she said quietly. "When you hated him, and then when you didn't. And I thought you might try to be like him, but instead you just tried to be what you thought he wanted you to be. But

that's not right, Draco. You don't learn who you are by being what you think someone else wants. You need to figure out what *you* want."

He didn't reply; he had gone rigid all over, staring out the window. "Harry," he said, and bolted to his feet. He spun around, looked at her - "Stay here," he snapped, and flung himself out of the room so quickly she had no chance to do anything more than stare after him in bewildered astonishment.

"You're a vampire," Harry said. He recognized that this was information the stranger doubtless already possessed, but it seemed worth noting. He had never seen an actual vampire before, only the photographs Lupin had showed them in DaDA class. The man's ice-white skin and blue-hollowed eyes and overlarge canines looked exactly like an illustration from Harry's *Understanding the Undead* textbook.

"Yes," said the vampire. "I am. And you are Harry Potter."

There seemed no point denying it. "So this is why Viktor told me not to go out after dark," Harry muttered to himself. Part of him felt obscurely irritated that Viktor had not been a little more clear about the local dangers, and part of him wondered if Hermione would be jealous when he told her he'd seen an actual vampire, and part of him, the part that was The Boy Who Lived - whether he liked it or not - was reaching under his cloak for the hilt of his Gryffindor sword. Was calculating the distance to the front door of Viktor's building. Was checking how many exits there were from this small street, what obstacles there were to flight that might also be helpful for leverage in a fight. "Was there something you wanted?" he demanded, his fingers closing tight over the sword hilt. "Or do you just like to know who you're eating?"

The vampire cocked his head to the side. "You are rather small," he said. "Smaller than I thought you would be. And I have no plans to drink your blood, unless, of course, you force my hand. I rather hope you do. As powerful as you are, and the great Harry Potter, your blood would be...something very special."

Harry shrugged his shoulder; his cloak fell back, exposing his arm, his bare hand gripping the sword hilt. "Come near me and I'll put this through your heart," he said.

The vampire smiled and the razored teeth gleamed in the lamplight. "You should know that the Dark Lord sent us," he said, and took a step forward. The other vampires followed. Their faces were hidden beneath their hoods, but Harry caught the flash of fangs as they smiled and began to move towards him.

Harry grabbed for his sword and drew it fast; metal skidded on metal with a seething hiss and the runic band brushed his arm and burned. It was as cold as ice. Harry held the sword up and looked steadily at the vampires over the blade. "I said not to come near me," he said.

"That is quite a blade," said the vampire. His teeth showed sharp where his lip curled. "You must find us very frightening."

"I've killed worse," Harry said. He was finding it no effort to keep his voice steady; for whatever reason he was not frightened at all. Some part of him, in fact, was spoiling for a fight. *Let them come*, he thought.

The first vampire took a step towards Harry, and the others fell into place behind their leader. They moved towards him with measured steps and Harry raised the sword and braced himself and then a look of complete surprise came over the first vampire's face, making him look very nearly human for that brief moment, and he stopped walking as suddenly as if he'd hit a wall. "*Ce magie e asta?*" he hissed in a language Harry did not recognize, and then, as Harry looked on in surprise, he felt a sudden hard grip on his arms, yanking him backward, and there was a familiar presence behind him and a familiar drawling voice in his ear: "You can't kill a vampire with a sword, Potter, if you'd paid attention in Defense Against the Dark Arts instead of falling asleep and drooling all down your front, you would know that."

Harry half-twisted around and stared. "*Malfoy?*"

Draco, who had one arm across Harry's chest and was gripping the back of Harry's cloak with his other hand, smiled tensely. "Try to contain your joy at seeing me, Potter. It's embarrassing."

"Let me go," Harry said. "I'm fine."

"You're being chased by eight vampires," said Draco, "obviously your definition of the word 'fine' is not the same as mine." His grip on Harry had not loosened. He pulled him back, and Harry realized Draco was dragging him into the pale circle of light cast by the street lamp overhead. "Give me your sword," Draco said, his breath stirring the hair on the back of Harry's neck and making it rise up.

Harry could feel the hammering beat of Draco's heart even through the several layers of fabric - shirt, cloaks - that separated them. The vampires remained where they were, looking curiously at the both of them, and Harry wondered why it was that he felt so uneasy when after all it was Draco holding him there and he trusted him beyond almost anyone else in the world. Later he would wonder why he'd never doubted for a moment that this was Draco, holding his arm and demanding his weapon in a sharp, harshly urgent tone, but doubt had never entered his mind. This was Draco, the sound of his voice, shape of his thoughts, the familiar, electric quality of his presence. Urgency flowed out of him, crackling Harry's nerve endings, setting his teeth on edge. "Draco," Harry whispered, "how did you get here, how did you find me -?"

"Just give it to me."

Harry let go his grip on the sword and Draco caught it with a swift and fluid grace, not by the hilt but by the blade. Harry felt him wince.

"*Malfoy*. Your hand-"

Draco raised the sword up, under the lamplight, and the shadow of the hilt was thrown clean and black and elongated across the pavement at their feet. The rough shape of a cross. The vampires hissed among themselves and stepped backward, too quickly for their usual grace, giving the offending shadow a wide berth.

Only the tallest, the first vampire who had spoken to Harry, did not move back. "You," he said, looking at Draco, "I know you."

"No. You know my father," Draco said.

"*Arati exact ca tatal tau,*" the vampire replied, his pale lips quirking into a grin. "You look just like him."

"*Nu sunt ca tatal meu,*" Draco said, and Harry twisted around to look at him in surprise, but Draco didn't glance at him; he was staring past Harry at the vampires.

The vampire chuckled. "You speak Romanian? Your friend -" and he indicated Harry -"does not."

"He is my friend, yes," Draco said. "*Daca vii aproape, de el, teucid.*"

"That is your business," the vampire said. "What of the girl?"

Draco stiffened. "There is no girl," he said.

Harry felt a sense of bewilderment and increasing agitation - what *were* they talking about? He was obscurely annoyed that Draco had never mentioned that he spoke Romanian although to be fair it had never come up.

"You say you are not like your father," said the vampire. "But he is a liar, too. Even now Lord Voldemort believes your father moves against him."

Draco chuckled low in his throat. "My father's loyalty cannot be bought," he said, "because he has none. The Dark Lord has more to fear than my father."

"You mean yourself?"

"I mean Harry," Draco said.

The vampire's eyes slid to Harry. Even from this distance Harry could feel the coldness of the ancient creature's gaze, the bleak tunnels of its eyes. "The protection you carry is strong," it said, "one of the oldest. But your charms of love, your runes and dragon's blood, they will not save you when you face the Dark Lord, and he will send the terrors of the earth against you before he is done."

"Let him send them," Harry said.

"Just don't let him make you pay for the delivery," Draco said, in Harry's ear, "he's a cheap bastard, the Dark Lord is."

Harry laughed, and after a moment, Draco did too, and the vampires stared at them. The first vampire looked at Draco. "You stand against the Dark Lord then?" he said. "Against your own father?"

"I thought you said my father moved against the Dark Lord," said Draco.

"Perhaps, but if you stand with the Potter boy, you most assuredly stand against them both," said the vampire.

"He stands with me," Harry said.

"I stand for myself," Draco said, as if Harry hadn't spoken. "And not my father."

The vampire grinned, for the first time, and its fangs flashed bright and terrifying. "I have known Malfoys," he said. "For hundreds of years, I have known them, wizards like you - those eyes, that face, those manners -"

"Manners are learned," Draco said. "Not like blood."

"*Sângele apã nu se face,*" said the vampire. "And I know blood better than most. Blood calls to blood, youngest of the Malfoys. You will not so easily escape the demands of your inheritance. *Bufnita nu cloceste privighetori* -"

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Did you just warn me against having sex with pigeons? Because I wasn't really considering it. Dirty, horrible birds. Rats with wings, my father used to say -"

"I *said,*" snapped the vampire, looking annoyed, "that eagles do not generally breed doves. It is an old proverb of my country."

"You know," Draco said, "my Romanian is really pretty much limited to 'Are these snakes poisonous?' and 'Hey, cute thing, can I buy you a beer?' so I'm afraid you'll have to take your long-winded proverbs elsewhere. Not that this conversation hasn't been fascinating, but Harry and I have to be going."

"I don't recall saying you could go," the vampire snarled.

"And I don't think you can come near us, or you already would have," Draco said. "There's something stopping you, isn't there? Something about Harry?"

There was a short silence. The vampire hissed something in Romanian; Harry suspected it was something rude. "What about me?" Harry muttered under his breath to Draco, who shrugged. "Why can't he come near me?"

"You're just special, Potter," he said, "I would have thought you'd be used to that by now, at any rate."

"Very well," the vampire said at last, its tone unpleasantly petulant. "You will be seeing us again, children, before the -"

"Wait," Harry said.

The vampire blinked at him. "Wait?"

"There's something I want you to tell the Dark Lord for me," Harry said, and stepped away from Draco and his outstretched protecting arm so that he was standing alone under the lamplight. "Tell him that I am coming," he said. "Tell him I'm going to kill him. And if he hurts Ron, I'll do worse. I'll burn his body to ashes and scatter the ashes all over Leicester Square so that Muggles dance on the body of Lord Voldemort for the rest of eternity, tell him *that*."

There was something about the hard viciousness in his tone that made the vampire smile at the same time that it made Draco tense up against Harry so that the arm around Harry felt suddenly like tensile steel. "I will tell him," the vampire said, and drew its cloak around itself, and vanished, followed in quick succession by the rest of its followers.

For a moment, neither of the boys moved. Harry stared down the empty street, seeing the shadows, the clear pools of light that spilled from the lamps overhead, the shut and curtained windows. He could hear the clear steady hammer of his pulsebeat inside his own head.

"Well done," Draco said finally, stepping back and releasing Harry. Harry turned to face him; Draco was holding the Gryffindor sword, by the hilt

now. There were smears of blood on the blade. They looked black in the moonlight. "Especially that last speech. You sounded as if you meant it."

"I did mean it," Harry said. "Are your hands hurt?"

"Only a little. Shallow cuts bleed. I'll be fine."

"Where's Hermione? Is she with you?"

"She's upstairs in the apartment," Draco said.

"So it was Viktor told you where I was," Harry said.

"Fleur, actually."

They were both speaking in normal voices, as if discussing the weather. Harry fought the urge to stare at Draco. His face was pale and set and unreadable and shards of lamplight caught in his hair and made it look as if glass had shattered down on him. "I told her not to tell you," Harry said.

"And Viktor told you not to go out after dark," Draco said.

Harry flushed. "I forgot something important in a bar," he muttered.

"What, your brain and your sense of responsibility? Oh, wait. That's two things."

"Glad to see you can count, Malfoy."

"Yes," Draco said. "Although not, apparently, on you."

"Don't," Harry said, unable to stand it for another moment, "don't let's fight, I'm not angry at you."

"That's very gracious of you." Draco's voice was carefully neutral. He lifted his face so that the shadows fell across his eyes and it looked almost as if he were wearing a mask. "I'd hate to think my saving your life had caused you any distress or inconvenience."

"Is that why you came after me," Harry said, "to save my life?"

"Why else would I have come after you?" Draco said, sounding perfectly calm, perfectly reasonable.

"Maybe you missed me," Harry said. "I thought you might have, a little."

"Ah." The shadows deepened around Draco's mouth. Harry tried in vain to reach out and feel what Draco was feeling, thinking; it was like having his face pressed to a glass so darkly tinted that it obscured everything happening on the other side. "Well, I didn't."

Harry blinked at him. "You don't need to be all proud around me -"

"No," Draco said. "I think you've made it quite clear that you have no use for me, or for my pride."

You had no use for me in life, why would you have a use for me after you were dead?

"I'm not dead yet," Harry muttered under his breath, and saw Draco start and look at him oddly, and he gritted his teeth. "I missed you," he said. "Whatever you might think, I did miss you."

Draco looked down at him, and the lamplight spilled clear and unbroken over his face and hair. His expression as he looked at Harry was tranquil, almost serene.

"So?" Harry licked his dry lips. "Say something. What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking," Draco said equably, "that right now, it's taking a great deal of effort for me not to hit you in the head with something."

"Oh." Harry blinked. "How much effort, exactly?"

"Too much," Draco said, and in one swift movement he swung his arm up, hard; the hilt of the sword crashed into Harry's temple with the force of a battering ram. Harry dropped like a rock, out cold.

When Draco opened the door to the apartment he found Hermione standing in the middle of the foyer with the loaded crossbow balanced against her shoulder. It was pointed directly at him. "Move and I'll put

this bolt right through your heart," she said in a steady voice. "I mean it, Malfoy. Stay where you are."

He froze, one hand on the doorframe. There was blood all over the front of his shirt, and blood on his hands. Not his own blood. It was red. "I only left ten minutes ago," he remarked, his eyes on the weapon in her hands. "Do your feelings about people usually change this radically over such short periods of time?"

The crossbow was heavy and was beginning to hurt her shoulder, but she didn't move. "Where's Harry?"

"Downstairs," Draco said. "In the foyer - I wanted your help to get him up the stairs." He raised an eyebrow at her. "Or I *did*. Admittedly this was before I realized you'd decided a sucking chest wound was exactly what was needed to improve my rotten day."

Hermione relaxed her grip slightly. "You hit him," she said. "I was watching from the window with the crossbow - I was ready to shoot any of those vampires if they got near you."

"I had to knock him out. He wouldn't have come with me otherwise." His voice was quite calm, and the incredulous, almost amused look in his eyes made her feel ever so faintly silly. "I don't see how this translates into you pinning me to the wall with a fourteen-inch crossbow bolt."

"Vampires can hypnotize people with their eyes," she said crossly. "Don't you pay attention in class? I thought they might have hypnotized you into hurting Harry -"

"Well, they didn't. Now are you going to come with me or not? Your boyfriend's unconscious and bleeding all over the foyer. If we leave him too long he might go septic, or wake up and run away, or both."

Hermione lowered the crossbow. "I can't believe you were willing to hit him," she said.

"I can't believe you were willing to shoot me," Draco replied.

She flushed. "I wouldn't have done it."

"Even if I really had been hypnotized?" There was a brittle tone to his voice.

She shook her head. "I couldn't."

"Well," he said, taking his hand from the doorframe and preparing to go downstairs, "I guess that's the difference between us, then, isn't it?"

Waking up was like having two very long, very thin needles jammed into his temples, just behind his eyes. Harry moaned, his eyelids fluttering wide and then squeezing shut again in protest as agonizing light sliced into his eyeballs. He tried to cover his eyes with his hands, but something seemed to be preventing him.

"Welcome back to the land of the living," said a familiar voice. Draco. "Does the light bother you?"

"Yes," Harry said, and winced again. Speaking also hurt. His head seemed to have started a rebellion and was trying to secede from his neck. As for the rest of his body, it didn't seem to be cooperating with him either. Neither his arms nor his legs were working properly.

"Sucks to be you, then," Draco said - rather unfeelingly, Harry thought, surprised. Very slowly, he pried his eyes open.

He was lying on his back on the bed in Viktor's apartment. Draco sat on the side of the bed, idly playing with the black seal ring on his left hand. Harry realized why neither his arms nor his legs seemed to be working. It was because his hands were tied to the ornate headboard, while ropes secured his ankles.

"Malfoy!" Harry yelled. Forgetting the pain in his head, he jerked violently against his restraints, with little result. "What the hell are you doing? Did you tie me up?"

"You wound me, Potter," Draco said, with a beatific smile. "As if I would do such a thing."

"Then -"

"I got the house-elves to do it," Draco said, giving the ring on his finger a final spin and turning to look at Harry. "They're wicked good with knots."

"Why?" was all Harry managed.

"I'm tired of chasing you round Europe," Draco said. "Barrelling from country to country, never a change of trousers. You're a flight risk, Potter. Short of handcuffing myself to your leg, I see no other way to assure myself that you stay put until Hermione gets back and we decide what to do with you."

"Hermione won't be happy that you tied me up," Harry said grumpily.

"Nonsense. It was her idea."

Harry's right wrist jerked in the loop of rope that held it. "Where is she?"

Draco shrugged, elegantly. He looked as if he had splashed water over his face, although his clothes were stained with mud and blood. Harry realized he was staring a little. He hadn't really looked at Draco properly in the street outside, and he found himself experiencing an odd pang of recognition: so *that* was what Draco looked like, all shapes and angles and that soft disorderly hair contrasting with the pointed chin and sharp features. "You're the one tied up," Draco said. "Shouldn't I be asking you questions?"

Harry gave up the idea of struggling and lay back on the bed. "Look," he said. "I know you're upset with me. I know what I did was -"

"Shut up," Draco said. His expression hadn't changed and neither had his inflection, but there was something in his voice that made Harry flinch and stare. Draco continued to regard Harry with the same look of faint, bland amusement.

"Well, if you have something to ask me, ask me," Harry said. "Incidentally, I can't believe you hit me over the head with a rock."

"I didn't hit you over the head with a rock. I hit you across the side of the head with my sword hilt."

"Details," Harry said. "And it was *my* sword."

"Which you luckily happened to bring with you. I won't say it was the one intelligent thing you did today, although we might perhaps agree it was the one not-completely-stupid thing you did."

'Call me stupid if you like," Harry said ruefully. "Everyone else has already today."

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Everyone?"

"Well - Fleur. Of course she also told me I was a great warrior."

"Don't get too excited. She uses that line on every guy."

"The warrior line or the stupid one?"

Draco ignored this. "Your eye is blacking up beautifully, by the way," he noted. "It's kind of red and yellow and maroon around the edges. Looks like you even bruise in Gryffindor colors."

Harry squinted at him. "Did you get a haircut?"

"No," Draco said.

"Yes, you did," Harry said. "It was getting so long you could practically have stuck bows in it. Now it's barely over your ears."

"Technically, I did not *get* a haircut," Draco said. "I cut it myself. Anyway, I don't want to talk about my hair."

More than slightly taken aback by Draco's cold tone, Harry plowed ahead gamely anyway. He'd certainly had experience with Draco's bad moods before. Usually it was all right if you could just get him to laugh, lower his guard briefly, let you in just a little bit - "You don't want to talk about your hair?" he said lightly. "Who are you, and what have you done with Draco Malfoy?"

Draco gave him a look. It was an indescribable sort of look. "You know who I am."

Harry felt a shiver of tension run along his spine and realized all his muscles had tightened up - it was as if he expected Draco to hit him again. And yet a voice in his head said, *Draco would never hit me*, and he knew that in a way it was true, that Draco had only hit him to stop him running away, and he would have done the same thing himself - he remembered flinging Draco down that snowy incline near the Manor, out of the path of the hellhounds, and Draco climbing back up to him through the snow with blood soaking through the bandages on his arm. *The things we do to each other*. "Malfoy..." He bit his lower lip, casting about for something to say. "I didn't know you spoke Romanian."

"We have relatives in Romania. My uncle lived there for years. I've told you that."

"What did he say to you? The vampire?"

"*Sângele apã nu se face*," Draco said. "*Blood is not water* - it's a saying. I assume he was referring to my father, or my family in general."

"He knows your father?" Harry asked.

"I'd rather not talk about my father."

"You don't want to talk about your father, you don't want to talk about your hair. What *do* you want to talk about?"

"I'd rather not talk to you at all," Draco said, "but since we're stuck here until Hermione gets back from the kitchen, I suggest we choose some topic unrelated to either of us, our family members, or how much we dislike each other."

Harry blinked; Draco's words made no sense, and all that came to his lips was a startled denial. "I don't -"

"For INSTANCE," Draco interrupted loudly, "If there's a *petrificus totalus*, then is there a *petrificus partialus*? And if so, do people use it for kinky sexual purposes? Because I can't see what else it would be good for."

"*Dislike* you? I don't -"

Draco looked so angry that Harry wondered briefly if he was going to hit him again. Fortunately, the door opened at that moment and Hermione came in to the room, carrying a silver flask.

Harry stared. She looked the same, and yet somehow different - he leaned forward, although the ropes bit into his wrists. His heart jumped up - she was wearing his old Puddlemere United shirt, surely that was a good sign? It was slightly too big on her, and the sleeves gapped around her slender arms: her face looked thinner, her skin translucently pale. Her soft mouth tensed uncertainly as she looked at him and her dark eyes went very wide and very soft. "Harry," she said, her voice barely a whisper.

Draco looked from one of them to the other as they stared at each other, and his mouth set in a bitter line. "*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose,*" he said. "I'll be going. There's a bottle of sixty-proof Bulgarian cough syrup in the kitchen with my name on it. If anyone here needs me, well, they can fuck right off."

That snapped Hermione out of her daze. "Draco," she said. "Wait -" and she held out her hand to him, with the silver flask in it. "Take this, please," she said.

Draco got up from the bed without looking at Harry, and went over to Hermione. She pressed the flask into his hand and said something very quietly to him that could have been *Don't be angry*, although Harry couldn't hear her and couldn't tell anything from Draco's response. He was shaking his head and had half-turned away when Hermione caught at his arm and pulled him back.

And there was something about the way she did it - the familiarity of the gesture, or her need to keep him there, or the way that Draco let her do it when Harry knew perfectly well how careful he was about being touched, how alert to the meaning of every casual gesture - Harry wasn't sure what exactly, but the feeling of jealousy he had experienced so powerfully in his dream surged up and over him again, a nausea so bad it was like pain. He bit down on it, clenching his fists. *I deserve this*, he thought, *I have no right at all* -

Hermione dropped her hand from Draco's arm. He looked at her - he wasn't smiling, certainly, but neither was it that look of absolute hatred he'd bent on Harry, it was rather a curiously vulnerable sort of blankness

- and then he went out the door and shut it behind him. Hermione turned and looked at Harry and took a deep breath and Harry realized something: he had absolutely no idea what to say to her.

"Those illusions don't sound so bad now after all, do they?" Rhysenn murmured, her forefinger tickling the back of Ron's neck. "How many games of chess are you at now? Six? Ten?"

Ron twitched away. "Stop it. What's the point of that cage if you can just stick your arm out like that? If you ask me, Voldemort should have made the bars closer together."

"You're holding back," she whispered, letting her black hair veil her face like a curtain. He could see her grinning behind it. "The Dark Lord won't like that. Are you afraid of the future?"

"Everyone's afraid of the future," Ron muttered, glaring down at the chess board on the table in front of him. He was actually on his fifth game with Voldemort, having been roundly trounced the first four times due to lack of concentration. The truth was, he really *didn't* want to have another vision - he was terrified what he might see - and he couldn't help panicking over Hermione, and Harry by extension.

He was not panicked about Draco. Draco could take care of his own bloody self.

Voldemort's eyes had begun to narrow in suspicion by the middle of the fifth game. Luckily, Wormtail had arrived in a state of agitation and fetched the Dark Lord out of the room. Ron stared moodily at the chessboard, and wondered if there would be any point in cheating while Voldemort was away, and if anyone would be likely to notice or care if he did.

"Not everyone is afraid of the future," Rhysenn said. "Only people with something to lose."

"And I have something to lose?"

"You're in love," she said. "Everyone in love has something to lose."

"Well, then everyone has something to lose, don't they? Everyone loves someone. Even Malfoy has feelings. Icky feelings, but feelings."

"You are more like him in feeling than you think," Rhysenn said, tucking her hair back behind her ears. Ron looked away hastily. She was nearly naked again. He did wish she would warn him when she did that.

"I'm not like Malfoy."

"You are," she said. "To love where love is not requited is painful, but to love where you have no right to love - that is pain that cannot be articulated, perhaps not even understood unless you have felt it."

"Everyone's got a right to love," muttered Ron, who still felt uncomfortable around this sort of talk. "And I'm not in love, anyway. If Malfoy is, that's his lookout, although I'd rather not speculate because eeew."

Rhysenn looked amused. "And I suppose if it were up to you -" she began, then broke off hastily as the enormous double doors to the chess room slammed open and Voldemort strode inside, Gabriel the vampire on his heels.

Both Ron and Rhysenn flinched - the Dark Lord looked furious.

"What do you mean, you could not approach him?" Voldemort roared in a voice like a hissing bonfire. His black and scarlet robe flew out behind him as he spun to glare at the vampire who followed, white-faced and sullen, on his heels. "*What is the meaning of this?*"

"I mean I could not approach him," replied Gabriel, his voice strained. He looked less flushed and human now, more pale and strained and nervous. His lips were drawn back tightly against his teeth and Ron could see the outline of his fangs. Ron remembered Lupin saying that vampires took on a waxy appearance when it had been a long time since they had fed, and shivered. Fortunately, as usual, no one was paying any attention to him. He sat with his elbows propped on the table, trying not to knock over the chess pieces, and stared. "You didn't even tell us he would be there. I was expecting the girl -"

Voldemort waved this objection away. "And you could not get by him? Did he use strong magic on you, was he hung about with crucifixes?"

"He was hung about with the Malfoy boy," said Gabriel, his lip curling, "but that was not the impediment."

Voldemort narrowed his eyes. "The Malfoy boy. Isn't he dead yet?"

"He looked quite alive to me," said Gabriel.

"I was speaking figuratively. I know he is alive. I have a certain amount...invested in him. I was rather hoping he'd manage to not die until after the ceremony, although Lucius' over-zealousness may force me to formulate a new plan. In any case, the Potter boy -"

"He has some charm on his person," said Gabriel. "It seems some form of runic band. It is endowed with powerful anti-demonic spells. I cannot approach it."

"Perhaps you should have tried a bit harder."

"I could *not*," Gabriel said, with emphasis, "and I know none who could. You will have to find some other way to retrieve what you want."

"I could send Wormtail," Voldemort muttered under his breath, "but he is weak and stupid." His head snapped up and he looked at Gabriel, his eyes gleaming unpleasantly. "Lend me your human servants," he said.

"But they are my servants! They obey *me*."

"And you," said Voldemort, "obey me."

Ron remembered what he'd learned in DADA about ancient vampires holding the ability to hypnotize humans with their gaze. If Gabriel was trying that on Voldemort, it was failing miserably. The short battle of wills between the two ended as something seemed to crumple behind Gabriel's eyes, "Very well, my Lord."

"Remember what the girl carries," said Voldemort. "Make sure they know it is to be brought back with her. They can touch silver?"

"Yes, my Lord." Gabriel's eyes slid, then, to Ron. "Master...that boy there."

"Yes?" Voldemort said.

"Could I feed on him?"

Ron pushed his chair back so quickly that it scratched the marble. "Don't even think about it, fang-face."

"My Diviner? Certainly not," Voldemort said. "I need him alive."

The vampire licked his lips, gazing at Ron with low-burning eyes. "I could take just a little and leave him alive," he murmured.

"No," Voldemort said, more sharply. "You cannot have any of his blood. Come now." He snapped his fingers. "Time grows short. If you must have blood, you can feed upon Wormtail before you go."

Gabriel made a face. "He tastes of onions," he complained.

"The Muggles have an apt aphorism about beggars and choosers, Gabriel, that you would do well to learn from. Now come," and Voldemort swept from the room, the vampire at his heels.

The moment the door closed behind them, Ron turned to Rhysenn, who had been silent throughout the interview inside her cage. She met his gaze with a pair of dark gray eyes but said nothing. "What does he mean, human servants? What was all that about?"

"If a vampire bites you but doesn't drain your blood, it gives him a certain amount of power over you. A bit like the Imperius Curse. A real master vampire could command an army of human servants. They're still humans, though, so Harry's demonic protection spell won't help him."

"Harry has a demonic protection spell?"

"He has a runic band," said Rhysenn. "He wears it on his belt."

Ron narrowed his eyes at her suspiciously. "You knew that," he said. "And you didn't say anything?"

Rhysenn examined her nails.

"Harry's with Hermione," Ron said, thinking aloud. "I thought Wormtail's spy said earlier that she was just with Draco?"

Rhysenn looked bored. "One of these days I will understand what the enormous fuss is over that girl. She isn't even pretty."

Ron ignored this. "The human servants - do you think he'll remember to tell them not to hurt her? Should I -"

"They'll do whatever they're told," said Rhysenn, rather shortly. "And the Dark Lord told Gabriel that she isn't to be hurt."

"He also told him not to feed on me," Ron said. "Why? What does he care if I get bitten?"

Rhysenn looked almost surprised. "Because he needs your blood himself," she said. "Didn't you know?"

Harry didn't move as Hermione approached the bed -- she supposed he really couldn't move very far, after all. Draco had secured his wrists tightly to each side of the headboard. It looked likely to be a fairly uncomfortable position, if not actually painful. He raised his head as she came near the bed and sat down facing him. A deep blue-black bruise flowered out from the welt just above his right eye.

"Does it hurt?" Hermione said, fighting the urge to reach and touch his face.

"Yes," Harry said. There was tension in the set of his mouth and his tone was guarded. "Hermione, could you--"

"Of course."

She lifted her wand, pointed; the ropes sprang apart and Harry's hands fell into his lap. He chafed his wrists, his eyes downcast, and said, guardedly, "Are you going to scream at me, too?"

There was a short silence while Hermione thought. "Draco said something like that to me earlier today," she said finally. "I guess I've been yelling at you both a lot lately. I'm sorry."

Harry looked as if she had taken the wind out of his stubbornness. "So you're not angry?"

"Well, of course I'm angry," Hermione said hopelessly, "you run off and leave me, you put yourself in danger - I mean, Harry, what were you doing out so late? Viktor said he made you promise to be back before sunset, what happened? Did you just decide to ignore him?"

Harry looked grimly exasperated. "No, I -" He sighed. "Could you hand me my cloak? I think Draco threw it over the footboard."

Wondering, Hermione picked up the cloak handed it to him. There was a distinct bulge in the inner lining; turning the left pocket inside out, he drew out a small green book, stamped with gold lettering. *The Malfoy Family Code of Conduct*.

"Draco's book?" Hermione asked.

"You could say that. He gave it to me for Christmas," Harry said, running a thumb along the spine. "I had it in my pocket when I went out earlier - I wanted to bring a book with me, and there wasn't anything in the flat in English, and I -"

"Left it somewhere?" Hermione finished. "And had to go back for it?"

Harry had the grace to look embarrassed. "Yeah. I couldn't Summon it - it's got all sorts of protective spells on it."

"You couldn't have gone back for it tomorrow?"

"Someone could have bunged it in a rubbish bin by then!" Harry looked outraged. "Or stolen it, or - Hermione, surely you understand why it's important."

"Well, because Draco gave it to you, of course."

"He didn't give it to me - he trusted me with it." Harry set it carefully down on the nightstand. "He trusted me with a lot of things, I think, and I let him down on all of them, and I didn't want to screw this up too. It's an heirloom, and you know how he is about things like that. Family things -" Harry winced, and broke off. "My ankles," he said. "I almost forgot."

"Oh! I'll get them," Hermione said, and touched her wand to the ropes at his feet. They fell away, and when she looked up he was leaning back against the headboard, rubbing his chafed wrists again and looking at her ruefully.

"You know," he said, "I've thought about what it would be like when I saw you again a hundred times since I left, but I have to say I never exactly imagined it this way."

"I'm sorry it came to this, Harry," she said, trying to keep her voice steady. She wanted to *touch* him, wanted it badly, wanted to push the damp hair back from his forehead and kiss the welt on his cheek and put her arms around him and feel that steadfast, familiar heartbeat, the constant pulse of her safety and his. A wild tenderness surged up inside her, but she said nothing and remained where she was, her hands folded quietly in her lap, her gaze fixed on a point just below his left ear.

"Came to what?" Harry said, leaning forward to undo the ropes that were tied around his ankles. Hermione leaned back to give him room. "Malfoy losing his mind entirely?"

"He had to knock you out. You would have run away again."

"He didn't have to tie me to the *bed*."

"Well, I suppose he could have tied you to the couch, but I'm not sure that would have been a distinct improvement from your perspective."

Harry made a low, exasperated sound. "I don't want to talk about Malfoy," he said. "Do you hate me, too? Is that what this is about?"

At that, she did look up. "I hate what you did," she said, softly. "I hate that you left me."

A spasm of pain crossed his face. "Hermione, I -"

"I hate what you did to Draco," she said.

"I don't want to talk about him."

"Too bad," Hermione said unsympathetically. "If you think I'm going to let you leave here without us, you're out of your mind, Harry Potter. I don't care what fantasy you've got in your head about saving the world single-handed -"

"I don't *want* to leave here without you," he said in a low voice.

Hermione stared at him. She would have thought he was lying, but Harry didn't lie. Not in the same way that Draco didn't lie - Draco didn't lie to *himself*, because self-delusion was weakness, and weakness was despicable. Harry didn't lie because he couldn't. He looked at his hands, clasping the blanket, plying the fabric nervously between his fingers.

"I was wrong to leave without you," he said. "Both of you. I see that now. I've been pushing you all away because I thought I couldn't possibly ask you to come with me. I thought it would be the most supreme kind of selfishness possible to drag you two along on a quest that was mine. It's my death the Dark Lord wants, after all. It always has been. What happened to Ron is my fault."

"But, Harry -"

"Don't." Harry's hands shook on the blanket, but his voice was steady. "Let me talk. I'm telling you what I *thought*, not what I think now. Draco kept trying to tell me, but I don't think I ever really listened," he said, and Hermione noted his abstracted use of Draco's given name, but did not comment. "He kept telling me that I was a hero, I was going to have to make a hero's choices. I thought he was mocking me a little, the way he always does, hell, the way he always *did* -- calling me Harry Potter, World Savior and all that. I figured he was trying to keep me from getting an inflated opinion of myself. But I realized, after I left, that he meant it. And he was right, too. He wasn't mocking me at all. He was trying to tell me that being a hero was hard and brutal and even *demeaning*, that it isn't glorious, that its all these ugly choices you make, day after day, every day. He was trying to tell me that you don't get the luxury of sparing your friends pain. You have to choose the world and not...not everything else,"

he said, and there was nothing self-pitying in his voice, only a frayed and irresolute exhaustion.

"I thought," Hermione said, "that's what you were trying to do. Choose the world."

Harry shook his head. "No. I was trying to keep the people I couldn't stand seeing hurt from being hurt. But that's not choosing the world. That's choosing myself and what I love and can't bear to be without. The truth is, if I really want to defeat the Dark Lord, I need you both. I can't be without you. I can't think properly without you -- I get all muddled and I try to think what you'd do but you're not there to tell me -- and without Draco I --"

He broke off.

"Without him, what?" Hermione asked, but Harry just shook his head.

"I never meant to hurt either of you," he said in a low voice. "That much is true, anyway."

"Then why did you write all those horrible things in that letter to Draco?" Hermione said.

It was cruel, but then she meant it to be a little cruel. His head jerked up and he stared at her, astonishment seared across his features. "He *showed* it to you?" he said.

"He didn't believe you'd written it, at first," Hermione said. Some small part of her wanted to remind him that he had not written her a letter at all, but pride stopped her. "I had to do a spell to prove it."

Harry's hands had fisted themselves on the blanket. His knuckles were white. "I know I'm not a very good letter writer," he began, a little unsteadily.

"*Harry*. It was horrible."

"I didn't mean it to be horrible!" he said, and there was anger in his voice now as well as anguish. "I was trying to be honest. God, I can barely even

remember what I said, now. It's all gone blurred together - but I never intended -"

"You can't have meant those things -"

"And *what business is it of yours?*" he half-shouted at her, suddenly, and Hermione almost fell off the bed in surprise. Harry never shouted at her, never. "Why are you tasking me on Malfoy's behalf, Hermione? Why don't you tell me how *you* feel? Do you need Draco to talk for you?"

"He's not talking for me," Hermione said stiffly. She hated the way she always froze up when she was upset, but she couldn't seem to help it. "I'm talking for him."

"And you think I don't know why? I saw your face when you looked at him just now- the way you always look at him - you feel guilty, don't you? About the way you feel about him, about everything. About what you did - you chose me, and you broke his heart, and he never said anything. If it'd been me I'd have crawled off like a sick cat to lick my wounds somewhere in private, but he couldn't do that. He's too proud. He had to behave as if he didn't mind. It would've killed me, but then he's strong in a different way than I am. And I saw how you pushed us towards each other, me and him, like you thought I could fix it for him, patch over what you broke, make him happy - because damned if you'd want Ginny to make him happy, or some other girl, no, *that* would have made you jealous. But what is it you really want me to do for him? What do you want me to give him that I haven't *already*? What do you want me to be for him that I haven't? I've always tried to be what you wanted, Hermione, but bloody hell, I can't even tell what you want from me any more!"

Hermione gaped at him. She was too stunned to even begin teasing out all the threads of what was true from what was rage and confusion in what he had just said. All she knew was that she had almost never seen Harry this angry in her life. "Maybe I did push you," she began, her voice wobbling. "Maybe I am selfish. Maybe you're right to hate me -"

Harry squeezed his eyes shut. "I don't hate you," he said. "Just because I know you're not bloody perfect doesn't mean I hate you. You're the one who thinks everyone has to be perfect. I practically killed myself trying to be what I thought you wanted me to be. But I'm not perfect, Hermione. I'm selfish sometimes and I do bloody stupid things and I *hate* - you

wouldn't believe how I can hate. I think ugly, brutal, horrible thoughts. All the time. I wish I'd broken Wormtail's neck - every day --" He broke off, his voice ragged and desperate. "If you knew the half of it - what I'm really like -"

"Don't, Harry," she said. "Open your eyes -"

"No." He kept his face averted. "You're not listening to me. Remember that time third year when you told Ron I didn't want to kill anyone? You were wrong. I want to kill Voldemort but maybe that doesn't matter, he isn't even human, but if I could get my hands on Draco's bloody father, I'd kill him, and he *is*- I thought about killing him at the Manor - if it hadn't been for Draco, I'd have done it, too, I'd have grabbed one of those swords off the mantelpiece and stuck it through his throat and I would have been *glad* --"

"If it hadn't been for *Draco*," Hermione said. "You didn't hurt his father for his sake - you couldn't take his father away from him, even though his father's a monster. That's unselfishness, Harry, it's -"

"It's *not!*" Harry shouted. "And that's exactly what I mean. You don't see me. You see what you want to see. And I'm not saying I'm a bad person, either, because I don't think I am - I'm just ordinary -"

"You're anything but ordinary."

He took a deep, shuddering breath, a sound like a sob whipsawing its way out of his lungs. "You'll never understand," he said despairingly. "I love you so much but you just don't understand. You've always seen my best self, and I wanted to be that for you, so badly. But I don't think my best self has much of a chance against Voldemort, Hermione. I just don't."

"Is this what you couldn't tell me?" Hermione whispered. "Is this what you've been hiding from me all this time?"

"Yes," he said. He had raised his face a little, but his eyes were still shut, stubbornly, his teeth biting down into his lip. "Mostly."

"Harry, open your eyes, please. Look at me."

"No. I can't look at you and say these things. I can't do it."

She moved closer to him, reaching out to touch him for the first time, her outstretched fingers feathering the lightest of touches against his bruised cheek. She felt him tense all over, as if he were holding himself back from leaning into her touch. "Open your eyes, Harry," she said again, and this time he did.

He opened them slowly and looked directly at her, and there was in his eyes a sort of hopeless relief that made her think suddenly and acutely of that first night at the hotel in Diagon Alley and the look on Draco's face when he had turned to her in the narrow bed and held his arms out. Exhaustion warring with relief warring with despair: he had done something he had been afraid for a long time of doing, and then it was done and all choices rendered irrelevant. She had felt it in the way that he had touched her, as if she were a dream he had been afraid of having, not a girl but a penance.

Just like him, she thought. She said, "I'm sorry you thought I wanted you to be perfect, or anything other than what you are. If you'd killed Wormtail - if you'd killed Lucius - it wouldn't have made me love you less. Draco's right. You're a hero and that means you find yourself forced into positions where there *are no right choices*. I love you, Harry. Nothing changes that. Nothing I could do changes it. Nothing you could do changes it. No wrong choices could change it. I've loved you since I met you and I'll love you if I never see you again. And I'm not angry at you. I promise I'm not. I feel like I've done nothing but scold you for months and I'm sorry. I was just scared of losing you."

He put his hands out and she took them. They were cold in hers, and she ran her fingers lightly over the backs of his knuckles, her thumb against the scar on his palm. "You're really not angry?" he asked.

"No," she said.

"Thank God," Harry said. "I don't think I could cope if you were both furious at me."

"I know." She reached up, pushed his hair back out of his eyes. "You *are* going to have to talk to him eventually."

"I would, but - what could I even say?" Harry asked. The loose strands of his dark hair tickled her eyelashes. "Maybe I should wait until he's a little less angry."

"He's Draco," Hermione said. "He won't get *less* angry."

Harry sighed. "I can't believe I could have so -"

He broke off, pulling away from her. He was staring over her shoulder. She turned and saw Draco standing framed, blond and indolently scornful, in the doorway. He was looking at them both with an expression of bland distaste.

"Sorry to break up the touching reunion," he said coolly. "One of your pots on the stove's boiled over, Hermione. Black stuff is leaking out of it and catching on fire."

"Oh!" Hermione spun around. "Did you take the pot off the stove?"

"You told me not to muck about with it," he said. "So I didn't."

"Oh, Draco, *honestly!*" Hermione leaped to her feet. "I'll be right back, Harry," she said to the silent boy on the bed, and ran for the door. The corridor was half full of black smoke and by the time she arrived in the kitchen and flipped the stove off, she was cursing Draco under her breath.

"Not at all," he said, having tailed her to the kitchen. "I assure you my parents were married."

Black fluid had pooled all around the base of the stove and the ingredients inside the pot were charred and unusable. "Why didn't you come get me *earlier?*" Hermione demanded.

Draco made a face but stayed well away from her. He was being very careful not to get any of the reeking black liquid on his expensive leather boots. "I didn't want to *interrupt* anything. I feel no need to go blind earlier than I have to."

Hermione glared at him, and dumped the ruined pot into the sink. "There was nothing to interrupt. We were talking."

"Is he all right?" Draco said abruptly.

"Ask him your bloody self," Hermione snapped.

Draco turned on his heel and stalked out of the kitchen. Grabbing up a dishtowel, Hermione was drying her hands when an idea hit her. She peered out and around the kitchen door. "Draco!" she called. "My wand - I left it on the table in the bedroom. Could you bring it to the kitchen?"

Draco, who had been leaning against the side of the corridor, gave her a look of intense annoyance. He peeled himself off the wall and stalked down the hall and into the bedroom. She saw Harry glance up at him as he came into the room and then Hermione took her wand out of her left robe pocket and raised her hand and pointed it at the bedroom door. "*Claudo!*" she hissed, and she saw Draco pause and spin around as the door slammed shut. "*Forinsecus!*" There was a grinding noise, and a number of iron bolts and locks appeared on the outside of the door. "*Prohibeo iunea!*" Hermione called, and the bolts slid home into the locks just as something thumped against the opposite side of the door - probably Draco, Hermione thought, signaling his rage at being locked in.

Well, too bad for him. She slid the wand back into her pocket. "There," she said aloud, "Now they'll *have* to talk to each other," and, pushing down the feeling that perhaps she had just done something unwise, she went back into the kitchen.

Ginny was so lost in thought when she returned to the living room that it took her several moments to realize that Blaise was gone.

Sirius and Lupin sat alone on the couch; Sirius' shaggy dark head was bent and he was studying a folder of parchment that Lupin had open on his lap. Lupin was speaking, and his voice was soft, the words meaning nothing to Ginny, "The victims were all close to Voldemort during the darkest years," he was saying, "They denied it at the trials, of course, and escaped Azkaban. The spies say they returned to Voldemort later, and he forgave them. As for now..."

Ginny stopped listening and simply stood for a moment, watching them as Sirius leaned to turn a page of parchment and Lupin moved aside to allow

it, turning his head with a half-smile in his old friend's direction. She wondered if, wherever they went together, they carried with them the ghosts of two other boys: one dead, one who might as well be. She wondered if Harry and Draco would ever be like this, some time in the far future. She wasn't sure she could ever imagine them peaceful - not together, and certainly not apart.

Something occurred to her belatedly. "Where's Blaise?" she demanded.

Lupin looked up. "She left," he said. "She went to Pansy Parkinson's. She said she'd come back later tonight and if she couldn't, she'd owl tomorrow."

"Oh," Ginny said, feeling oddly bereft. "But -"

Lupin looked up at her. "Yes?"

"It's raining," she said.

"She took your raincloak," Lupin said. "The yellow one - she said you wouldn't mind."

Of course she did, Ginny thought, faintly amused by Blaise's nerve. She was disappointed the other girl was gone. There had been something she had wanted to ask her, something she had wanted to say...

"Moony," said Sirius thoughtfully, tapping his quill against Lupin's knee, "could you check and see if Avery is cross-referenced under the Mulciber files? Didn't Arbuthnot Mulciber meet a sticky end a few years ago?"

"Mm, he did, but Moody said that was a botched plot of Renton's, so it's probably unrelated. I suppose it wouldn't hurt to look, though..."

There was the sound of rustling parchment, but Ginny had stopped paying attention. Idly, she crossed the room to the long table that ran along the wall under the garden window. Usually it held Mrs. Weasley's good china, but now it was covered with books and numbered stacks of parchment. She ran her finger along the gold-embossed spine of one of the books, *Death Eater Histories, Vol.III*, but her mind was elsewhere. She was thinking about Blaise, about how Ginny had known just the right thing to say to make the other girl stay, somehow, which seemed odd to

Ginny because she didn't know Blaise at all, in fact had barely spoken to her previously.

It was because she was like Draco, Ginny thought, I talked to her just as if she had been Draco. They were both so single-minded and so economical in their caring; weighing the checks and balances of what mattered and what didn't, what was worth doing and what wasn't. Each armored all over with their icy indifference, each with a vulnerable place where they could be hurt: for Blaise, it was Draco. For Draco...

"Nothing under Mulciber," Lupin said, softly, his voice cutting through her reverie.

"Check the others, then," Sirius said. "Parpis and that first one, Nott..."

It was as if his words cut into her, as sharply as a knife. Ginny stiffened all over, whirling away from the table to stare at Lupin and Sirius. Neither of them noticed her movement at all, so engrossed were they in their papers. A moment later Ginny was scrabbling at her pocket, yanking out the slip of parchment Draco had given her, opening it with shaking fingers, reading once again down the list of names. *Thaddeus Nott, Eleftheria Parpis, Charles Travers* - and that was all, the lower part of the list had been torn away, right through the last listed name: *Linton Avery*.

A queer feeling built up behind Ginny's eyes, as if she were about to cry, or laugh very hard. She could hear her own uneven breathing, and feel the pound of blood in her veins. Tom, she thought. It's you, Tom, killing them, isn't it? I should have guessed. I should have known it was you. But why would you kill them, your own Death Eaters?

Her breath caught in her throat. Because they're not yours, she thought, the world seeming to tilt crazily about her. They're his...and you could never bear to share your toys, not even with yourself. Better that the toys be broken...

She looked up, then, absolutely sure that Lupin and Sirius must be able to sense her shock, hear the hammering beat of her heart. But they were still engrossed in their research and their own conversation. She felt as if they were miles away and she was looking at them through Omniculars. Think, Ginny, she told herself fiercely. Detach from the panic and think...This senseless killing isn't senseless at all. Tom never does

anything without a rhyme or a reason to it. If he's killing them in a specific order, then there's a reason for that order. *They were all close to Voldemort during the darkest years, Lupin had said, They denied it at the trials, of course, and escaped Azkaban. The spies say they returned to Voldemort later, and he forgave them -*

But *you* didn't forgive them, Ginny thought. You didn't forgive them, did you, Tom? You never forgive anything. Her heart was still pounding wildly as she reached for the book on top of the table, and flipped quickly to the index. She found the entry for '*Trials*,' and swiftly paged back until she found the right chapter. Somewhere, she thought, there would be a list of their names, not in the order in which they had been brought to trial, but in *the order in which each had been pardoned and forgiven...*

And there it was. Trembling, she pressed the page flat and read:

Thaddeus Nott

Eleftheria Parpis

Abuthnot Mulciber

Charles Travers

Linton Avery

Frances Parkinson

The book dropped out of Ginny's hands and struck the floor with a bang. Both Lupin and Sirius looked up, startled. Ginny was barely aware of Sirius beginning to rise to his feet, a worried expression on his face. 'Ginny, are you -'

"I have to go," Ginny whispered, and bolted past him, through living room and out the doors and into the hallway and she grabbed Charlie's green cloak off the wall peg and stumbled out the front door, clutching her broomstick in one hand, not even remembering when she had picked it up but that didn't matter because she was fleeing down into the garden, she was kicking off from the ground, she was racing the rising moon towards Pansy's house and praying that she was not already too late.

Draco gave the locked door one last kick and turned around. He bent a wrathful gaze on Harry, who was still sitting on the bed, too bewildered at this sudden turn of events to say anything. "Oh, nicely done, Potter," Draco snarled. "Was this your idea?"

Harry scrambled up and off the bed. "What's she done? Locked us in?"

"Level six Forinsecus spell," Draco said with grudging respect. "Take hours to get it off, even for one of us. I haven't got the energy, and you're too incompetent to get a counterspell right. Blast the girl. I don't suppose you've got a crowbar shoved in among your unsavory belongings?"

"No," Harry said. He leaned against one of the bedposts. "Besides, she's got a point. We should talk."

"We have nothing to talk about," Draco said, and stalked across the room to the wardrobe. He threw it open. It appeared to be functioning as a sort of catch-all closet, stuffed with pillows, blankets, Quidditch gear, boxes, and a haphazard array of household items. "I wonder if I could bash the door down with a Quidditch bat?" Draco mused aloud.

"Viktor wouldn't like it if you ruined his bat," Harry said, his mind not really on the problem of the door. Having shouted at Hermione, for which he already was beginning to feel guilty, Harry felt drained and wrung out, in no shape to ponder what exactly it would take to placate Draco's apparently boundless rage. He'd imagined seeing Draco again dozens of times since he'd left Hogwarts but the imaginary circumstances had always been quite different. He'd always been returning home in triumph from a summary defeat of the Dark Lord, and all his friends had come flooding out of the front doors of the school to hug and congratulate him. Sometimes, in the fantasies, he'd been bandaged up or limping bravely, and everyone had been very concerned. In none of the fantasies had Draco regarded him as if he were a worm and an outcast from polite society.

"Viktor also told you, presumably, not to go out after dark," Draco said. "Tell me, Potter, were you purposely trying to top your previous thickheaded stunts, or was tonight a coincidence? I can never tell if you're trying to be stupid deliberately or if it just comes naturally."

Harry sighed. "Look, Malfoy, you don't have to talk to me if you don't want to, but will you at least listen?"

"No," Draco said, dragging several boxes out of the wardrobe and upending the contents at his feet. "Hey. Are these Muggle tools?"

"Yes," Harry said. "And what do you mean, no?"

"What do you think I mean?" Draco prodded at the tangled pile of junk at his feet -- broomstick seats with the stuffing coming out, scraps of uniform, bits of metal tools, a pestle snapped in half. "Is that a what-d'you callit, one of those things you can take hinges off with?"

"*Accio!*" Harry said impatiently, snapping his fingers; the screwdriver shot out from the bottom of the pile and flew across the room. It smacked into the palm of his hand and he set it down on the bed next to him. "Yes, it's a screwdriver. I'll give it to you if you talk to me for five minutes."

Draco had straightened up and turned to look at Harry. There was a hard, unpleasant flatness in his gray eyes. When he crossed his arms over his chest his cotton shirt pulled tight across his back, showing the angular thinness of his shoulder blades. He was still too thin - he should be back at school, Harry thought distractedly, with Madam Pomfrey to look after his recovery, not barreling around Europe on no proper sleep, no proper food either...

"I'm not sure I want that Muggle device that badly," Draco said. His voice was deceptively soft, and Harry, attuned as he had become to every tone and shade of Draco's voice, knew that it meant that the other boy was very angry indeed.

"It's far too big to take the hinges off anyway," Harry said. "Look, Draco - Leaving Hogwarts like that, it was the biggest mistake I'll ever make -"

"Don't sell yourself short, Potter," Draco said. "I'm sure someone with your obvious talent for imbecilic misjudgments will be making even bigger, better mistakes in future."

"I didn't want to leave you," Harry said. "I thought I had to."

At that, something did flicker in the back of Draco's eyes - a sharp, irresolute fierceness, as if Harry's words had surprised him. Harry remembered putting his hands through the bars of that cage back at the Manor, the sharp quiver of surprise that had run through Draco when Harry's knife had cut into his skin. "Is that what you thought," he said.

"Voldemort is my problem," Harry said wearily. "Not yours. You've done enough, suffered -"

"*Your* problem?"

Draco's voice was blood and honey: metallic and deceptively sweet. Carefully, he set the box he had been holding down on the nearest wardrobe shelf. He turned and walked over to Harry. Harry, leaning against the bedpost, did not shrink back as Draco came and stood in front of him, but he wanted to; some part of him entirely expected Draco to hit him again as he had done earlier. Draco made no violent move in his direction, however, merely hooked his thumbs into the waistband of his jeans and regarded Harry with half-hidden eyes and maliciously set mouth. Harry felt as if the hair were standing up along his arms and the back of his neck, and he couldn't help remembering the alleyway outside the Midnight Club, and being pushed up against that wet wall, the sense of menace he'd felt, the unease. But that was nothing to this, because now it really was Draco looking at him with a flat unforgiving gaze, the finely drawn mouth tight with furious disdain.

"Your problem, Potter?" Draco said again. "Are you entirely sure about that?"

"It's my responsibility," Harry said, keeping his voice as steady as possible.

"Really." Draco raised his hand; Harry tried not to flinch, but Draco only touched his hair with a surprising lightness, pushing it back from his forehead, and grazed his thumb along Harry's scar. "Because of *this*?"

"Malfoy," Harry said, his voice very quiet, "what happened to your hand?"

Draco dropped his hand as quickly as if Harry's skin had burned him; he rocked back on his feet, his eyes narrowed. "Maybe it is your problem," he said, ignoring Harry's question completely. "After all, what's the Dark

Lord to me? Only the man who forced my father to have me as part of some breeding program. Only the man who tortured me with the Cruciatus Curse until I bit through my lip because he was trying to get me to tell him where *you* were. Only the man who took my parents away from me as surely as he took yours - no need to gape at me, Potter, I know all about what my father gave up in the Dark Lord's service. I never had a father and thanks to him, I never had a mother either, but you're right, of course, the Dark Lord is entirely *your* concern."

"I didn't know you wanted - revenge," Harry said, his mouth so dry his voice sounded indistinct to his own ears. "You never said -"

"I didn't need to," Draco said. "You wanted it enough for the both of us and I wanted what you wanted. But that was when I thought I would be a part of whatever you accomplished." His slender shoulders lifted in a shrug; Harry was reminded oddly of Fleur and her expressive gestures. "I know better now."

"You are a part of whatever I do," Harry said, almost biting off the words in his urgency. "Didn't you read my letter -"

Draco's hand slammed into the side of the bedpost so hard that Harry almost fell over. "If you ever mention that letter again," he snarled, his voice suddenly raw and uncontrolled, "I will break *every bone in your body*. Do you understand me?"

Harry was too shocked to say anything. He simply stared, as Draco, looking away from him, seemed to be fighting for control, although over what emotion Harry could barely guess. For the first time Harry was able to imagine the shattering of that perfect restraint, the death of all those careful refinements and that beautifully controlled malice. It was like imagining the death of a person; it terrified him. "All right," he said finally, quietly. "I won't mention it again."

"Good," Draco said, and his voice shook. He dropped his hand back to his side, tightening the fingers into a fist, hiding the ugly weals along the palm that Harry knew better than to ask about again. "Then we understand each other."

"Do we?" Harry said. "Because if we're going to go on together, you and I, then we're going to have to learn to get along better than this."

"Go on together?" Draco echoed. The gray eyes were veiled again, barely visible beneath lowered eyelashes. "What do you mean, precisely, go on together?"

"If we're going to stand against Voldemort together," Harry said, "then we can't be fighting with each other."

Draco looked at him incredulously for a moment, then smiled delightedly, that swift characteristic smile that lit up his face and made his eyes sparkle, a smile that felt like something tugging at the corner of Harry's own mouth, making him want to smile back, and then Draco, still smiling, said, "You thought I was going to come *with* you now? I'm not sure what's funnier, Potter - your endless optimism, or your boundless stupidity."

Harry's smile vanished. "What?"

"Well, of course you'd think that," Draco said dryly. "After all, what purpose do I have on this earth beyond following you around?" His gray eyes, up close, were shaded with an amused and tranquil blue. "I remember when I was eight years old," he added, confidentially, and Harry, bewildered, felt the confiding and gentle tone like pain, as the memory of past and lost intimacy is always painful. "I had a pet bird. It died. My father killed it, actually. I ran away from the Manor. My father sent the hellhounds to drag me back. They dropped me on the floor at the foot of the staircase and my father came down and knelt down over me. I thought he might pick me up, but he didn't. He said, *You were wrong to run. You belong to me. You are mine, like this house, like these dogs, like the portraits on the walls. No less and no more than any of my other possessions, you belong to me. You are subject to my laws and to the Manor's laws. Fight me and I will break you. Run from me and I will bring you back. There is no part of this earth you can run to that I cannot find you, no place so distant that, finding yourself there, you will no longer be my son.*"

"But this isn't like that," Harry said. "You don't belong to me like that and I don't make you do anything you don't want to do. I'm *not* like your father. I'm not friends with you because you're *useful*. You matter to me," he said, thinking how very feeble that sounded. If only he had Draco's gift of words. "And I'm your friend because I want to be. I assumed it was the same with you. I would never want to hurt you, not deliberately."

"I know," Draco said. "I'm sure you wouldn't. And you, I suppose, are mine as much as I am yours." The blue-gray eyes, supremely calm, were icy. "I wanted my death to mean something," he said. "And you took that away from me. Maybe you meant to, maybe you didn't. But I won't ever forgive you for it. *Ever.*"

Utterly bewildered, Harry stared. "I don't understand," he said.

Draco cut him off. "You wouldn't," he said. "And it has passed the point where it matters to me whether you understand me or not." The deliberate voice was elegant, the words carefully chosen; Harry wondered if Draco had rehearsed this particular speech, or if it was simply that in times of stress he reverted to his Malfoy upbringing and the carefully cultivated ancestral graces that kept real emotion at bay. "I remember when you said you didn't choose the connection we had, it was forced on you..." The careful voice stumbled a little, but Draco caught himself and went on with perfect clarity, "I should have listened then. I didn't. But you were telling the truth, and I'm grateful for it. I'm grateful for a lot of things, Potter. And I *will* miss you," he said, "when I can," and he stopped, not as if he had nothing else to say, but as if he could not find the words to go on.

"Miss me?" Harry echoed. "But I'm not going anywhere."

"I am," Draco said. "Tomorrow. I'm going back home. You and Hermione can go on together. I won't try to stop you. I promised her I'd find you, and we've found you. My responsibility in this matter is discharged. I intend to return to England by myself."

Harry felt his knees give; he slid down the bedpost and found himself, to his surprise, sitting on the floor. He felt as if he had just been running down the stairs from Gryffindor Tower, shrugging his cloak on, late to breakfast as he often was, and just as he was about to put his foot down on the last step a black pit had opened up at his feet and he'd toppled into it without warning or even enough time to cry out in surprise. He looked up at Draco, but from this vantage point the other boy's face was in shadow: he could see him only in shades of light hair and pale skin and dark clothes. "I could stop," Harry said. "I could come back with you..."

"And leave Ron, and your revenge, and all that? Could you really?"

Harry couldn't pretend. "No. I *have* to go on."

"I know," Draco said. "I'm not asking you to come with me. I don't even want you to come with me. As I said, we are not without choices, and this is what I choose. I chose you as a friend, and I can retract that choice by my own free will. You don't have to pretend that you need me to come with you," and for a moment he almost sounded amused, but then it wasn't really amusement at all. "I would just -"

Harry interrupted him. He did not want to hear it. "Are you saying you no longer want to be my friend?"

"Yes," Draco said. "It's my decision. Perhaps it's not what you want -"

"It's *not* what I want."

"-But I trust that you will abide by it."

"I couldn't possibly," Harry said, immediately, without thinking or deliberation.

Draco was motionless, looking down at him. The curtains stirred in the faint, cool wind from the half-open window, and the same wind ruffled Draco's hair and blew the fine bright strands across his face. His eyes held no light of their own, only reflected light from the lamps in the room, and if there were any pity or regret or tenderness or remembered kinship in them, Harry could not see it. He could see only the tension in the thin shoulders, the shadow-hollowed eyes, the downturned curves of the dispassionate mouth. "I'm asking you," Draco said.

"I can't," Harry said. "If I said I could I'd be lying."

The tension went out of Draco's shoulders; he looked down, as if he were gazing at himself, at the blood still splashed on his boots and trousers, the wreck of his clothes, the ruin of his beautiful hands. "You won't even do that for me," he said. "Not even that."

"No," Harry said.

"Then," Draco said, "I suppose we are at an impasse, Potter," and he sat down on the floor, at the opposite side of the bed's foot, leaning his back

against the other bedpost. He pulled his legs up and wrapped his hands around them and rested his chin on his knees. Harry looked over at him, waiting for him to go on, but Draco was silent; there was only the faint sound of the wind coming into the room, and the shadows lengthening on the floor between Harry and the boy whose pale hair blew across his face and covered his eyes so that Harry could not see them. Over the sound of the wind Harry became aware of a faint whispering noise and realized that, as it had been promising to do all day, it had finally started to rain.

Hermione tapped the heavy bolts holding Viktor's bedroom door closed with the tip of her wand, and they melted away. She paused a moment, hand on the door, listening for any sound from within. Silence. Perhaps they were sulking? Perhaps they'd made up and were chatting in a happy telepathic silence? Perhaps they'd ripped down the curtain rods and beaten each other to death with them? Where Harry and Draco were concerned, anything was possible. Biting her lip in trepidation, she pushed the door open.

The lamp on the mantelpiece had burned out and the room was in shadow. Grey light poured in through the open window over the bed, along with wind and the metallic smell of city rain. For a moment she thought the room was empty and wondered wildly if they had both been desperate enough to climb out the window to get away from each other. Then her gaze slid down to the foot of the bed and she saw the two figures huddled there on the floor, wrapped in their dark cloaks, apparently fast asleep.

There was so little light in the room that it was hard to see them properly. The faint illumination from the window stenciled them both with light, touching the edges of Harry's black hair with lighter shadow, turning Draco's fairer tangles to silver tinsel. Draco was asleep, slumped back against the right bedpost, his chest rising and falling softly as he breathed. Harry's head had fallen back against the footboard and his eyes were closed and his mouth was soft in relaxation and for a moment she just simply stood and watched them breathe in tandem: *one sleeper, two bodies*, she thought.

Kneeling next to Harry, she reached to stroke his cheek, gently. She meant only to smooth his hair back and go, but when she touched him his eyes

opened, slowly, the veiled lids lifting over tired green eyes. He looked young in his exhaustion, the dirt and cuts smudged darkly against his pale skin, a blue tracery of spiderweb veins visible beneath his eyes. There was a faint curiosity in his expression. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she whispered. "When did you two fall asleep?"

"Two hours ago, maybe three," Harry said, fighting back a yawn. "I've just been dropping off and waking up again. Listening to the rain. I'm glad you came back," he said, and smiled at her. It was a dejected smile, a little disbelieving - Ron had smiled at her like that, she remembered, the first time they'd seen each other again, sixth year, after they'd broken up; less a happy smile than a rueful admission that sometimes life didn't turn out the way you wanted it to. She wondered what Harry been sitting here thinking about. He looked a little dazed, as if he'd lost something extremely important and was still trying to remember where he'd last seen it. "I appreciate what you tried to do," he said. "Even if it didn't really work."

"It didn't?" Hermione tried to keep the surprise out of her voice.

"Harry...if you want we can go into the living room and talk."

"I can't," he said, and slid his eyes sideways. She followed his gaze and saw that he was looking down at Draco. When she had first come in she had thought that the boys were leaning on each other, but had realized as she came closer than it had merely been a trick of the shadows. Draco was in fact leaning away from Harry, his head cradled against his own arm, braced against the foot of the bed. But his other arm, his free arm, was extended towards Harry, and his left hand gripped the sleeve of Harry's cloak tightly, his fingers so intricately knotted into the material that Harry could not possibly have stood up or drawn his cloak away without waking the other boy.

"I thought you said you hadn't made up," Hermione said.

"We haven't," Harry said. "He told me he never wanted to talk to me again, and then he sat down and fell asleep. I started to get up but he grabbed my cloak. I thought he'd woken up but he hadn't. He was still asleep. He must have been really tired," Harry added, "to fall asleep like that."

"He hasn't been sleeping much lately," Hermione said softly.

"Well," Harry said, "I'll just sit here then. I don't mind."

Hermione looked from Harry to Draco. Even asleep, Draco seemed to have arranged himself elegantly, his hair tousled just right, the curve of his arm just *so*, whereas Harry always slept as if he lay where someone had tossed him. Draco had the charm and the physical beauty, but Harry would always be, to her, the more beautiful. Draco was the graceful one, but Harry had *grace*, grace in the sense she had learned about as a child: innocence that inspired mercy, courage that merited compassion. What she had said to him before was true. She could never have hated him.

"I love you," she said.

He smiled at her, a tired smile but a real one, and she leaned forward and kissed him lightly on the mouth. She meant it as a gentle kiss, but his mouth opened under hers and she felt her nerve endings spark. His lips were as soft as she had remembered and he still tasted faintly of chocolate. His left hand came up to cradle her face, although he kept his right arm where it was, with Draco holding on to him, and she felt somehow as if she were kissing them both and it was a very odd feeling although not entirely unpleasant and she pulled back, suddenly afraid that they would wake Draco up and precipitate what promised to be a very bizarre scene. "I should go," she said.

"Well, *now* I'm not going to get back to sleep," said Harry, although he sounded amused rather than cross. "I don't suppose you want to tell me what that was for?"

"No," she said, and stood up. "It'll do you good to wonder," and with that, she walked out of the room, and closed the door behind her. When it clicked shut, she leaned against it, closing her eyes.

Because her eyes were closed, she heard the noise before she saw them: the sound of footsteps on the hallway's wood floor. Her eyes flew open and she sucked in a startled breath of absolute horror at finding herself surrounded. She fumbled for the knob of the door behind her but there were already rough hands on her arms, jerking her forward. A hand clapped over her mouth, cutting off her scream, and she bit at the fingers but it was too late: something heavy and hard came down across the back

of her head, and the world exploded into a fragmenting kaleidoscope of shapes and colors before fading entirely to black.

It had been raining steadily for twenty minutes already when Blaise landed her broomstick in front of Pansy Parkinson's house, but she stood on the gravel walkway in front of the door anyway, reluctant to go up and knock.

Nouveau riche, her parents called the Parkinsons, their tone distasteful, and it was evident even from the outside of Pansy's house that the Parkinsons' wealth was new rather than inherited. Despite, or perhaps because of, the two huge stone griffins (rampant, with heraldic shields) that guarded the front door, the enormous house looked somehow cheap and tawdry - the two awkward modern wings that had been slapped on at either side stuck out like sore thumbs, and the enormous brass P's that served as door handles were just...

"Hideous," Blaise muttered, wrinkling up her nose. At least the grounds were beautiful. Lawns fell away to a small lake in the distance, and she could see the shadowy copses of trees dotting the hillsides: slender birches, attenuated larches, stripped and elegant and dripping with rain. The air smelled wet and heavy, sharp with dampness and wet bare wood.

Blaise sighed to herself. The truth was, she did not want to go inside; she did not want to face Pansy; she did not want to do any of the things Ginny had asked her to do. And yet, somehow, she felt she had to. Partly because it would help Draco - and she did love him, although standing here somehow she found it hard to conjure his face out of the shadows and the falling rain - and partly because Ginny had asked her to, and while she felt she owed the other girl nothing, she also felt a strangely perverse desire to prove herself.

It was inexplicable - prove herself to a Gryffindor, a girl younger than herself! And yet - Hermione had said to Blaise, *I trust you*, but Ginny's face had showed her open disbelief and her mistrust and finally, a doubtful hope. If Blaise turned back now she would only be fulfilling Ginny's expectation that she would fail, and that she refused to do.

She propped her broomstick against one of the griffin statues and ran up the stairs, her yellow raincloak as wet and heavy as drenched carpeting. The door knocker was brass and very heavy, carved in the shape of an eagle's head holding a ring in its beak. Blaise's wet fingers slipped on it at first, but on the second try she managed to lift it. Its fall sent a great echoing reverberation through the house.

There was no reply. Blaise waited a minute, two; then leaned back and looked up at the house again. Lights burned in the upstairs windows and some of the downstairs as well. Someone must be home, then, and surely they could spare a house-elf to open the front door, even if they weren't expecting visitors. Annoyed now, she reached out for the knocker again -

The door swung open before her fingers could close on their target. She stepped back, uncertainly, rain dripping from the hood of her cloak and running, cold, down into the open neck of her dress. She blinked, clearing the water from her eyes, and stared.

The entryway was full of candles. They burned, high and hot, giving off a strange gold light, and in the center of that gold light, his hand on the open door, stood Seamus Finnigan. Blaise felt her mouth open of its own accord; what on earth was he doing here? And in those clothes, they looked fifty years out of date - those boots, that long tailored black cloak, the white shirt under it, so odd against all his pale hair and lightly freckled skin and what on earth was that splashed all over his cuffs, was it red ink ...? And why was he *looking* at her like that?

She had no idea, of course, how she looked to him. The darkness behind her, her slim Chaser's body wrapped in the familiar yellow cloak - because Seamus did remember it, as he remembered everything about the girl he'd loved, so Tom remembered it too - and the poppy-red hair escaping from the hood, streaming in long soaked strands down over her shoulders, plastered to her throat, her face in shadow under her hood.

He caught her to him so fast that she had no time to exclaim in surprise; his right arm went around her, his other hand sliding up under her hood to run itself over the wet planes of her face, her damp hair. The look on his face was indescribable - a glazed sort of desperate hunger, as if he were holding himself back, but just barely. She could feel the tremors running through the tense young body pressed against her, and the wild

hard beating of his heart. "I knew it," he hissed under his breath, "I knew you couldn't stay away...."

Oh, bloody hell, Blaise thought, mortification mixing with her horror. He thinks I'm Ginny.

"Seamus," she said, and oddly, his body relaxed at that, as if he were surprised to hear her say his name. "Seamus, I'm not Ginny. It's me, Blaise, so..." His grip on her relaxed further, although he did not release her. Blaise bit her lip. This was certainly very awkward. Perhaps he had been drinking? "Mistake anyone could have made, really," she assured him. "Is...is Pansy anywhere about?"

It was a moment before he replied. "You're not Virginia?" was all he said, and Blaise blinked. Did anyone actually call Ginny that? Well, apparently Seamus did. There was no accounting for boyfriends.

"No," she said lightly, "although after a greeting like that, I can't understand why she ever dumped you. I wouldn't have thought you had it in you, Seamus. You always seemed so *stolid*." She tipped her head up towards him, and her hood fell back, exposing her face. "Appearances can be deceiving, I guess."

At that, he smiled, his soft mouth curving upward suddenly into a hard malicious grin. He leaned towards her, his pale curling hair falling forward over his forehead, and a spark of apprehension lit in the back of her throat, making her swallow hard.

"You have no idea," he murmured, and, still holding her where she was, his free hand came up to trace again the contours of her face, the shape of her mouth. "Perhaps you are not her," he said, "but you'll do just as well for the moment. In fact," he said, raising his hand, a gesture which slammed the front door closed so hard that the hinges shook, "in fact, you'll do very well indeed..."

A muffled noise woke Harry: it sounded like a bag of wet sand striking against a wooden surface. Blearily, he pried his eyes open and looked around.

Surely it couldn't have been more than a few minutes since Hermione had left. Draco, however, was apparently now awake, and was several feet away, down on his hands and knees, trying to get something out from under the bed. Harry rubbed his eyes. "Did you drop something?" he asked. "I thought I heard a noise."

"Go back to sleep," Draco said ungraciously, and dragged what he had been looking for out from under the bed. It was his sword, the one Sirius had given him. The dark steel seemed to part the moonlight, like the gleam of a fish's back breaking the surface of river water. "I'll be out of your hair in less than a minute."

"You're not still blithering about leaving, are you?" Harry got slowly to his feet, yawning. Being so very tired had the effect of making him feel a little drunk. "I thought maybe you'd have slept that off."

"Right, because, you know, I didn't mean it in the first place. I was just being melodramatic for kicks." Draco straightened up. "Get out of my way, Potter."

Harry realized that he had, whether deliberately or inadvertently he wasn't sure, put himself between Draco and the door.

"No," he said.

Draco paused and blinked at him. He had slept oddly on his hair and it was sticking up wildly all around his head; in another situation, Harry would have been tempted to laugh. "What do you mean, no?"

"If you want to leave you'll have to go through me," Harry said.

"Potter." Draco looked pained. "Tell me you're not really doing this. 'If you want to leave you'll have to go through me?' Who says that? This is just embarrassing."

"I don't care," Harry said, and found that he didn't. Far from feeling mortified, he felt merely resolved, absolutely adamant, and it was nice, finally, to feel something that wasn't subject to question. "Hit me if you want. You already did once today."

"And then what? You'll hit me back and we can scrap like we used to, make each other bleed? And what does that prove? This denial problem of yours is becoming tedious. Just get out of the way, Potter, it makes me sick to look at you."

"Then look at something else," Harry said. "I don't care - you're not going. I don't even care what you stay *for*, it doesn't have to be me, but this is where you should be -"

"Because *you* say so?" Draco took a step forward. His eyes were flat, glittering with fury. "Get out of my way."

"No," Harry said, again.

"*Move*, Potter," Draco said, and tried to step around Harry; his shoulder knocked Harry's, and Harry, already strung up and tense, threw out an arm to block his way. Draco moved to shove him sideways, and Harry pulled back so hard that he toppled over; he grabbed at Draco, and they went over together, landing on the carpet in an unpleasant and awkward heap, the sword clattering to the floor just before Harry.

"Ouch - *ouch!*" Harry yelped as Draco's sharp elbow dug into his arm. He had landed with Draco on top of him and crosswise, and it hurt. "Malfoy -"

Draco, going very pale, pulled back. "Are you all right - are you cut, are you hurt?"

"No, I'm fine. Your elbow -"

The pallor vanished, followed by a flood of angry red. "Potter, you stupid bastard," Draco snarled, and started to get to his feet.

Harry, moving with a greater speed than he would have thought himself capable of, threw out a hand and caught hold of the front of Draco's shirt and hung on like grim death. "I said you weren't going anywhere," he panted, "and you aren't."

"Let me go." Draco was panting too, the breath knocked out of him by the fall and his own blind fury. "I said let me go, Potter!"

"Don't call me that."

Draco spat at him. "*Harry.*"

"Swear you won't run if I let you go."

"I won't swear anything of the sort."

"I'm happy to stay here all night like this. It's more uncomfortable for you than it is for me."

Draco changed tack. "I thought you said you were still my *friend*," he said, his voice acidly bitter, "I thought you were going to let me have a choice -"

"I don't know if we're friends. I don't know anything for sure, except that you can't leave like this."

"I can do whatever I want!"

'No,' Harry said, "you can't."

"What gives you the right to tell me what to do?" Draco snarled.

"I love you," Harry said. "That's what."

Several things happened after that in quick succession. Draco's eyes went almost impossibly wide and his mouth dropped open; Harry had never seen him look like that, and in another situation he would probably have found it funny. He didn't now. He found it even less funny a moment later, when Draco, going rigid all over, jerked away from Harry so violently that his shirt tore. His face was a white mask of astonishment and dawning anger.

"That,' he hissed, glaring at Harry, "is so - you're so - that's so bloody *unfair!*" and his voice cracked on the last word, but before Harry had a chance to respond the bedroom door tore off its hinges with an explosive screech of splintering metal and shattering wood.

It crashed to the floor an inch from Harry's feet, sending dust and splinters flying through the air. There was the sound of shouting, and a

moment later hands had caught hold of Draco and flung him off Harry. He hit the far wall and crumpled; Harry began to struggle to his feet, but one set of hands caught hold of his arms, while another hand pressed a sharp blade to his throat. Something dark was flung over his eyes, cutting off his vision. "Get his hand - his right hand," he heard a voice bark just by his ear, and his wrist was grabbed and held. He felt himself being pressed back against the floor, the hilt of the sword jamming painfully into his back. He flinched, and the grip on his arm tightened. "Move," said the voice, "and I'll cut both your throats - starting with your friend's..."

References:

Sic oculus, sic ille manus, sic ora ferebat : "Such eyes, such hands, such looks." From the *Aeneid*.

Take heed; for I hold vengeance in my hand, to hurl upon their heads that break my law: Adapted from :

Take heed; for he holds vengeance in his hand, To hurl upon their heads that break his law. Shakespeare, Richard III.

"I have learned to hate all traitors..." Aeschylus.

"Desire is a tyrannical master": Socrates. I seem to be in some Classics phase.

'Denn die Toten reiten schnell: The dead travel fast. From *Dracula*.

Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose: The more things change, the more they stay the same. Traditional proverb.

Fleur's French lullaby is traditional and translates thusly (with many, many thanks to Glowfrog for the lyrics):

To the clear fountain

I went to walk

I found the water so beautiful

That I bathed in it.

Under the leaves of an oak tree

I let myself dry

On its highest branch

A nightingale was singing.

I have loved you for a long time

I will never forget you

I have loved you for a long time

I will never forget you.

"Your definition of fine is obviously not the same as mine" - Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.

"Man, That's Grapefruit" : "*Why I Hate Saturn*" by Kyle Baker.

Draco Veritas Chapter Fourteen: Thorns

Part One: the Path of Stones

For one human being to love another: that is perhaps the most difficult of our tasks; the ultimate, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is but preparation.

~ Rainer Maria Rilke~

It was raining again when Ginny landed her broomstick on the path that led up to Pansy Parkinson's front door. The snow was melting into slush that soaked her boots as she raced up the path, flinging her broomstick aside when she reached the porch steps. Rain was dripping from her hair into her eyes; she shoved the wet strands impatiently out of her face and saw that the front door was open - not wide open but slightly ajar, as if her arrival had been expected.

She shivered all over once, hard. Then she drew her wand and pushed the door open, stepping cautiously over the threshold.

The foyer was full of light, a sort of pale, harsh gold light that hurt the backs of her eyes. Several candles burned in silver sconces against the walls but that was not the source of the light. It seemed to come from the air all around, and carried with it a bitter scent, as of something burning.

Ginny half-closed her eyes - he was all around her, in the air, in the sharp coppery taste inside her mouth. Her heart began to pound in earnest. He was somewhere in this house, somewhere beyond one of the corridors that led off the foyer, waiting for her there in the darkness, blue eyes burning like gas flames turned low.



She knew she ought to be terrified, and some small part of her was. And yet what knotted her stomach, dried her mouth, set her nerves to pounding, was not fear - it was anticipation. Her brain told her that death waited there in the shadows; her heartbeat said *Tom, where are you, Tom?* She bit her lip hard, but even the pain didn't help; what had *happened* to her willpower? *Willpower*. Her heart jumped again, and Ginny plunged

her hand into her pocket, terrified for a moment she had left it - but no, her fingers closed on the small, blooming branch, and when she drew it out of her pocket she saw that it was remarkably undamaged, the small yellow flowers still fresh and unbruised. She pulled one off and placed it on her tongue. It tasted faintly of butter. She put the rest of the plant back in her pocket, tightened her grip on her wand, and set off down the leftmost corridor, where the sense of Tom's presence was strongest.

The corridor led to a grander entryway, this one with a marble floor. A set of wide stone stairs with a gilded balustrade led up into shadow. At the foot of the steps was a heaped pile of pale fabric. Coming closer, Ginny saw that it was her yellow cloak. The hood of it was half torn away.

Blaise.

Ginny caught her breath. A moment later she was racing up the stairs, her wet shoes slipping on the smooth steps, her blood pounding harshly in her ears. She stumbled onto the first landing, hurling herself forward, tripping and almost falling over something sprawled at the foot of the second set of stairs. She caught at the balustrade to steady herself, staring.

It was a body.

When at last Hermione regained consciousness, the first thing she did was open her eyes. This turned out to be a mistake. She was two hundred feet above the ground, racing along at incredible speed with no visible means of support. She promptly fainted again.

The second time she opened her eyes, she was above mountains. This time, though her stomach lurched with nausea and her mind reeled with terror, she remained conscious. Her first thought was that she was on an invisible flying carpet, but then she felt nothing under her, supporting her. Instead she was dangling, like a kitten by the scruff of its neck.

Slowly she craned around and looked up; it was difficult, with her hair whipping in her face, but she had been right: there was someone holding her, a man with long dark hair and a thin cruel face. His eyes burned. He bent his lips to her ear, "So you are awake at last, little witch," he hissed.

"Let me go!" Hermione screamed, writhing.

He grinned. "With pleasure," he laughed, and released his grip on her shirt. Screaming in terror, she plummeted down, hands sawing helplessly at empty air -

And landed, hard, atop the roof of a tower that had appeared out of nowhere. Impact knocked the wind out of her, cutting off her scream. She rolled over onto her stomach, blinking back tears of pain, and saw the black-haired man alight, still grinning and light as a cat, a few feet away.

"I'm so sorry," he said. His voice was accented, the vowels thick and liquid. He was very pale, with thin lips drawn back over long - too -long - teeth in a snarl of amusement. His fingers, bare and white, seemed also too long, and there was something unpleasant about the way he moved, too quick and light for an ordinary person. "That was terribly rude of me. You did seem to be sleeping so pleasantly through most of our journey, it's quite a shame. I do admire those who can sleep through air travel." He smiled, engagingly.

Breath had finally come back to her lungs, and with it, a cold pain and panic. "Who are you? What do you want from me?"

"I am Gabriel," he said, and swept her a small, mocking bow. "I serve He Who Rules the Shadows."

"He who *what*?"

"Rules the shadows," said Gabriel with a touch of impatience. "Look, it's a ceremonial title, I didn't make it up. He Who Rules the Shadows, the Bringer of Night, the Death-Dealer, the Dark Lord -"

"You mean," Hermione said, sitting up straight, "Voldemort."

Gabriel waved a thin white hand. "Such an unaesthetic choice for a name," he murmured. "I much prefer the titles myself."

Hermione shivered - it was freezing up on the roof, and she was wearing only Harry's old Puddlemere United shirt and a pair of jeans. "So Voldemort's your master? What does he want with me?"

Gabriel shrugged. "I don't much know - or care," he admitted candidly. "All I know, little witch, is what is written, and it is written that the dark lord will perform the Rite of the Tetragrammaton and it will bring him life eternal -"

Hermione wrapped her arms around herself and glared. "Your prophecy is wrong. *I* know what's really going to happen. Harry is going to destroy your precious Dark Lord; he's going to banish him down to Hell like he did to Salazar Slytherin, and when he does, you'd better pray he shows you and all Voldemort's other filthy minions the mercy you don't deserve."

For a moment, she thought she saw Gabriel's lips tighten, but then he merely smiled, his long canines showing stark white against his too-red lips.

"Nonsense," he murmured, his tone caressing, "do you think my only order was to fetch you, little witch, do you think you are the only one who matters? I left several Death Eaters there, my best men, trained killers. If your Harry is not quite dead already, he will be very soon."

As always in times of great stress or agitation, everything seemed to snap sharply into focus for Harry at once - although, of course, he could not see, so that focus took the shape of a swift and intense awareness of the hard floor under his back, the hilt of the sword digging into his spine, the rough coarseness of the ropes binding his wrists behind him - he didn't even remember the men binding his wrists, they must have done it with a spell - the sharp tip of the knife pricking just under his chin. There was pain, somewhere, localized beyond the pain at his throat, as if his skin were torn -

Draco, he thought, hard and feverishly, *Draco, where are you, are you all right?*

There was a pause, just long enough to be agonizing, during which Harry tried to ignore the voices of the men kneeling over him, speaking roughly to each other in some foreign language he didn't recognize. Then:

I'm here. Over by the wall. Draco's interior voice, cool and careful and familiar. Can you see anything?

No. Harry swallowed hard, and the knifepoint scraped his throat. Are you hurt?

No - they tied my feet and my hands, though. I don't think they think I'm much of a threat, anyway. It's you they seem to be interested in.

Lucky me, Harry thought dryly. What are they doing now? How many are there?

Talking...Draco's tone was hesitant. I don't know the language. There are two of them, Harry; one kneeling over you, and one standing behind him, nearer me. The one has a knife at your throat. The other one is holding a wand, he's got a sword through his belt, too.

There must be something I can do, Harry thought. They don't know we can talk to each other -

Yes, and a lot of good it does us, Draco thought with customary bitterness. A moment later, however, he spoke again, thoughtfully: Your sword is pinned under you. If you lean back, could you use it to cut your wrists free?

Harry did not reply, but only let his weight settle farther back, pushing his wrists down towards his heels. His shoulders ached but he ignored them, fumbling with numb fingers for the sharp edge along the blade's side - *If only I could see*, he thought, desperately, and for a moment did not realize that his mind was still connected to Draco's and of course the other boy would hear him; Harry had been alone in his mind for too long.

Harry - Draco's thought cut itself off, and Harry felt the other boy's mind brush his, as if fingers scraped lightly over his skin, seeking something. It did not hurt but was startling; Harry jumped, and felt a twofold pain: the knife under his chin, and the slice of the blade under his hands. He pressed down with his hands, the sting at his wrists sharp even as the ropes, fraying, began to loosen -

Light burst behind his eyes. For a moment, gasping, he froze, as the world swung crazily around him. Although the rough cloth still pressed against

his shut eyes, *he could see*, could see the room he sat in, the two heavysset men in their dark robes, leaning over him, could see *himself*, on the floor, a cloth bag over his head, the neck of his shirt open and the knife pressed to the pulse that beat there. What he could not see, was Draco; and Harry realized, after the first frozen moment, that this was because he was seeing *as* Draco, that he looked through the other boy's eyes as if through a kaleidoscope or a double pane of glass.

He expelled a whistling breath of shock, and at that moment, the rope that pulled between his wrists, frayed beyond endurance, sprang apart.

The sword - Draco said aloud, and the man kneeling over Harry started and turned to the side, the knife in his hand lowering, not much but it was enough - Harry, his hands freed, was already seizing the hilt, swinging the blade up and over, driving it down. He saw light glint from the blade as it flashed its descent, heard a choked howl in his ear as it drove through flesh and muscle, scraping bone.

Something wetly hot poured down over Harry, as if he'd upended a hot water bottle on himself. Eyes screwed shut, Harry couldn't tell what it was, just that there was a great deal of it. He swung the sword again, and again, and again, and heard yells and a dull thudding and then the one voice he could still have listened to was shouting at him to stop and drop his hands. He let go the hilt, and darkness banded his vision; fingers found the cloth covering his eyes, and tore it away, and he stared up at wide, ice-water eyes in a face gone gray as a winter sky.

"What's happened?" Harry said, wildly. There was a terrible pain in his wrists and he was soaked, drenched in something, his hair hanging in sopping tendrils. "What's all over me -"

Draco took him by the shoulders, hard, and held him there. His voice was steady. "You've killed him, Harry, he's dead. You've killed him, and you're covered in blood."

"What do you mean, he needs my blood?" Ron demanded, a cold chill prickling the skin on the back of his neck.

Rhysenn's delicately arched eyebrows raised. "Ooops," she said. "I think I spoiled the surprise."

Ron stood up, his expression grim. "Explain what you meant."

Rhysenn pursed her lips in a smile. A moment before she had sounded bitter, now she seemed as prettily unconcerned as a little girl in a swing. "I just meant," she said, "that the blood of a Diviner at full power is an item much sought after in, let us say, certain circles."

"What *kind* of circles?"

"Knitting circles," Rhysenn said drily. "Think, dearest. Dark magic circles, of course. Only dark magic requires *human* blood."

"Then all these games, the chess, the dice, the tests -"

"All to bring you to full power, so that your blood could be harvested."

Ron's heart pounded. "I thought it was the visions he wanted me for -"

Rhysenn threw her head back and laughed. "Visions. What use are visions? Blood, now there is something that can be used. Not that -"

But she broke off as the door opened. Ron stayed on his feet, tensed for the Dark Lord's arrival - but it was the vampire Rhysenn had called Gabriel. With his long black hair and white skin, Gabriel could have been Rhysenn's twin. When he strode across the room and leaned to kiss her through the gold bars, the unpleasantly incestuous sight sent a shiver up Ron's spine. "Oi there," he said. "Get a room."

Gabriel broke away and grinned at Ron with wet red lips. "I've got your girl," he said, without preamble. "What do you say to that?"

Ron blinked, and looked from Gabriel to Rhysenn, who had shaken her long dark hair back and was staring at him. To his relief, she was not naked, but was suddenly wearing a dark red dress with an elaborately laced bodice. High gold combs dressed her hair. Ron shook his head to clear it. "I wouldn't exactly say Rhysenn was my girl," he hedged, "I mean, every once in a while she tries to seduce me, but I figured that was just professional courtesy, what with her being a sex demon and all. But no, I

don't feel I have any claims on her. I guess what I'm trying to say here," and he clapped Gabriel on the arm in a comradely manner, "is, go right ahead. Although maybe you could drape something over the cage for privacy -"

"You," said Gabriel, "are a driveling idiot."

Ron took his hand back. "Well, I suppose I could just face the other way -"

"I did not mean Rhysenn," Gabriel said. "She is emphatically not your girl, or anyone's. I meant the little brown-haired witch. Your *Hermione*."

Ron went cold all over, down to the pit of his stomach. His voice, when he spoke, also sounded frozen. "She's not my girl either."

"Be that as it may," Gabriel said, his voice like raw silk, "I have left her on the rooftop, without a cloak or a wand. If you do not go up to retrieve her, she may well freeze to death."

Draco looked at Harry worriedly. He was covered in blood: it was all over his hands, in his hair, streaked down the front of his shirt like uneven swipes of red paint. The room even smelled like blood, a dark electric smell like the air before a storm. Draco kept his eyes on Harry, not wanting to look at the dead man on the floor, how small he looked in death, how waxy and vulnerable.

"What did I do?" Harry said, after a short, shocked pause. His voice was flat, dazed, affectless. The neck of his shirt was still gaping open, and where Draco touched his bare wrists he could feel how cold Harry was - wasn't that a sign of shock, being cold?

Harry was covered in blood, too, as if he'd been dipped in it like a wick dipped in wax. It streaked his face and drenched his shirt and stiffened the dark curls of his hair. The blood didn't bother Draco, he only wondered if any of it was Harry's own, and if so, how much, and if he was all right.

The pulse that beat in the cold wrist he held was a steady one. Draco said, "Can you stand up?"

"Yes," Harry said. "Yes, I'm all right." He stood up, and Draco stood up with him. The bloody sword drooped from his half-open hand, and the cloth that had bound his eyes dangled, loose and bloodstained, around his throat. He stared down at the dead body at his feet without any expression at all. "I thought," he said, "that there were two of them."

"There were," Draco said. "Once the other one saw what you did to his friend here, he did a bunk. Ran right out the door."

Harry's eyes flicked up; in his pale face, they were the transparent green of stained glass. "I thought maybe you'd done something to him."

"No," Draco said, with bitter lightness, "the way you were waving that sword about, I didn't much fancy wading in and getting my head cut off by mistake."

"Ah," Harry said, as if this made perfect sense, and Draco forbore to add that by the time he'd been able to stand up on legs that didn't want to hold him - he'd twice crumpled back to the ground - one of the men was gone, and the other dead. "It doesn't matter anyway, I suppose. I wonder who sent them? Voldemort, probably. I mean, I'd assume so. Or your father. It's quite something having enough enemies that you can pick and choose among them, Malfoy. Although I imagine you already know that." Harry's speech had taken on a disquieting rapidity. "I wonder how long it's going to take him to change back."

Draco wasn't sure what he'd been expecting Harry to say, but this threw him. "Change back into what?"

"Those shapeshifters we killed before," Harry said, "they changed back into whatever they were when they died. And vampires turn into dust. I don't know what these were, but -"

"They were just *people*, Harry," Draco said, without thinking, "he's not going to change into anything. He's just *dead*."

"Oh," Harry said, and his head went up and he looked at Draco. "Are you - do you know that, or are you just -"

His voice trailed off, but mentally Draco finished the sentence for him, Are you just saying that because you want to hurt me? - and he felt it, like

a sharp and sudden pain, a pain he'd thought he was beyond. That Harry would think that of him, that he would mean it. That it might be true. Only it wasn't.

"I'm not," he said, "trying to hurt you."

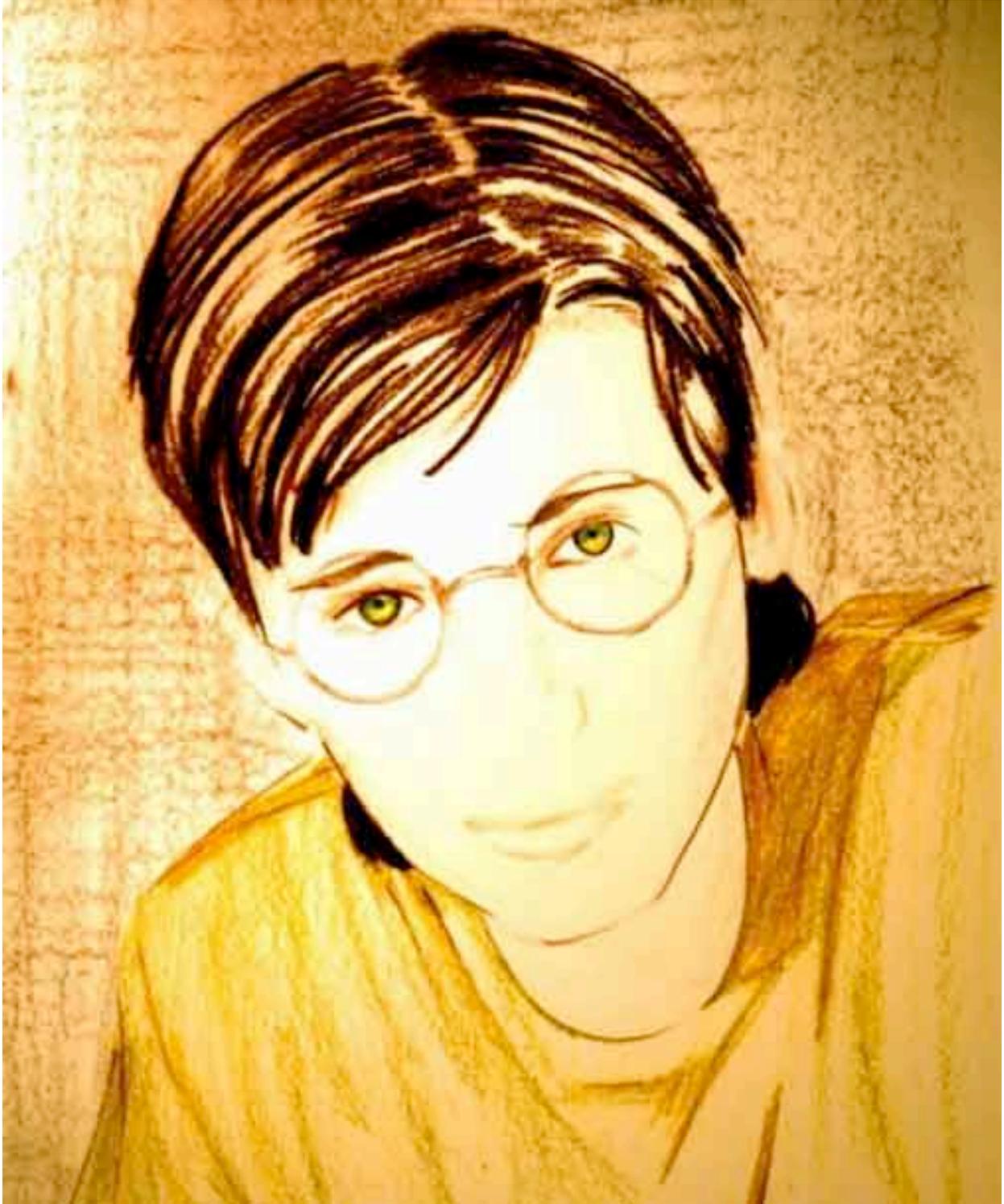
Draco was someone who felt irony. He lived it and breathed it and his aesthetic soul, that saw the beauty in malice and admired the tightly controlled structure of tragedy even when it was his own, appreciated the irony here : he'd spent hours tonight trying to hurt Harry as much as he possibly could, and now fate had handed him the chance to watch Harry shatter into a thousand pieces, and he didn't want it any more.

"I'm sorry," he said. "But it doesn't *matter* -"

Harry didn't interrupt him, but instead turned around and walked out of the room. There was a precise, determined look on his face, as if he knew where he was going and what he meant to do when he got there.

After a moment of startled hesitation, Draco followed him.

He found Harry in the kitchen. He was standing in front of the sink, his slender shoulders hunched over, his bare, bloody hands plunged under a stream of water. Pinkish steam rose in a cloud and enveloped him, misting over his glasses, shrouding his face. It took a moment for Draco to realize how hot water would have to be to create that much steam in an already warm kitchen. He was across the room so fast he didn't remember later whether he'd walked or run. He pulled Harry back by his shoulders and spun him around and let him go.



Harry looked at him blankly. The steam had condensed into water droplets that clung to his hair and sheened the tops of his cheekbones and glittered on his lashes like tears. But he hadn't cried. Blood and water pasted his cotton shirt to his body. His hands were a bright and ugly red,

already beginning to blister along the curve of his thumb and forefinger. "What are you trying to do?" Draco said. He had to raise his voice to hear himself over the sound of running water. "Ruin your hands?"

"Why not?" Harry said. "You ruined yours."

His voice didn't sound like his voice at all, and his green eyes were flat and vacant. Draco felt something inside his stomach lurch and tighten. "You had to kill them," he said. "You didn't have a choice."

"We always have choices," Harry said. "You said so yourself."

"He would have killed you," Draco said. Harry didn't seem to hear him. "He would have killed *me*," he added.

Harry looked up at that. He reached up and rubbed the clouded surface of his glasses. "I know," he said. "I know that. It's the way I did it - I didn't think about it. I just did it."

"It's what you had to do," Draco said. "You do what you have to do. You always have."

Harry began to shiver. The color hadn't come back into his face yet, despite the heat in the kitchen. He was still papery white, a color like old eggshells. Against the whiteness of his skin, the blood stood out as glaringly as burning cinders. "Hold me up," he said.

Caught off guard, Draco blinked at him. "What?"

"Malfoy," Harry said, and the use of Draco's last name was oddly not so much distancing as merely pleading somehow, pleading and childish, as if Harry were eleven years old again and Malfoy was the only name he knew Draco by. "Hold me up - I think I'm going to fall over." He reached out with his hand, blindly, groping for the back of a nearby chair. Draco didn't move. "I'm sorry," Harry said, very softly, and Draco had no idea who he was apologizing to. It didn't matter. The scalding bitter rage that had been the constant companion of Draco's every waking moment since he had sat on Harry's bed and read the letter Harry had written receded with the soft sound of Harry's voice, and he took a step towards Harry and then reached out his hands and put his arms around Harry very awkwardly, and held him up.

Harry let go of the chair instantly, and seized hold of Draco, his hands fisted in the front of Draco's shirt, so tightly that it was painful. He smelled of blood and metal and sweat and salt, and his grip pulled the shirt down and the collar cut into the back of Draco's neck but Draco didn't mind. He stood where he was and tried not to breathe too quickly because he was afraid that if he did, Harry would let go. As if they had been closed suddenly in a glass box, an utter and profound stillness seemed to have fallen over the small space that held them. The world, the sounds and colors of it, seemed muted and distant and far away. All that was real was the hammering beat of Harry's pulse in the wrist Draco held, and all he could hear was the rough sound of Harry's breathing and the water splashing into the sink.

Harry had begun to shiver. Draco was acutely conscious of how fragile the other boy was, how thin his shoulders were, how light his bones, how close the pulse ran to the surface of his skin - he could feel Harry's heartbeat through the hands against his chest. He could feel Harry again, as though some unprecedented alchemy of love and grief had worked a change in his blood: he could feel his desolation and his horror and his appalling guilt. He felt these emotions but they did not hurt him the way that he would have expected them to, because they were Harry's, and he had not realized how much he had missed knowing what Harry was feeling until he felt it again.

"I'm getting blood on your shirt," Harry said. Draco couldn't see his face, but his voice sounded like his own voice again. "I'm sorry."

"I don't mind," Draco said.

"I killed that man," Harry said. His voice was affectless, stripped raw by shock. "And I'll have to do it again."

"Probably," Draco said.

"I can't stand it," Harry said.

"You can stand it," Draco said. "You have to."

Harry didn't relax but his hands loosened their death grip on Draco's shirt. "I'm a murderer now," he said. "Everything's different."

Draco remembered Sirius holding him next to his father's grave, and stroking his hair and his back, and saying soothing things. He still couldn't think of a soothing thing to say but he put his other arm around Harry and lightly touched the back of his blood-and-water soaked shirt.

"Not everything," he said.

Harry's voice was quiet. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For not saying, *No, you're not a murderer.*"

Draco didn't reply. You're welcome seemed inappropriate, almost flip, but what else was there to say? He had never been taught that consoling words were anything more than lies, and he wouldn't lie to Harry. Harry trusted him not to. He couldn't say everything would be all right, because in some sense it wouldn't - the Harry he was holding was changing, even as he held him; he would never really be the same Harry again. If he could hold Harry together with his hands, keep him from breaking apart, from losing what he must inevitably lose - Draco would have given Harry any part of himself if he could, but what Harry was losing was something Draco had never had. He was not sorry himself that that man was dead. He was sorry Harry had been the one who killed him. He wished he had killed the man himself, not because the idea gave him any pleasure, but because it didn't horrify him either, and it clearly horrified Harry. It was something he himself could have borne so easily, and for the first time, Draco began not just to know but to understand that there were things he could give Harry that Harry didn't already have and couldn't give himself.

He thought of what Dumbledore had told him, weeks ago, about Harry.

He is strong, and can endure much, and for what he cannot endure, he has you.

He remembered a few hours before, how determined he had been to cut the tie that bound him to Harry and walk away and never look back. He had not thought about what would happen after that: a sort of blank, clenched pain was all he had been able to imagine, going on and on with every beat of his heart until all heartbeats stopped. He had known that what he was saying was hurting Harry: he could see the desolation in

those clear eyes, and he had liked it because it meant that Harry cared enough to be hurt. The idea of a Harry who felt nothing at all was more terrifying to him than a Harry who hated him. If he could make Harry hate him again at least that would have been something.

But Harry didn't hate him. He knew that now. You didn't cling like this to someone that you hated. You didn't trust them to carry you through nightmarish pain, to hold you up and not to let you fall. Maybe Harry didn't love him enough, or in the right sort of way, but he trusted Draco and he needed him and the line between that and love was so thin that Draco couldn't have drawn it himself. He could feel, through the tangle of desolation and horror that wound Harry like a net of wires, how much Harry needed him. He hurt, and he wanted, and what he wanted was Draco, because Draco would never lie to him and never tell him things were all right when they weren't.

"I could make you forget," Draco said, "easily enough, if that was what you wanted - is it what you want?"

Harry straightened up. "No. No, I don't want that." He paused. "Unless you think -"

"Don't," Draco said, "ask me to decide. If you want to know what I think, I think that I wish it had been me who killed him, because I wouldn't have minded and I hate that you mind. But I also think that you're right, you'll have to do this again. And I can't keep making you forget every single time. I'm not saying it'll get easier, either, Harry, because maybe it won't. But you've never chosen to do anything because it was easier, you've never expected things to be easy, you don't even like it when things are easy - I've told you that before. You're strong enough for this - strong enough even to do things you know are evil - you just don't want to be, is all."

Harry was silent for a moment. "I thought you were done being my friend," he said finally.

"That doesn't matter," Draco said, "that doesn't have anything do to with this."

Harry laughed shakily. "Sometimes I wish you'd lie to me," he said, "just a little."

"No, you don't."

"You're right. I don't." Harry let go of Draco's shirt entirely, but didn't move away from him. "Malfoy...?"

"Yes?"

"What's the difference between being strong enough to do things you know are evil, and actually being evil, then?"

"I don't know." Draco paused for a moment, thought about the difference between defeat and acceptance, and the blood on Harry's hands that had transferred itself to his own clothes and skin, and the fact that he didn't mind. "I don't know, Potter. I really don't know."

In the half-light all Ginny could see was a tangle of black fabric and a sprawl of slim, pale limbs; an arm flung out at an angle, legs bent towards the chest, a white throat splashed with black blood. No pulse in the throat. Fingers bent into claws. The wand clattered out of Ginny's nerveless fingers as she flung herself down by the corpse, put her hand on the shoulder, pulled -

It rolled towards her and Ginny jerked her hand back, a sharp cry escaping her throat. Bulging eyes stared at her out of a face so distorted with horror that it was barely recognizable, but Ginny would have known her anyway by the gaudy barrettes, the tangle of dark brown hair, the bitter little mouth: Pansy Parkinson.



There was no wound on her that Ginny could see, but the white front of her shirt was stained with red, and there was blood in her brown hair. For a moment Ginny thought of unbuttoning her shirt to see what Tom had done to her, but she quailed; what did it matter, anyway? What mattered was that she was dead.

Gently, she reached out and, with the tips of her fingers, closed Pansy's staring eyes. "I'm sorry," she whispered, very softly, but her voice seemed to echo anyway in the empty stairwell, and the echoes that bounced back to her whispered the same two words over and over: *your fault, your fault, your fault.*

'No," Ginny hissed under her breath, and reached out to the wall behind her, hitching herself to her feet, "no -"

"There's no need for you to cry, Ginny," His voice came light and soft, and the torches along the walls seemed to flicker, or perhaps it was her own dimming vision. "Don't pretend you care that she's dead; she always hated you. She told me that, among other things, before I killed her."

It took every bit of Ginny's amplified willpower for her to raise her head and look at him. He was standing at the top of the stairs, just where the shadows were darkest. The faint torchlight knitted itself around his pale hands and face, his barleycorn hair. His mouth was curved into a lucid and passionless grin and his eyes, as they fixed themselves on her, were full of hunger.

"I knew you'd come," he whispered. "I knew it." His gaze was satisfied. "You belong to me."

Rage exploded behind Ginny's eyes, almost blinding her. Wandless, she flung herself up the stairs, running - hurled herself at him, her fingers curled into claws - and struck the ground, hard, bruising her hands and knees.

There was no one there.

She struggled to her feet, casting around wildly, but he was gone - she was alone at the top of the twisting staircase. Below her Pansy lay dead in her own blood on the landing. Above her - Ginny looked up, but there was nothing, only the immense chandelier hanging still and lifeless, its pendant drops of dark red cut glass glimmering with a dull fire.

I could leave, she thought. I could run down the stairs and out of the house and he wouldn't follow me.

He wouldn't have to. Tom knew she would come back. She would always come back to him. Hate wedded her to him, stronger than love, more enduring. *Hatred's an emotion you can trust*, Draco had said to her. *You always know where you stand with it.*

Straightening her shoulders, Ginny turned from the stairs to the corridor, and began to walk forward.

Ron was only halfway up the narrow stone staircase when his breath began to puff out of his mouth in small white clouds. God, it was freezing, he thought. Fear for Hermione made his blood pound in his ears. The sides of the tower were so steep; it was so cold -

He reached the top of the stairs, pushed the wooden door open, and found himself atop the North Tower. The flat stone floor stretched away to the battlements, and the sky above was a pebbly gray. A knifelike wind blew fine particles of snow against his bare face. He raised an arm to shield his eyes and called out. "Hermione!"

A long moment passed before he heard her reply and even then, he almost mistook it for more wind. Spinning around, he saw a dark shape huddled against the wall of the inner tower.

He raced over and knelt down beside her. She was huddled in against herself, her thin bare arms wrapped around her denim-clad legs. When she raised her face to his, he saw that her lips were tinged with blue. "Ron," she said, shakily. "What - w-what are you -"

But her teeth were chattering too hard for her to get the words out. Quickly, Ron shrugged off his blue cloak and slung it around her shoulders. clutched at it, and then at him as he helped her to her feet. "We've got to get you inside," he muttered, and pulled her to her feet.

She held tightly to his arm as they crossed the roof through the snow. Her fingers felt like wands of ice pressed against his bare skin. When they were finally inside the tower, he pushed the door shut against the wind and turned to face her, his eyes searching her face anxiously.

"Hermione—are you all right?"

She had let go of him, and was standing huddled underneath the heavy blue cloak he had draped around her. Under the cloak, her right hand was pressed to her side; for a moment he thought she was in pain, then realized she was holding something against her side. He caught a flash of silver - a knife, perhaps? Her lips and eyelids were tinged faintly with blue, and her hair stuck to her cheeks and forehead in limp brown tendrils. "Ron," she said, her voice hoarse. "What are you *doing* here?"

"I was captured by the Dark Lord," Ron said, "and brought here—just like you. I don't even know how long I've been here, Hermione, how many days—"

"You don't look like a prisoner." She gestured at his clothes. "You look like you're ready for a fancy dress party."

"Hermione -" Ron reached out to put a hand on her shoulder, but she shrank away from him. Her eyes were filled with suspicion. Ron felt as if he had swallowed a block of ice - to have endured so much, and still to be distrusted - "Fine," he said, shortly, and turned to head back down the staircase. After a moment, she followed him.

The first three rooms Ginny glanced into were empty. The third was not. It was a bedroom, probably a spare room, furnished in dark yellow velvet. On a brocade chair in the middle of the room sat Blaise. Ropes circled her waist, securing her to the chair's mahogany back, and thin cords tightly bound her wrists. A pale green kerchief was stuffed in her mouth. Her eyes, a much darker green, widened when she saw Ginny, then began darting wildly around the room.

Ginny raised a finger to her lips, then stepped forward and drew the kerchief from Blaise's mouth. The other girl gasped and licked her dry lips. Up close Ginny could see that her eyes were full of tears, although knowing Blaise, they were probably tears of rage or pain rather than fear.

Ginny crouched down beside the chair. "Blaise," she whispered. "Are you all right?"

Blaise snorted. "Do I look all right?" She raised her arms slightly and Ginny saw that the thin cords binding her wrists together were tied so

tightly that they were cutting into her skin. Blood stained the rope and her hands looked oddly white. Blaise's voice was strained. "You'd better get out of here, Ginny. There's no telling when he'll come back, and if he finds out you're here -"

"He knows I'm here," Ginny said grimly. "Let me untie you -"

"No!" Blaise's eyes were darting around the room again. "He killed Pansy, you know."

"I know," Ginny said, standing up. "I thought he'd killed you, too."

"No," Blaise said slowly. She raised her head to look at Ginny. "It's you he's really after," she said. There were weals on her white neck, dark red, they looked like bite marks. "He's said I looked like you -"

A horrid thought occurred to Ginny. "You do know he's not Seamus, don't you? I mean, not really."

"I know," Blaise said. For a moment, her lower lip trembled, and she looked like what she was - an ordinary teenage girl, badly frightened, struggling to retain the scraps of her self-possession. "What *is* he, Ginny? I looked in his eyes and I saw - not a person at all but a *thing* - blacker than a shadow, and twisted, and when he touched me his hands cut me like knives - what *is* he?"

Ginny blinked - black and twisted? But he was not that - he was beautiful, and the more horrible for being beautiful. Her Tom - she opened her mouth, to explain, to condemn herself, when from behind her a soft voice spoke in a tone that was like a sharp nail running down her spine. "Yes, Ginny," it whispered - he whispered. "Tell her what I am."

They were halfway down the stairs when the snake lunged out at them; Hermione shrieked and threw herself backward. Ron stood where he was, the torch in his hand held stiffly out in front of him. Its flame was the same gold color as the snake's eyes.

"It's all right, Hermione," Ron said. "It's just Kevin."

Just? the serpent inquired, its tone lazy, scraping like scales against the inside of Ron's head. You hold me in low regard, True Dreamer?

Not at all, Ron thought quickly. He could hear Hermione behind him, her breathing sharp and harsh. Without her wand, he thought, she must really be terrified. *I just want to pass by.*

It's just a snake, you just want to pass by - your desires are so little for one of your power, your speech so careful. Why is that, Diviner?

Ron's mouth twisted bitterly. *What power? A head full of useless visions, a future I can't do anything to change -*

The snake let out a hiss which sounded impatient. *I tell you, boy, it said, the answers you need are not locked only in the future. Some are in the past.*

What do you mean by that? Ron began, but he heard a low moan behind him, and turned to see that Hermione had slid, shivering, to the floor. She was alarmingly blue.

Kevin chuckled, if a snake could be said properly to chuckle (although a snake named Kevin might perhaps be capable of more than your ordinary snake, Ron thought.) *See to your girl*, he hissed, and slithered backward, disappearing into the alcove he had emerged from with a disdainful flick of his tail.

It was only much later, when he had seen Hermione again and had known that she was, for the time being at least, safe, that Harry was able to remember that next terrible half an hour, during which he and Draco had wandered Viktor's flat, silent as ghosts. They had not even called out her name. She was so clearly gone: Harry felt the lack of her, like its own presence, in every room.

They wound up back in the kitchen. Draco paused by the stove and looked down at it. For the first time Harry noticed that there was still a pot on it, the flame underneath turned low. Whatever had been in the pot was now a blackened and unrecognizable mass. Draco waved a hand at

the stove and the flame vanished. Then he looked at Harry. "Do we want to talk about what we're going to do now?"

Some part of Harry, a distant part, was comforted by that use of the word "we." Whatever happened, he would not be alone..."They took her," he said. "Voldemort's men."

"Yes. Probably the same ones that came after you last night. They said they were looking for her."

"I heard something," Harry said. "When I woke up- when they woke me this morning. The sound of a body falling -"

"You think she's dead?" Draco said. He touched the side of the pot, jumped, drew his hand back. Closed his fingers in against his palm. He was very white.

"She's not dead," Harry said. "I'd know."

"Yes," Draco said. "I think you would."

"I guess we don't need to talk about what we're going to do." Harry's voice was bitter. "I guess I was going after the Dark Lord anyway. Now I'll just go - a little faster."

"Faster?" Draco said. He was still staring down at the pot, at whatever it had once contained, burned now to ash. "We haste by night, and press by day -" He stopped, overtaken by a fit of coughing. "Sorry," he said. "Ash in my throat."

"All my friends," Harry said. "One by one - " He touched Draco's sleeve. "You'll be careful?"

Draco looked away from him. "The Dark Lord wouldn't want me. He doesn't like damaged things."

"Your hand will heal," Harry said.

Draco seemed not to hear him. "I almost wish I could talk to my father," he said. "He'd know where Voldemort is."

"I know where he is, sort of," Harry said. "He's in Romania."

"Ah," Draco said, realization in his voice. "Yes, those creatures last night, they were speaking Romanian - and there's a place - my father always spoke of it - a fortress on a hill..."

"We just have to figure out the fastest way to get there."

"As for that," Draco said with the ghost of a smile, "I may have a cunning plan...give me a few minutes, Potter. And why don't you go wash the blood off you. Looking at you is making me sick."

Blaise gave a little moan and tensed all over. Ginny touched her shoulder lightly, then turned, and looked at Tom.

He was lounging in the doorway, his head to the side, a faint smile touching the corner of his mouth. In the light now, she could see that he wore a white shirt, stained all over with blood, some of it dried to rusty stains, some of it fresh and new. His skin - Seamus' wind-tanned skin - was a few shades darker than the shirt, his cheekbones flushed, his lips a pale shell pink, his coppery-gold hair catching the candlelight. He looked like an angel, she thought dazedly, an angel of the old days when there were wars in heaven and angels could kill.

His faint smile widened to a smirk. "Nothing to say, Virginia? Cat got your tongue?" He unhitched himself from the doorway and walked into the room, stopping before Blaise. Hands behind his back, he looked down at her, his gaze considering. "Miss Zabini," he said. "I remember your grandfather, with his stammer and his funny unpronounceable name. Plenty of money, your family always had, but in the end - foreign trash was all they were and they knew it. Yes, I know you," he added, his voice like poisoned honey, "but you won't know me, oh no." He knelt down then, before her chair, took her bloody hands in his, and brushed his lips across the top of her knuckles. "Ginny could tell you who I was, if she liked," he confided, his eyes fixed on Ginny. They were full of a disturbing amusement. "After all, she made me."

Breath escaped Ginny's lips in a hiss. "Don't," she whispered. "Tom -"

"You hear the way she says my name," Tom murmured, his lips almost touching Blaise's skin. "She doesn't know whether to love me or hate me,

for I am herself. I am her love, I am her hatred. I am her joy and I am her loathing and her abhorrence. I am her unrequited passions. I am her guilt and her remembrance. I am her beautiful despair. I am the futility of all her wishes. Out of blood and tears and ink, she made me. And *I will never leave her.*"

Blaise was staring at him open-mouthed. "You're a complete lunatic, is what you are."

But he seemed hardly to hear her. He was staring at Ginny, and his eyes were burning - and in their lighted depths, Ginny saw a heat that could char her to kindling, melt her down and make her anew. "This isn't about her, Tom," she said. "This is about us. You and me."

He nodded, and rose to his feet, light and graceful in his bloodstained shirt. "Then what is it that you want, Virginia?"

Ginny looked at him levelly. "To finish this," she said, and walked out of the room.

Harry let the shower water run as hot as he could stand, then stood under it for a long time, letting it sluice the blood and dirt off his skin. He felt bruised all over, outside as well as in. He swallowed water and soap, spat, closed his eyes and raised his face to let the water run over his mouth and eyelids.

Alone now without Draco, he was acutely conscious of the beat of his own heart, the sting of his bruised skin where the hot water ran over it. He only dimly remembered whatever it was Draco had said to him in the kitchen but being held onto like that had been like having an arrow pulled out of his chest: the agony was gone now, though the wound remained.

When the water had run clear for several minutes, Harry shut the shower off, put his trousers on, and padded barefoot back into the bedroom, toweling off his hair as he went. Draco was already in there, sorting through Viktor's pile of weapons. He looked up when Harry came in.

"You changed," Harry said. "Are those your clothes?"

Draco glanced down at himself. He was wearing all black: black boots, black trousers, a rusty black pullover that was a little too big, a black cloak on over it. He seemed disinclined to look directly at Harry. "These are Viktor's," he said. "I took them out of his closet." He shrugged. "My bags haven't gotten here yet and I didn't want to borrow anything of yours."

"You could have if you wanted," Harry said. "You look sort of depressing. I mean, you don't look bad," he added hastily as Draco's expression darkened. "Black suits you."

"Looking Better in Black Than the Widows of Our Enemies Since 1500," Draco said. "It's a Malfoy family motto." He quirked a half-smile at Harry. "What about you? You know what they say, 'No Shoes, No Shirt, No Epic Defeat of the Dark Forces.'"

Harry tossed the towel he was carrying onto the bed and looked around for his bags. "I was planning on putting a shirt on."

"Well, before you do," Draco said, straightening up, "come here."

Harry went over to him, stepping carefully around the piles of knives and spiked maces. Draco was standing up now, and holding something in his left hand; he said, "Hold your hands out," and Harry did, palms down, very curious now. Draco still wasn't looking directly at him, but down at his hands, his expression thoughtful. "Don't fidget," he said, and reached for Harry's right hand. Harry realized that what Draco was holding in his hand was some sort of set of cuffs or bracelets, made of very soft leather. Draco buckled one around Harry's right wrist and the second around his left, then stepped back and surveyed his work critically. "Do they hurt?" he asked.

"No," said Harry, flexing his wrists. "Is there a point to these, or are you just being kinky?"

"There's a point to them. Here." Draco took Harry's right hand, turned it over, and pushed his fingers down. Harry felt the cuff around his wrist tighten; there was a *swish-thuk* noise, and suddenly there was a knife embedded in the floor at Harry's feet, its hilt quivering slightly. "It's enchanted," Draco said, his tone satisfied, as if he'd enchanted it himself. "To throw knives. You'll never run out, either."

"This," Harry said, "will come in extremely handy at picnics."

He couldn't tell if Draco smiled at that or not; Draco was still carefully avoiding looking at him. "Just don't make any really sudden moves," Draco said, "you might impale your foot."

"I won't," Harry toyed with the cuff on his left wrist. "Are you all right? You won't look at me."

Draco sighed and raised his eyes to Harry's. "I thought you might mind being given weapons," he said. "So soon - but you'll need them, and I'd rather you were properly armed, and we haven't got much time-"

"It's all right," Harry said. "Where is the ... the body?"

"I'll show you," Draco said. "As soon as you're ready to go." He paused. "You really don't mind them, then?"

Harry held his arms out. "The buckles are too loose," he said. "Can you tighten them?"

Draco hesitated a moment before starting on the left cuff. His touch was fast and gentle. Harry looked at him curiously, unable to see his face, just the bent fair head, the dangling locks of white-blond hair and the flushed tips of his ears. "You're not going to leave now," Harry said. It wasn't really a question. "What you said before, about going back to England -"

"Of course not," Draco said. "I want to find her as much as you do."

"Maybe not quite as much," Harry said.

Draco shrugged and started on the other cuff. "I said I'd go with you. I'll go."

"What you said before, in the kitchen, about me being honest," Harry said.

Draco tensed; Harry could feel the tightening grip on his wrist. "Yes?"

"I wanted to thank you," Harry said. "I thought, the way you were talking last night, that you hated me - that you'd always hate me."

Draco's tone was guarded. "I don't hate you."

"But then in the kitchen," Harry said, "it sounded like maybe you didn't. Like maybe you still have faith in me. And I need that - I need you to have faith in me, because if you don't" He let his voice trail off.

'And you think I do? Have faith in you, that is?"

'Do you?"

Draco gave the buckle a final tug. 'You're the only thing I ever have had faith in."

Harry said nothing to that. There seemed nothing to say. Draco released his grip on Harry's wrist, and raised his face to Harry. There were faint lines of tiredness under his clear eyes. "There," he said.

"Do you - does that mean we're friends again?" Harry asked.

"No," Draco said. He took a step backward, picked up the sword belt from the bed, and slung it around his waist. His fingers, where they touched the buckled fastenings, were shaking slightly. "You ask too many questions, Potter. Come on. Let's get ready to go."

He went through the door, and Harry could hear the sound of his boots, fading away down the narrow hallway. Harry looked after him and for a moment, heard a dull roaring in his ears that was like the sound of the sea. *Love is faith*, he thought, and bent down to pick up his sword.

She heard his footsteps behind her as she walked down the corridor, but she did not stop and turn until she had reached the landing on top of the stairs. When she did, she found he was just behind her, still faintly smiling, and looking at her expectantly. In the red light of the chandelier the blood on his shirt looked hyper-real, like spilled red wine.

"Don't hurt her," Ginny said, without preamble.

Tom lowered his eyelashes demurely. "Don't hurt who?"

"You know perfectly well who I mean," Ginny said wearily. "You've already killed Pansy - you can't hurt *her* any more."

His eyes gleamed. "I would not be too sure of that. I know spells that can bring a man back from the dead that he might be tortured again and again without recourse to escape."

Ginny shuddered, but held firm. "I meant Blaise," she said. "I want you to let her go."

"I did not know," said Tom, "that she was so dear to you."

"She is not dear to me," Ginny said, falling inadvertently into the rhythmic cadences of his speech. "But I cannot bear the guilt of another death laid at my door."

Tom shrugged. "You make much out of nothing."

Ginny shook her head. "You don't understand guilt," she said. "I wouldn't expect you to. But it is its own form of torture."

Tom's blue eyes narrowed. "You cannot honestly imagine," he said, "that I would spare her at your request. Not when I am unwilling to spare *you*."

Ginny hesitated. Tom stood still, looking at her, his hands at his sides. In the silence between them, she was agonizingly aware of the loud tick of the clock downstairs, the drift of dust in the diffused beams of torchlight, the faint tinkle of the chandelier. Tom's eyes were feline and watchful. They held a clear and malicious amusement. No, he would never spare her. He had waited too long for that.

But I don't need you to spare me, Tom, she thought. She raised her head. Almost without her own volition, her hands went to the clasp that held her still-soaking jacket together in front, and undid it. The jacket slid to her feet. Tom was watching her, his eyes beginning to narrow. Her fingers found the buttons on the front of her blouse and undid them. The wet cloth peeled away slowly, like a second skin. She let the blouse fall and shook her hair out; it fell down around her shoulders and tickled the bare skin there.

Tom was staring at her. His expression hadn't changed, only his fingers had begun to curl in towards his palms. "Virginia," he said, "what are you doing?"

Her hands went to her belt, undid it, began to slide it through the loops. They were shaking, determined. "I'll trade you," Ginny said. 'You wanted her because she looks like me - now you have me. I'll do anything you want, anything you say. Just let her go.'



They were up on the roof of Viktor's flat, and there was a rent in the eastern sky where the sun was beginning to come up, as if someone had taken a bloody knife to the lower banks of clouds. The stars were still out overhead, dim and irregular sequins that cast just enough light for Harry to clearly see Draco as he walked to the edge of the roof and looked over the side, as if he were considering jumping the distance to the next house.

Harry leaned back against a brick chimney and watched Draco as he hopped up onto the low wall that ran around the edge of the roof. His black clothes blended in with the darkness but his pale hair and face were marked out very clearly against the dark sky. Whatever it was that he was doing, he was a pleasanter sight than the corpse sprawled where Draco had left it in the middle of the balcony, its open dead eyes gaping blankly at the sky.

Draco was still standing at the roof's edge, hands in his pockets, silvery head tilted back. Harry wished he wouldn't rock back and forth like that while standing so close to a sheer drop. It wasn't good for Harry's nerves. They tensed again as Draco abruptly turned around, ran along the wall, stared into the distance, then leaped back down onto the roof and strode over to the dead man. Drawing aside his cloak, he hooked a hand into his belt and stared down at him thoughtfully.

Harry could stand it no longer. "Amazing," he said dryly. "He's still dead."

Draco shot him a look. "Toss me one of your knives," he said.

Harry drew a knife slowly from his wrist sheath, and threw it to Draco. Draco caught it neatly out of the air, crouched down by the dead man, and cut through the tie at the throat of his robes. They fell away, showing a black shirt underneath and, when Draco sliced through that, a quantity of unpleasantly pale and mottled skin. Black gashes snaked across the dead man's chest, crusted with dried blood.

Harry arched his eyebrow. "What are you doing?"

Draco did not reply, but turned the knife in his hand, and laid the edge against the corpse's neck. After a moment's hesitation, he sliced down, hard, neatly slitting the throat.

Harry's breath hissed through his teeth; a little dark blood seeped out around the cut, and Draco sat back on his heels. "Damn," Draco said. "We waited too long."

"Too long for what?"

"Blood," Draco said. "His heart's stopped beating. You can't get blood out of a dead body for long after the heart's stopped pumping."

Harry arched an eyebrow at him.

"Mystery novels," Draco said, by way of explanation.

"That's not what I meant," Harry said. "I meant, there are plenty of Medical Magic spells to restart hearts that have stopped beating."

'*Living* hearts," Draco said.

Harry shrugged. "There's nothing to say it couldn't work," he said, and raised his hand. He held it out towards the dead man. '*Cardiatus*,' he said.

The corpse jerked as if electrocuted, midsection curving upward, forming a bow shape with the head and heels still touching the ground. The dead fingers scrabbled at the roof as a black tide of blood poured from the gashed throat, spilling across the overlapping roof tiles. A high bubbling scream came from the corpse's mouth: it sounded like a pot boiling over.

Draco stepped back hastily to avoid getting blood on his boots. He looked horrified and slightly sick; he raised his hand and gestured quickly, "*Finite incantatum*."

The body collapsed, limp, at his feet. Its already livid skin had taken on a greenish, waxy sheen. Draco stared at it, then at Harry, his lips very white.

I'm sorry, Harry thought quickly at him, *I wasn't expecting that to happen*.

Draco shrugged. *It worked*, he thought, and then scowled. *And stay out of my head*.

'Sorry,' Harry said again, although this time he wasn't. The sky was lighter now and he could very clearly see the bright spots of sickly color

on Draco's cheekbones and the angry set of his mouth; he remembered Draco's hand awkwardly patting his back in the kitchen and thought about what a very confusing person he was. "Look, are you all right? You look -"

He broke off as a high cry split the night. Draco's head jerked up and Harry followed his gaze. The dawn sky was heavy with a clear brassy light, and Harry saw a wheeling shape, dark and winged, growing larger and larger against the fading moon, angling down towards their roof

Draco's mouth curled into a satisfied smile. "Thestrals," he said.

Incense had been left burning in the clawfooted gold brazier next to the bed in Ron's quarters, and the room was full of a heavily scented black smoke. Ron went to put the incense out while Hermione glanced around the room frowning, her eyes narrowed. "They've certainly put you up in style," she said.

"Yes," Ron said shortly. It was hot in the room, and he felt himself sweating through his lace-trimmed shirt and velvet waistcoat. "Maybe you should sit down. Rest."

"I'm all right," Hermione said. She was obviously lying. She was still very pale, her lips a dark purplish-blue, and she shivered under the cloak despite the heat in the room. "That man who brought me here -"

Lifting a slim gold poker, Ron prodded at the coals in the brazier, not looking at her. "Gabriel. He's a vampire."

"I *know* that, Ron," she said, with a flash of her old, superior crossness. Her tone was acid. "Is he a friend of yours?"

Ron whirled on her, poker in hand. "Whatever you're implying, I wish you'd quit implying it and just bloody *say* it."

Hermione raised her chin. "Fine," she said. "Are you cooperating with the Dark Lord? Are you - working with him?"

Ron flung the poker to the ground with a clatter, and spoke between his teeth. "No," he said. "And I don't suppose it would do any good to tell you I'd never do that, because you won't believe me. So let me tell you instead that he's never asked for my cooperation, because it's the truth. He's drugged me up, and made me play chess for hours, and forced me to see visions, visions so bad I thought my head would split apart -"

"Visions?" Hermione said, and then, "oh, *chess*," and to his surprise, she nodded, as if this made perfect sense. Her frozen hair was beginning to unthaw, and drops of water ran down her cheeks like tears.

"What do you mean, 'oh, chess'?"

"There's a theory," Hermione said, "that people who are talented at chess have some sort of latent precognitive ability." Seeing his blank expression, she made an impatient noise. "That they can see the future. Just a little, just enough to visualize the board a few moves ahead. My guess is that the Dark Lord was trying to force you to use your Divining skill, over and over, until you got so exhausted that your mental barriers broke down and you couldn't hold the visions back." She was looking at him now, dark eyes wide, lips pressed together. "What did you see?"

"The Dark Mark," Ron said. "I saw dead bodies. The Dark Mark over the school. I saw the Ministry on fire -"

"Ah," Hermione whispered. "Draco. He burned his father's office."

"Harry leaving us, the runic band broken. Seamus standing under green light -"

Hermione half-closed her eyes. "Tom."

"And," Ron's voice thickened. "Ginny. She'd been strangled."

Hermione shook her head slowly. "Ron, oh, Ron, how awful for you -"

"And," Ron said flatly, "I saw Draco lying on a bed in a stone room, and Harry sitting next to him and crying. He was dead."

Hermione recoiled as if he had struck her, then bit her lip. "Yes," she said, "Draco is dying." Her dark eyes were bright with tears. "But," she

whispered. "If Harry was sitting beside him, if Harry will be with him when he dies -"

"Then what -?"

"Then Harry will live through today," Hermione said, and hugged herself through the thick, damp cloak.

Ron expelled a breath. "God, Hermione," he said. "Do you ever think about anything else than whether Harry will live through the day?"

But she was shivering again. When she pulled the cloak closer around her, he saw that her fingertips, also, were blue. "I'm so cold," she said.

Ron rubbed the back of his hand across his eyes. "You need to warm up," he said. "Look, through that door - there's a bathroom there, a tub, the water's always hot. Go soak in the hot water and I'll go get you some dry clothes."

Hermione nodded. "Thank you, Ron." She slipped the cloak from her shoulders and laid it across his bed. He waited for her to undo the strap that held the flask at her waist, but she left it where it was and walked across the room to the bathroom door. She paused there, and looked back at him. "Your visions - they're true," she said. "But Ginny - that wasn't your sister that you saw. That wasn't Ginny." She smiled at him a little, the first time she'd smiled since he'd found her on the roof. "Your sister is fine," she said, and went into the room and shut the door behind her.

Because her eyes were closed, she felt him before she saw him move, felt the brush of his shirt against her bare arms, and the warmth of his body as he came and stood in front of her. He did not touch her at first, only stood close, so close she could feel his breath against her closed eyelids and the tickle of his hair against her cheek. She tensed all over, waiting for him to put his hands on her, wondering if she had chosen precisely the wrong tool to use against him, offered bait he would neither want nor understand

She heard his breath escape between his teeth in a low hiss. Then he reached out, and placed his hands on her hips, just above the loosened

waistband of her jeans. His fingers were cold against her skin. She opened her eyes.

He was looking down at her, his eyes very blue. Strands of light hair fell across his forehead and his expression was absorbed, almost anxious, not at all fierce; the look of someone leaving a half-desired isolation for unknown country. "Seamus?" she said, wonderingly, and he kissed her.

"Oh, Tristan!" Rhiannon flew across the room to her beloved. Her frail taffeta gown was shredded where the Dark Wizard Morgan had torn it. Beneath its inadequate covering, her bosom heaved and trembled like two dishes of aspic being served for dinner during a storm at sea. "I thought I would surely never see you again!"

"Yes, yes," Tristan said, holding her at arm's length. "Don't fuss yourself, darling - and do be careful of my hair, there's a poppet."

Rhiannon turned to her beloved's companion, the frightfully handsome Lord Sebastian d'Oursine. "How can I ever thank you for keeping my Tristan's spirits up during his dark time of captivity?" she gushed, heaving in his general direction.

Sebastian scratched at his neck, where there were a number of dark red marks. Signs of the torment he had endured? "Well," he said in a measured tone, "there were some touch and go moments"

"More touching than going, really," said Tristan, and they both sniggered.

Lord Sebastian looked at Tristan adoringly. "God, you're clever," he said. "Get over here, you clever, sexy bastard."

It was only as Tristan detached himself from her grasp that he might sidle over to Lord Sebastian and begin kissing him in a decidedly unbrotherly fashion that Rhiannon began to twig that something fairly unusual was going on.

"You know, Sirius, the only thing worse than reading rubbish is reading rubbish aloud. Are you trying to punish me? Have I done something to offend you?"

Sirius, lying stretched out along the couch with the garishly bound book held above his face, looked sideways at Remus and grinned. "I remember Lily used to read these, but I don't remember them being quite so racy back then."

Remus rolled his eyes. "What's it called?"

"*Trousers Undone*," Sirius read, "*The Erotic Journey*."

"And that's *Ginny's* book?"

"She seems to have quite a collection of them." Sirius tossed the book aside and it landed on the coffee table, the illustration of a shirtless blond man in tight breeches face-up. "What are you up to, Remus?"

Remus, who had been going through the contents of a large cardboard box, shrugged. "I told the Ministry owls to get all our old records from my house and bring them here. I meant official Order membership records, but they took me literally." He held up a vinyl disc. "Look - the Bay City Rollers."

Sirius wrinkled his nose. "That one must be Snape's."

Remus heaved another one out of the box. "Hey, remember when we used to listen to Chocolate Frog?"

"Yeah, before they sold their umlauts to Doxy Frivous and went mainstream," said Sirius. "Peter had such a crush on that lead singer, what was his name, Nigel Heslop?"

"Yeah, he used to *dress* like him. Remember those stacked-heel lucite boots with the goldfish inside that were enchanted to swim around?"

"In retrospect," Sirius said, "perhaps we should have known he was going to sell out to the Dark Lord."

Remus was about to reply when the door to the study swung open. It was Charlie Weasley, a bemused look on his face. "Speaking of drugs," he said, "Aiden Lynch is in the fireplace. He's got a mad hangover and says he has to speak to one of you right away. Something about Harry being in Prague?"

As it turned out, it was only one thestral.

It landed on the roof between Harry and Draco with a soft sussurating beat of leathery wings, and was still. Its fleshless black hide clung to its protruding skeleton, and the eyes that regarded Harry and Draco were as white as smoke.

"Ugly bugger," Draco remarked offhandedly, "isn't it?"

The thestral gazed at Draco steadily. It had a look on its face Harry did not particularly like.

"Don;t insult it," Harry said. "What if it bites you?"

"It won't," Draco said, and held a hand out to the beast. It continued to stare at him for a moment, then lowered its head and brushed the back of his hand with its muzzle. "Thestrals like me."

"Thestrals don't like anyone."

"They like me," Draco said, and indeed, the thestral's desultory nuzzling of his hand was the closest thing to any kind of affectionate gesture Harry could imagine one of the deathly horses making. "At least, they always used to."

"I didn't know you could see thestrals before this, Malfoy," Harry said. "Fifth year, you couldn't."

Draco shot him a sideways look. "Is that your tactless way of asking me whether I've seen someone shuffle off this mortal coil before today, Potter?"

Harry shrugged. "I didn't know you'd seen death, is all."

"I've done better," Draco said. "I've *been* dead - remember?" He dropped his hand, but the thestral continued to nuzzle his shoulder. "After that, I started seeing them. Around the Manor, on the school grounds. They tended to follow me. I think they just like anything related to death."

A shiver ran down Harry's bones. "I've ridden one before ¶ have you?"

To his surprise, Draco paled slightly. "No," he said, displaying a sudden and surprising hesitation. "I don't like - riding horses."

Harry blinked at him. "You don't?"

"No," Draco said sharply. "I don't."

"Why n-?"

"I just don't, that's all," Draco said, stepping back from the thestral and from Harry, his face shut like a locked box. "I told you not to ask me questions."

"I didn't know you were banning all inquiries across the board," Harry snapped. "I thought it was just the important stuff you didn't want to talk about -"

"And I suppose I need you," Draco said, his tone glacial, "to tell me what is and isn't important?"

Bloody hell, Harry thought, *right back where we were before*, and impulsively, he reached out and caught the flaring edge of Draco's cloak, and held it tightly, preventing the other boy from walking away. "Never mind then," he said. "Forget I asked."

Draco, who had half turned away, looked back over his shoulder at Harry. Harry could sense in him a coiling tension, and underneath the tension, he could feel the shape of Draco's thoughts brushing against his own. It was a strange blind sensation, as if he held his hand to the side of a jar and felt through the glass the beat of trapped wings inside. He wondered if Draco knew, or felt it too.

He didn't appear to have noticed. "Listen," he said, abruptly. "Potter—" He paused a moment and then went on, dropping each word into the silence between them with a deliberate and passionless clarity, "I meant what I said before," he said. "That I'll go with you, that I won't leave you. And you know if I said it, I'll do it. You have that as an advantage over me, that I made that promise to you. And if you choose, you can press that advantage. You can ask me whatever you want, and I can't walk away. It's your choice then, if you want me here because I want to be with you, or if you want me here only because of a promise."

"I just don't understand why you won't talk to me," Harry said, despair in his tone.

"No," Draco said flatly, "you don't understand, and that's why I won't talk to you."

You talked to me in the kitchen, Harry thought, but he sensed without a doubt that saying it would only make Draco angry. There had always been vulnerabilities that the other boy was unwilling to discuss; all that had changed, Harry thought, was that now even the unwillingness itself was also apparently a forbidden topic. For someone he was so close to, Harry thought, he knew very little about how Draco felt about *anything*.

"If you don't like riding horses," Harry said, "how are we supposed to get off this roof?"

Draco gave him a poisonous look, but it didn't bother Harry; it was only one of Draco's garden-variety poisonous looks, and much less alarming than the clear, dead voice he had just been speaking in. "I said I didn't like it; I didn't say I wouldn't do it."

"Fine," Harry said, and reaching up, he fisted one hand in the thestral's tangled mane and pulled himself up onto its back. It danced forward a few steps, then relaxed. He looked down at Draco, who had taken several involuntary paces back and was now scowling up at him from a slight distance.

Harry held out a hand. "Come on," he said.

Draco's scowl deepened. "Who says you get to be in front?"

Harry leaned forward and theatrically banged his head against the ridged top of the horse's neck. "Just get on the fucking pony, Malfoy."

Ignoring the other boy's proffered hand, Draco swung himself up behind Harry, gripping the horse's back tightly with his legs to keep from sliding off. The thestral made a sound low in its throat; leathery wings rustled. Draco swore rapidly under his breath. Without turning around, Harry could feel the tension in the other boy's body; he radiated a sharp and panicked electricity. "You'd better grab on to my shirt or something, Malfoy."

Draco stopped cursing just long enough to tell Harry what he could do with his shirt. It sounded like a complicated process involving knots. Harry shrugged, and leaned forward to whisper into the thestral's ear. "Take us," he began, "to the Dark Lord -"

The thestral's legs bunched beneath it, and it launched itself skyward before Harry had even finished speaking. Draco yelled out loud and grabbed onto Harry's belt; only Harry's grip on the thestral's mane prevented them both from sliding off. Together they sped up into the blood-red sunrise.

"Lo, Sirius." Aidan fixed bleary eyes on Sirius. He wagged a manicured hand at him in greeting, then winced. "God, my head. Bloody magic, bloody wizards; we can turn a man inside out but we can't cure a bloody hangover. I tell you, I wish someone *would* turn me inside out—"

Sirius sighed inwardly. It was never easy getting information out of Aidan at the best of times. He'd worked with him briefly in the Resistance. Aidan had been the best-dressed bloke there, but his habit of rolling up every day at noon, incoherently hungover to the teeth, had not endeared him to his superiors, of which Sirius had been one.

"So listen, Aidan—"

"Right, right." Aidan tugged at the collar of his black velvet frock coat. "So enough about me, then," he said. "What's up with you, Sirius?"

Sirius sighed. "I don't know, Aidan," he said. "Charlie indicated that there was something you wanted to say to me. Have you any idea what that might have been?"

Aidan gazed blankly around the kitchen, then brightened. "Oh, right," he said. "About Harry."

Sirius tensed all over. "What about Harry?"

"Well, it's not about Harry specifically. It's really about Viktor, and sort of peripherally about Harry -" Aidan blinked again, then beamed. "Hey,

that's a good word, peripherally. I didn't know I knew that word. I must not be as hung over as I thought."

"AIDAN." Sirius's voice was like thunder. "May I remind you that there is a fully grown adult werewolf in the other room who is entirely capable of eating your head if you don't tell me whatever it is you know about Harry?" (This, Sirius thought, was mostly true - Remus was indeed a fully grown adult werewolf who was entirely capable of eating Aidan's head although not, perhaps, in his present form.)

Aidan looked hurt. "All right, all right, there's no need to resort to threats." He flicked a speck of dust from his collar, and said, "So Viktor Krum, right, he's got this flat he lets me stay in sometimes, in Prague. Lovely place, right in the center of town, all the modern conveniences -"

"AIDAN."

"Anyway," Aidan went on huffily, "yesterday, I got an owl from him demanding I leave the flat immediately because he needed to put up another friend there. Needless to say I was rather put out at being dismissed in such a manner - and besides, I had something of a hangover that day due to having been out at a party in Budapest the night before; anyway, the upshot is, I didn't actually get around to leaving the flat until well after Viktor had asked me to, and I was still in the bedroom when he arrived with his friend. Luckily I had the old Invisibility Cloak that I had borrowed from the Order -"

"Stolen from the Order, more like," Sirius corrected.

Aidan glared. "Do you want me to tell you this story, or not?"

"Depends if you think 'partially eaten' would be a good look for you."

Aidan opened his mouth, seemed to think better of it, and closed it again. "I put the cloak on, and snuck out into the corridor and out of the flat, but not before I passed Viktor on the stairs and saw who he had with him. It was Harry Potter."

Sirius leaned forward so quickly he almost overbalanced. "My Harry? You're sure?"

"Of course I'm sure."

Sirius' heart was pounding. A lead on Harry, their first lead on Harry - "I suppose I should thank you, Aidan, you've certainly -"

The kitchen door opened at that moment, and Remus stepped in, a thoughtful expression on his face. He was about to speak when Aidan let out a terrified scream and vanished from the fireplace in a shower of blue sparks.

Remus looked startled. "What got into him?"

Sirius shifted guiltily. "Ah, nothing, he's, ah, terribly shy."

Remus looked mystified.

"Anyway, Remus, you won't believe it - Lynch actually had something to say after all," Sirius said, eager both to change the subject and to impart this new information to his friend. "He's seen Harry. With Viktor Krum, of all people."

Remus looked surprised. "I wouldn't have said they were close."

"No, but then he'd know we'd find him if he went to any close friends. Of course, Aidan barged off before he could tell me anything beyond that, so I suppose we'd better pay Viktor a visit." Sirius rose to his feet. "Anyway, what'd you come in here to tell me?"

Remus looked somber. "It's Ginny," he said. "She still hasn't returned and Charlie's terribly worried. He thinks we should go after her."

He was not Seamus, of course, and being kissed by Tom was nothing like being kissed by Seamus. Which had been a pleasant thing, sweet and gentle, and this was nothing like that. Nor was it even like being kissed by Draco, which had been fierce in its way, but Ginny had always known that Draco would never hurt her, and now she had no such assurance.

She sucked in her breath as Tom pushed her back against the banister railing, and his hands found their way into her hair and tangled there,

pulling the curls tight, making her wince. His lips were hard and dry and hot on hers, his tongue pushed them open and scraped the roof of her mouth insistently, and she shivered, although not as hard as he was shivering. She could feel the reverberations of shudders tearing through him. His hands shook as they slid up the curve of her waist to her breasts.

He seemed not to notice what his body was doing, that it was trying to shake itself apart. She could almost have mistaken his tremors for the tremors of extreme emotion, if she did not know better. Her hands had been braced against the railing; she moved them now, and placed them on his shoulders. He caught her wrists, pulled them down to her sides, held them there. "You don't," he said, against her neck, "touch me."

"Your hands," she said. "They're shaking."

He snarled at her, but released his grip. "There's nothing wrong with my hands."

Her tone was placating. "Of course there isn't."

He leaned his full weight on her, and the banister railing cut so hard into Ginny's back that she winced. She uttered a sharp cry and saw him look briefly gratified. She twisted her head away from him, letting her head fall back. When he leaned to her, mouth at her throat, she reached to touch his hair.

He stiffened, and jerked away from her. "I told you not to touch me."

Ginny lowered her eyelashes, hiding the hatred in her eyes. "What are you so afraid of, Tom?"

'Be *quiet*," he hissed, pushing harder against her, cutting off her breath. "Or I'll make you quiet."

Her head swam with the nearness of him, the heat of his body, his smell of ink and blood. Her open hand fluttered against his back, tracing the bumps of his spine through his damp shirt; she could feel the scar below his shoulder blade where Seamus had injured himself flying too near a tree when he was nine -

"You wouldn't hurt me," she whispered.

He paused. "Oh," he said, "*wouldn't I?*"

It was what she had hoped for. "You couldn't," she said.

It was all she had to say; his hands went to her throat, and circled it, his thumbs pressed into the notch above her collarbone. His expression softened as, his eyes gazing directly into hers, he began to tighten his grip.

Stars exploded behind Ginny's eyes as she fought for breath. Her hands flew to his; she clawed at his wrists with her nails, gouging the skin, and he gasped with laughter as she thrashed under him, kicking out at him uselessly with weakening legs, and just as her knees began to buckle under her, her vision dimming to gray, his grip suddenly loosened. With a choked cry he staggered away from her, his legs buckling, and sank to his knees at her feet.

Clinging to the banister to keep herself upright, Ginny could think of nothing but breathing for several moments, gulping lungfuls of air through her bruised throat. When her dizziness finally ebbed, she raised her head to find Tom had risen to his feet, and was standing an arm's length away from her, staring at her through slitted eyes. One of his hands was at his throat, and under the spread of his fingers she could plainly see the bruises there against his pale skin.

"I told you," she said, and though it hurt to speak she felt a burst of dark triumph, "*I told you you couldn't hurt me.*"

It was only a short while before Ron realized the stupidity of his assertion that he could easily find Hermione some extra clothes. The fortress, while impressive, was anything but homey. Ron wandered through great halls and enormous ballrooms, through empty conservatories and dusty libraries, their walls lined with books whose spines were plated in gold. Nowhere could he even find another bedroom, much less a random pile of girls' clothes lying in a convenient heap. (He briefly wondered where Rhysenn Summoned her endless wardrobe changes from. Perhaps she could actually fashion garter belts from thin air - an unusual, if restricted, talent.)

He was just leaving the larger of two libraries when he heard voices. One of them was the familiar harsh voice of Voldemort; Ron ducked into an alcove and froze as the Dark Lord passed into the room, followed by Wormtail. The small man was obviously agitated; his round face was red and sweaty, and his left hand plucked nervously at the front of his robes. "Master, I would not lie to you. Lucius has been meddling in matters that surely you can not approve of, matters dangerous to you -"

"Yes, yes, I heard you, Wormtail." The Dark Lord seemed distracted and annoyed. "Your obsession with Lucius grows steadily more unhealthy, I do hope you realize that."

"I am only looking out for your best interests, Master," Wormtail protested, sounding wounded. Ron remembered Voldemort's exasperated tone - *A spy in the house of Lucius, eh, Wormtail?* and pressed himself further back into the alcove.

"By inventing insane tales?" Voldemort demanded. "Your claims that Lucius has been summoning spirits and demons seem largely unfounded. Besides, it is little to me what Lucius chooses to do with his recreational time."

"Not just demons and spirits, Master," Wormtail protested. "Some kind of murdering spirit - it has been killing your Death Eaters -"

"Well, yes," Voldemort admitted. "But only those, I note, who at one time renounced me. Perhaps Lucius is simply clearing corruption out of the ranks."

"If so, I do think he ought to have checked with you first," Wormtail said humbly, and Ron had to reluctantly admit that he had a point.

Voldemort seemed to think so too. "If he has betrayed me, his punishment will be immediate and severe," he said, running the tip of a pale finger across his chin. "But - the burden of proof rests on you, Wormtail." He snapped his fingers. "Until you have proof, I wish to hear no more of your stories."

Wormtail hung his head. "Yes, Master."

Voldemort gazed at his servant, and made a face. "Really, Wormtail," he said, "I do wish you were a bit more *attractive*," with which bizarre comment, he turned on his heel, and strode from the room. Wormtail stared after him in a woebegone manner.

Tired of hiding, Ron stepped out from behind the alcove. Wormtail jumped, then snarled. "Spying on us, were you?"

Ron pulled a face. "You should talk," he replied, made a rude gesture, and left the library.

On the way back to his rooms, he pulled down a set of dark blue velvet hangings, assuming that Hermione, in her infinite wisdom, could somehow enchant the fabric into something resembling garments. When he arrived back at the bedroom, he thought for a moment that Hermione had not yet returned from her bath. The room was still and quiet, and from the other room he could hear the sound of running water.

Then he heard her voice, low and steady. "Shut the door, Ron."

Ron pulled the door shut behind him. When it closed, the torches flared up in their holders, and he saw Hermione, sitting on the foot of the bed, wrapped in a wide white towel. Her wet hair stuck to her cheeks and neck in smooth dark tendrils. For a moment she just stared at him; then she smiled, and was Hermione again. "Sorry," she said, gesturing sheepishly at the towel. "My clothes were wet ☹"

"It's all right," Ron said awkwardly. He took a few steps forward, laid the bundle of velvet he'd found down on the bedspread, and backed away hastily. "Sorry it took me so long - I had to hide from the Dark Lord and Wormtail. They must know you're here, but -"

She looked panicked. "Did they say anything about me?"

Ron shook his head. "No. They were too busy talking about how they don't trust Lucius Malfoy."

"They don't? I thought -"

"It doesn't matter." Ron took a step forward. "What matters is if you feel better."

She nodded. She certainly looked better - her lips were back to their normal pink, and there was color in her cheeks. "Yes. I'm sorry about before, too. I was being a real bitch."

"Oh," said Ron. "Oh. No - you weren't."

"I was, though." She swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood up, clutching the towel around her. Her legs, beneath the towel hem, were slim and bare. There was a graze over her right ankle that touched him oddly - there was something so childish about it. "I've no right to slag off on you for doing what you had to do to survive," she said. "I was just so concerned about Harry, I wasn't thinking."

"Is he in danger?" Ron checked himself and smiled wryly. "I mean, more than usual?"

"Yes," Hermione said. "We were staying in Prague, all of us, Harry and Draco and I, and Gabriel sent his men to get me, and left some of them behind to kill Draco and Harry. So I don't -"

"No," Ron said. "Voldemort would never allow that. They're needed for something, both of them. The Dark Lord wouldn't have them killed outright. Lucius is always here, and he -"

"Lucius?" Hermione stepped towards Ron and caught at his arm with the hand that was not holding up the towel. Ron looked away. "You've heard him talk about Draco?"

"Only a little," Ron said. "I know that the Dark Lord sent his creatures after Harry but they couldn't hurt him, and I know Draco was with him and protecting him, only when they were talking, they made it sound like actually he'd meant them to go after *you* - but why? What do they want with you?"

Hermione had gone tense all over; her thin fingers gripped his arm like cabled steel. "Surely you must know," she said in a whispered tone.

"The Cup," Ron said. "The Fourth Worthy Object -"

Hermione's eyes were wide and bright. "Yes!"

'But I didn't realize you had it with you still. I would have thought you'd have left it at Hogwarts.'

Hermione's tone was sharp. "It's much too powerful an object to be simply left behind, Ron."

Ron felt obscurely scolded. 'Well, right, but I figured you'd have hidden it, at least. Did you?'

Hermione was still looking up at him; suddenly she smiled, an odd sort of smile. "Can't you guess?"

Ron shook his head. "No."

Hermione's smile wavered for a moment; then she laughed, and dropped his hands. "You always were," she said, "the least devious of all of us."

"So you're not going to tell me, then?" Ron asked, slightly put out.

Hermione shook her head, sober again. "It's safer for you if you don't know." Lightly, she put her hands on his shoulders, and looked up into his face. "I've spent too much time thinking I'd lost you," she said, "to risk losing you again."

"Oh," Ron said, feeling his lack of eloquence. He was aware suddenly and sharply of the nearness of her, the light gliding along The soft curve of her cheekbone, pulling gold threads out of her hair. The thin towel was stark white against the softer white of her skin. 'Hermione, you probably shouldn't"

Words were failing him; he felt a precarious and strangely intoxicating dizziness. Aftereffects of Pansy's spells? He wasn't sure; all he knew was that her hair was drifting across his face and that it smelled of clover honey. *Am I still in love with her?* Ron wondered. She had been his first love, his childish love, the sort of awkward ineffectual charming love most people looked back on years later with affectionate nostalgia. But not Ron. That love had been taken away from him, twisted and thrown back in his face, robbed of its charm, its sweetness replaced with pain. She was a symbol now, of every mistake he had ever made, and everything he had ever wanted that he could not have. if only there were some way to make that right...

'What?' Hermione blinked up at him, wide-eyed, then tightened her arms around his neck. 'Are you worried about those love spells Pansy used on you?'

"Er," Ron said. "Well, I mean, I am a bit. You know. Just a bit and all. I know you would never!"

'Oh, *Ron*,' Hermione whispered. "You're so noble and so forgiving, after the way we treated you. I'd never want to hurt Harry, but sometimes I wish...you just make everything seem so *simple*..."

Ron blinked. "I do?" It seemed to him nothing about his life, especially recently, as particularly simple.

Hermione turned her face up to his. Tears glittered on the ends of her lashes; she was breathing hard, as if she had been running. "It's just us now," she whispered, "and it can be our secret, just between us two..."



The words were distantly familiar, as if he had heard them before in a dream. *No*, he thought, *no, I've been through this before, it was wrong, all wrong, this is a dream or a nightmare* - but it was Hermione, still

Hermione, who was his friend, and when she put her mouth to his, he could not summon the anger he would have needed to push her away. He froze, letting her lips cover his; he had never felt a kiss like this before, so heated, so close and draining - could not breathe enough air; pain mounted behind his eyes and burned down through his veins as if his blood had turned to firewhiskey, and he *knew*. "Rhysenn," he hissed, pulling his mouth away from hers, and heard her laugh, low in her throat.

Furious, he tried to push her away, but she would not release him. He bit down, hard, on her lip, and heard her gasp out loud in pain; she shoved him, hard, and his feet went out from under him. He slid to the hard marble floor, limp as a deboned fish.

She knelt over him, slim and straight in her virginal white dress, and her ink-black hair spilled down over her shoulders and tickled his skin. She put her hand to her red mouth and when she drew it away there was blood on her fingers.

"You mortals are so ruthless with your love," Rhysenn said. "Is it because you have such a short time to live?"

Gazing up at her through his haze of pain, Ron heard Hermione's voice in his ears once again - *If Harry lives to see him die, than Harry will live through today*. "Don't," he said. "Don't expect me to feel sorry for you." Her eyes widened, but he was already slipping away into blackness; if she spoke again, he did not hear her.

The world spun away beneath them, a glowing carpet of lights that gradually faded to an indistinct blur.

"Potter?"

"Mm, yes?"

"Are there stars?"

Harry was silent for a moment before replying. "What do you mean? Of course there are stars." He twisted sideways to look at Draco, and Draco tightened his grip on Harry's belt. "What kind of question is that?"

"Nothing. No kind of question. Forget about it, Potter."

Harry blinked at him, then turned back around. Draco looked back up at the sky: instead of individual stars, he saw only a flat field of darkness, hazed with brighter spots, the pinpricks of which hurt his eyes. He remembered Snape's voice, saying *blindness*, and thought with a faint despair of the antidote only Hermione could make, now seeping molecule by molecule out of his bloodstream. Soon there would be nothing standing between himself and the poison but his own failing strength.

He hoped it would be enough.

Tom lowered his hand from his throat, slowly. His eyes glittered at her, flat with malevolence, but he did not move towards her. "What," he said, and his voice was as raspy as if it had been *his* throat that was crushed, "have you done to me?"

Ginny felt a wild urge to grin, to laugh, to *shake* him - "I haven't done anything," she said. "I guessed it when you didn't kill me before. You knocked me out, left me lying there - you could have killed me, but you didn't. You couldn't hurt me. I bet you didn't know why, but you couldn't. You probably put it down to being in Seamus' body, the weakness of being mortal again -"

"Not mortality," Tom said. He coughed, swallowed, looked at her with hate. "Love. That he loved you."

"I know," Ginny said. "I know he did." She felt a wave of sadness swamp her, looking at Tom and remembering Seamus. She had not expected him to love her. It had been an unexpected grace note, softening her sadness, dulling the edge of her sense of loss. But she had never really appreciated it, never loved him back, never let herself. She had been waiting, always waiting for Draco. "But that's not why you couldn't hurt me." She pushed her hair back behind her ears. Even her fingers hurt. "It's the spell that brought you here. Sympathetic magic, you called it. My blood, my tears. *I* brought you back. It's because of me that you're here at all. I'm the chain you used to pull yourself into this world, and I am the anchor that keeps you here, and only I," she finished, her voice tightening, "only I can send you back."

She took a step backward, then another. He was staring at her, breathing hard and furiously; she would almost have enjoyed the look in his eyes, trapped and snarling, if not for what she was about to do. Another step back, and the banister was against her back. She turned her head, looked down at the staircase beneath her, winding down into the darkness, then looked back at Tom and took a deep breath. His eyes narrowed - realizing, a second too late, he hurled himself towards her with a furious yell - and in one smooth motion she turned, seized hold of the banister, and flung herself over it.

When Hermione came back into the bedroom, her cold and dirty clothes sticking to her damp, clean skin, the sight that greeted her was a strange one. There was Rhysenn, sitting on the floor in a long white dress stained with blood, her black hair pouring down over her shoulders like smooth ink. Lying in her lap was Ron. She looked up as Hermione walked into the room, and smiled her predatory smile. "Shh," she said. "You'll wake him up."

And she tossed back the thick curtain of her black hair, and Hermione saw that Ron was asleep, or seemingly asleep, his dark red hair tousled, his arm thrown carelessly across his face. His chest rose and fell softly with his sleeping breath.

"Ron!" Hermione couldn't believe her eyes. She took a running step forward, paused, hands outstretched. "Is he all right? What have you done to him?"

Rhysenn was still smiling. "I was merely trying to obtain a bit of information," she said, idly toying with a lock of Ron's hair.

Hermione felt her hand tighten into a fist. How she longed to lurch at Rhysenn and punch her in the face, blacken one of those grey eyes, wipe the smile off her red lips. "You mean you *tortured* him?"

"Tortured him?" Rhysenn's laugh was like windchimes. "No, I did not torture him - it is strictly forbidden to harm the Diviner, and that includes torture. His mind is too precious, its balance too delicate. No," she repeated, "all I did was give him a little...kiss." She looked down at Ron, and her smile turned possessive. Her long fingers glided down his cheek

to his throat, and stroked across the bare skin revealed by the open neck of his shirt. "My kisses tend to have that effect on men. They certainly had that effect on your Harry."

Hermione sucked in a breath so quickly that she heard the air whistle between her teeth. "You -" Hermione struggled to find a word bad enough to call Rhysenn. "You lying *bitch*," she finished, lamely.

Rhysenn chuckled. "I wouldn't call names. You don't know *what* I truly am."

"You're a succubus," Hermione said shortly. "You suck out men's souls while they're sleeping and leave them mindless shells," she added, remembering her Dark Creatures textbooks.

"Not while they're sleeping. Where would the fun be in that?" Rhysenn's fingers stroked the pulse at the base of Ron's throat; he murmured, and turned his face into her gown. His bright hair was like another splash of blood against the white. "Where were we? Oh, yes, your Harry. So charming. The way he closes his eyes when you kiss him -only halfway, with the lashes fluttering down - "

"Stop," Hermione said, savagely. "I know you're just trying to hurt me, make me jealous -"

"As if you've a right to be jealous," Rhysenn said, her eyes darting swiftly up to Hermione's, "*when you can't choose between them.*"

Hermione was so startled for a moment that she could only stare, at the ancient girl rising from the spread pool of her white skirts, the unconscious boy in her lap and her hair cascading down over both of them. Her pale, unpretty face was shut like a box.

"I don't know what you mean," Hermione said. "Choose between who?"

"Your Harry," Rhysenn said, speaking very slowly, as if to a stupid child, "and Draco, who is not yours, because you didn't want him - only you do want him. You never stopped wanting him, you simply told yourself you didn't anymore. And you stood between him and anyone else he might have or want, always telling him that you were still there -"

"I never said anything to him like that! Never!"

"I remember a night," said the demon girl, "a winter's night, when the sky was black and silver and the steps of your school were sugared in snow. I remember a boy standing on those steps and a girl running up them to catch his hands, leaving her cloak open, even though the night was cold, so that he could see her pretty new dress, and that she wore the gifts he had given her -"

"I couldn't bear how alone he looked." Hermione's eyes were filling; she swiped at them with the back of her hand. "That was all it was."

"Alone," Rhysenn sneered. "You mean, *alone without you.*"

"No," Hermione whispered.

"There's a girl who would have been happy to stay with him," said Rhysenn, "if you would have let her."

"He doesn't love her." Hermione lashed out sharply with her voice, beyond caring or pretending she didn't understand. "*He doesn't love Ginny.* He told me so -"

"He said that? He said in so many words, *I do not love her?*"

"It was what he meant." Hermione heard Draco's voice in her head, the lucid, emotionless tone, *Is there any way to respond to I love you with anything but I love you, too?*

"He loves you because he thinks you are unselfish," said Rhysenn. "If only he knew how selfish you really are."

"I can't help it," Hermione said. "I can't help who I love. I don't want to love him, but I do - it's like he's part of me, a part I don't even like sometimes, but I need him and *he needs me* -"

"Because you have arranged it that way," Rhysenn went on, her voice cold and inexorable. "It is by your design that you are the only one who can make the antidote he needs to live - you could control his access to Harry, if you -"

"I could never do that. I would never do that."

"But you've thought about it."

Hermione stared blankly at Rhysenn. "You're cruel."

"Love is cruel," said the demon girl, "and so is desire and that, after all, is what I am. And you may look at me however you like, but at least I know my own nature. You mock my servitude, my captivity, but at least I do not keep others captive, especially those I profess to love. And I am truthful in my desires. Can you say the same?"

"I" The front of Hermione's shirt was wet. She looked down at herself, realized she had been crying, long enough that tears had soaked her clothes. When she looked up again, the door to the bedroom was open, and two men were standing in the doorway. One was short and fat, with a hand that gleamed like a new silver moon; one was tall and pale as bone. Wormtail, and the Dark Lord.

The Dark Lord glided soundlessly into the room, and his servant followed. His eyes, under their heavy albino brow ridges, were the color of old blood. He glanced at Hermione coldly, then turned to Rhysenn. "The Mudblood seems out of sorts," he said. "Have you been using her without our permission?"

"I have not laid a hand on her," said Rhysenn, bowing her head, "my Lord."

"I would imagine she weeps out of fear," said Wormtail, "not pain, Master."

"Ah." The Dark Lord's eyes swept Hermione; the lipless mouth smiled. "The anticipation of pain is indeed a terrible thing," he said. "Let it be over." He stretched out his hand to her and hissed through his teeth:

"Crucio."

They were flying over a wide valley checkerboarded with winter-brown fields and dotted with small farmhouses when Draco reached around and tugged on Harry's shirt.

Harry half-turned, his vision obscured by his own whipping hair. "What is it, Malfoy?"

"I'm hungry," Draco said.

Even blinded by hair and with the wind stinging his eyes to tears, Harry could see Draco's woebegone expression. "You're *hungry*?"

Draco's tone was stubborn. "I'm hungry."

"Well, then," Harry said crossly. "Let me just whip up a few sandwiches for you. Never mind that we're two hundred feet up in the air and miles from anywhere."

"There is no need for sarcasm at this altitude."

"Well, what do you want me to do? Just tap the thestral and say, 'Hey there mate, could you drop us off somewhere where we could get some food?' or perhaps -"

Harry broke off abruptly as the thestral suddenly wheeled and banked, angling itself into a steep dive towards the ground. Draco shrieked like a girl and grabbed for the back of Harry's shirt. They both slid forward onto the horse's neck, seizing at handfuls of tangled mane. The ground came up with alarming swiftness, and they landed with such jarring force that Harry pitched sideways off the horse's back, landing awkwardly in a pile of hay. Draco landed next to him, with more grace if no less force. The thestral paused for a moment, regarding them beadily. Then it took off into the sky with a powerful beating of its scaly wings.

Cursing the thestral, Harry sat up and looked around. They were in a field, liberally dotted with pyramids of dried straw. A group of scruffy-looking chickens flapped noisily around a puddle of dirty water and there was a dilapidated farmhouse nearby. Draco was sitting next to him, picking straw out of his hair. "And you say thestrals don't listen to you," he said, glancing around curiously.

"It's not like there's anything to eat around here," Harry pointed out.

"Well, not in this haystack, but possibly in that village over there," Draco said, waving his arm towards a cluster of small low-roofed buildings in the middle distance. "To which end," he added, leaping to his feet in a shower of straw, "I shall return shortly."

Harry sat up. "Don't you want me to go with you?"

Draco shook his head. "It's a small place. One foreign visitor will be alarming enough. Two foreign boys and a nasty-looking horse will rouse the whole village."

"They won't be able to see the horse," Harry pointed out.

Draco looked at him darkly. "This village lies in the shadow of a stronghold of the Dark Lord," he said. "You want to bet on that?"

Harry got to his feet in a shower of straw. "Well, how come you get to go?"

"You know," Draco said, arcing a pale eyebrow, "I was the bilingual one of us, last time I checked," and with that, he turned and walked towards the village, kicking dried grass in front of him. Harry watched him go, a slim dark figure crowned with hair that was the only bright thing visible against the gray-brown fields and the grayer sky.

He returned, neat and composed, a half an hour later. He was carrying what looked like a loaf of bread, some cheese and dried fruit, and a corked bottle filled with clear liquid. He tossed the food to Harry, who was sitting on a tree stump near the farmhouse, and began to struggle with the cork.

Harry bit off a piece of bread. "Don't drink all the water," he said. "I'm thirsty too."

Draco looked up, tossing bright hair out of his eyes. "Oh, this isn't water, my friend," he said. He hefted the bottle. "*Palinka*."

Harry blinked. "What did you call me?"

"Palinka," Draco repeated, rolling his eyes, "it's a sort of fruit brandy, and from what I gathered, could take the paint off a house at twenty paces." He waved a hand at Harry. "Give me a knife."

"I haven't got a knife."

Draco rolled his eyes, leaned forward, and tapped one of Harry's leather-cuffed wrists. "You've got a knife."

"Oh," Harry said, and bent his hand backward, the way Draco had showed him. A knife shot from the cuff, just above his wrist, and embedded itself in the hay bale next to Draco.

"Do be careful, won't you?" Draco said in a patronizing tone, took hold of the knife, and dug the cork out of the bottle. "You could have hit the bottle, you know." Dropping the knife, he took a swig, made a face, and rubbed his face on his sleeve, a funny, childish gesture Harry couldn't remember him making before. "Well, well. As an extra bonus, it's *flavored* like paint remover."

"That's your lunch?" Harry demanded, biting into the cheese. It had a sharp, sweet bite that was very pleasant. "Brandy?"

"Brandy with *fruit*." Draco waved the bottle expansively. "Loads of nutritional value."

Harry expelled an amused breath. "Whatever you say, Malfoy," he said. "So, do you think there's any chance that thestral is coming back, or are we going to have to Summon broomsticks or what?"

"Neither," Draco said, sitting back against a hay bale. "We're going to have to walk."

Harry cocked an eyebrow. "Walk?"

"Yes, walk," Draco said. "I asked around a bit. We're not that far." He pointed somewhere behind Harry, but when Harry turned all he could see was a line of mountains, very black against the sky, fading to a pale-blue smokiness at the tops. They seemed to cast a shadow over the valley below, like a looming wall. "It was also strongly suggested to me that we do as little magic as possible on the road, as 'the Dark Lord's spies are

everywhere." Draco snorted - a sound that was most unlike him - and rubbed the back of one dirty hand across his cheek, leaving a smudge. It was sort of endearing, the smudge, or would have been had Harry been in the mood to find things about Draco endearing. "Eat your cheese, Potter, we've got something of a hike ahead of us."

"You're the one who's been talking about it like it was a nature stroll through the local park."

"Well, sorry," Draco said, not sounding sorry at all. "Shall I rephrase? 'The cruel path to the Dark Lord's stronghold, beset by many thorns, lies ready; we have only to set foot upon it, and -'"

"Thorns," Harry said tiredly, and sighed. "Look, be serious for a second, Malfoy - aren't you afraid?"

Draco licked a bit of spilled alcohol off the side of his hand and regarded Harry thoughtfully. "I've been afraid, Potter," he said. "And the things I've always been most terrified of, they've always happened anyway. The way I see it, it doesn't do much good being afraid, one way or the other." His eyes narrowed then, and he laughed, a strangled sort of noise. "You're the Gryffindor - aren't you the one who's supposed to be lecturing me on bravery? Not to mention team spirit and patriotism. I thought all I was supposed to be an expert on was underhandedness and nice hair."

Harry ignored this. "Bravery doesn't mean you're not afraid," he said. "It just means you don't turn back, even when you are."

"And the lecture begins," Draco said, although he didn't sound really out-of-sorts, just tired and strained. "Tell me all about being a hero, Harry Potter."

"I can't," Harry said. "I'm not really comfortable being a hero. I'm just not comfortable being a coward either."

"Ah," said Draco, "the whole concept of this war must be something of a no-win for you, then, mustn't it?"

Harry blinked. "War?" he echoed. "Is this a war, then?"

Draco just looked at him over the neck of his bottle. Harry had always imagined a war against the Dark Lord as a business of troops and soldiers, platoons of wizards clashing by night on dark battlefields, trenches ablaze with magical fire. He had never thought of it like this: himself and Draco, alone and dirty and bitterly cold, without maps or plans, advice or guidance, bereft of all familiar things save each other.

Harry looked up. When they were flying, the stars had seemed very close. Now they had retreated up into the sky, as far-off and unreachable as everything Harry could not touch: courage and surety, a sense of home and safety, the secrets Draco held behind the shutters of his grey eyes.

"I killed a man today," Harry said, just to hear the words spoken.

"I know," Draco said. "Welcome to the war."

Master Lucius,

It appears there is talk among the Dark Lord and his servants as regards their opinion of your trustworthiness. It might be advisable for you to put in a reassuring visit or two. Not to mention, I find myself pining for your sparkling company.

Your obedient servant,

Rhysenn

She had underlined the word "servant" twice, and drawn little stars around it. With an impatient grunt, Lucius crumpled the paper in his hand and tossed it into the fire; it caught alight and vanished in a puff of ash.

Irritably, Lucius began to pace the room. He'd spent a pleasant day at the Manor so far - having not heard from Tom had made the day even better - engaged in a minor bit of house-elf torture. He'd also tried on all his old trousers to see if they still fit - they did - and contemplated the purchase of twin greyhounds which would follow him everywhere he went. He would name them Jareth and Chamberlain and they would wear matching collars inscribed with the Malfoy crest.

A very pleasant bit of day-dreaming it had been, too, until his reverie had been rudely shattered by the missive from Rhysenn. The truth was, he had been avoiding Voldemort - socially, so to speak - while he sorted out his thoughts regarding the Tom fiasco. Surely by now the Dark Lord must know of the murder sprees, the dead Death Eaters, and Lucius was going to have to have something very convincing to say when he -

Lucius broke off mid-reverie as a loud crash sounded behind him: he spun around just as the crack of displaced air faded from the room, and stared. There, in the center of the expensive Persian library carpet, stood Tom Riddle. He was white as a sheet, drenched in sweat, and the front of his shirt was stained with blood. His throat was necklaced with ugly weals, and in his arms he held the limp body of Ginny Weasley. Her long scarlet hair trailed over his arm, her legs dangled lifelessly, her left arm hung at an ugly angle. Her eyes were shut, sunk in bruised skin.

Lucius bit back a furious groan. "The girl -" he said. "Is she dead?"

Tom's breathing was ragged. "She is alive, but barely," he snarled, coughed, and spat blood onto the carpet. "And so am I. I need your help, Lucius - I need you to save her life."

They were walking. The end of the short winter day had come, and the sun was setting behind the mountains Harry had thought looked like a wall. The sunset had opened across the sky like a scarlet fan, edged with black lace clouds, and in the shadow of the mountains and the sunset Harry was following Draco down a narrow path that wound between low hills crowned with crumbling rocks. The ground was hard and winter-bitten, and Harry hoped Draco was not just pretending to know where he was going.

"Are you *sure* we're not lost?" Harry asked, for the fifteenth time.

"If you ask me that again, I'm going to fuck right off and leave you here," Draco said. "I'll take my chances with the Dark Lord. I bet *he* never worries about getting lost."

"Of course not," Harry said, navigating a frozen puddle with care, "he just kills anyone who gives him wrong directions."

"You have to admire that kind of singlemindedness," Draco said. All the *palinka* he had drunk did not appear to have impaired his motor skills; he was striding along well ahead of Harry, bareheaded despite the cold. The frigid air had brightened his pale cheeks to scarlet.

"No, you don't," Harry said. He knew Draco was being argumentative and annoying on purpose, but did not care. "I don't need to admire anything about Voldemort, thank you."

Draco rolled his eyes. "I know you're all about saying the Dark Lord's name, but you know the best time to be trilling out those syllables might not be *right outside his front door*, right?"

"Yeah, because that squirrel over there, that's one of the Dark Lord's spies," Harry said, indicating a squirrel crouched on a nearby branch. "When did you get so paranoid, Malfoy?"

Draco stuck his lower lip out and exhaled irritably. "Look, Potter," he said. "Do I think we'll make it to the Dark Lord's fortress? Yes, I do, largely because as far as I can make out, the Dark Lord's always had a two-pronged plan: kill you, and rule the world. And he's always been just as obsessed with killing you as he is with ruling the world, largely because he's a petty bastard, really. So do I think he'll let anything stand in the way of getting you in his grasp? No, I don't. But it isn't just him I'm worried about. This is evil country, you know - cursed land. Things roam here whose attention we really don't want -"

"Oh, not this horror-novel stuff again." Harry flung out a hand in exasperation. "Malfoy, I-" But to Harry's dismay, he had flung his hand out a little too hard. There was a *whoosh-thuk*, a knife shot from Harry's wrist, and the unfortunate squirrel Harry had previously accused of surveillance activities tumbled from its branch with a squeak and a heavy thumping noise.

"Oh, *no*," Harry exclaimed, aghast.

Draco was scarlet with the effort of not laughing. "You've eliminated one of the Dark Lord's spies!" he announced. "Perhaps you're right! Perhaps we could stroll right up to his front door, singing traditional wizarding drinking songs the entire way, and be none the worse for it. In fact..."

Draco took another swig from his bottle of brandy, tucked it under his arm, and began to warble a deliberately off-key tune.

*As I strolled down along the quay
All in the lateness of the day,
I heard a lovely maiden say:
"Alack, for I can get no play."*

*A minstrel boy heard what she said
And straight he rushed to her aid,
But too much drink the task forbade,
And so the maid he could not lay.*

*Alack for I can get no play,
Oh woe is me and lackaday,
O chaste and pure I'll always stay,
Alack for I can get no play.*

*To mirror went she straightaway
And did her ruby hair array
And for her gown she much did pay
Though on her bod it should not stay.*

*Then down she walked along the street,
A handsome lad she chanced to meet,
And sore by dawn were her dainty feet,
But all the boys were gay.*

*Then cried she at the break of day
And hung her head in such dismay
To mourn the dearth of fine boo-tay
"Alack, for I can get no play."*

*Alack for I can get no play,
Oh woe is me and lackaday,
O chaste and pure I'll always stay,
Alack for I can get no play."*

Finished, Draco flung his now-empty brandy bottle against a nearby tree. It shattered. Harry looked at him, at the messy blond hair and the satisfied smirk on Draco's face and the sharply drawn shadows under his

eyes. "That is not a traditional wizarding drinking song," he said. "You just made that up right now."

"Maybe I did," Draco said, blinking gently. They had come out now into a field, sparsely dotted with stunted trees. Draco paused. "I need to sit down for a moment," he said, and flopped down onto the frozen grass. "Sorry if the music wasn't quite your style, Potter."

Harry sat down next to him. The ground was cold, but it was very pleasant to rest. "It wasn't half bad," he admitted.

"Thanks," Draco drawled thoughtfully. "I think I'll dedicate it to Ginny."

"Wh- oh, never mind. I don't even *want* to know what you meant by that."

"No," Draco agreed, staring idly up at the sky, "you probably don't."

There was a long silence. It stretched out between them like pulled taffy. Harry turned on his side slightly and looked at Draco, who seemed lost in thought. The moonlight blanched him; in the middle of the field, with nothing around to cast a shadow, Harry could clearly see the shadows cast by Draco's own eyelashes against the sharp tops of his cheekbones, the dark spaces below his mouth and eyes, gathering in the hollow of his bared throat. Harry wondered if he was correct about what Draco was thinking, or not.

"So, do you love her?" Harry asked.

Draco blinked. "Who?"

Okay, perhaps not. "*Ginny*," Harry said, with emphasis.

There was another long silence, but this one was taut. "I think what you mean when you say *love*, and what I mean when I say it, are two entirely different things," Draco said finally.

"That's not an answer," Harry said.

"I know it isn't," Draco said agreeably. He turned his head towards Harry, so that his cheek was pillowed on his hand. The moonlight washed his eyes out, turned them white and blind. "What's it to you, Potter?"

"Can't it just be natural curiosity?"

Draco laughed, and the dry grass stirred with his breath. "Or you want me out of your way."

"I don't," Harry said evenly, "want you out of my way."

Draco's gaze scanned Harry quickly. In the pale light, his lashes were the same color as the dry straw, his hair a few shades lighter and his skin lighter still. Harry remembered the Draco of his dream, older and with all the flaring curves of chin and cheek and jaw gone to hard straight lines. "I don't know," he said finally. "Sometimes I think I could. But then, sometimes I used to think I could beat you at Quidditch. I could picture it so clearly, it was like it was happening. I could feel the wind in my hair and the Snitch in my hand, me closing my fingers over it..." His voice had turned drowsy. "...you know the way it feels, when you hold it in your hand, and it beats like a heart?"

"Yes," Harry said quietly.

"Sometimes you want things so badly, you picture them so clearly, it's as if they're already real."

"And you want...Ginny?" Harry asked, utterly confused. "So you do love her."

"I want," Draco said, "to be able to love her. Sometimes I think I could. I can picture it. I think it would make me happy. But I think perhaps it's not in my nature to be happy. Happiness is simple, after all, and I've never liked anything simple."

"Happiness isn't simple," Harry said. "And I don't see why you can't love her."

"I still can't see the stars," Draco said.

"The moon's too bright," Harry said again, wondering if Draco had forgotten having had this conversation before, because he was drunk. "It blots them out."

"Exactly," Draco said.

Harry stared at him, mystified, and Draco reached out a thin hand then, and touched his hair. It was a light touch, like a leaf grazing his cheek, and a shiver passed over Harry.

He stared.

"You had straw in your hair," Draco said, and pulled his hand back.

"Oh," Harry said. "Well, thanks."

"I would have thought happiness would be simple for you," Draco said quietly. "You know who you love."

There was another silence as Harry tried to puzzle out what Draco meant. How could anyone *not* know who they loved? Love was like pain; you didn't not know when you felt it, any more than you could miss having stepped on a carpet tack. "If you mean Hermione," Harry said, "it's like I said in the letter I wrote to her when I left Hogwarts. I've always -"

He broke off then, not because Draco had made any noise to interrupt him, but because Draco had somehow interrupted him with his *silence* - in a way Harry could not have explained, he had felt the explosion of something inside Draco, a burst of bright realization followed by a sudden terrible tension. He turned to look at Draco, whose eyes were very wide, his mouth half-open.

"What letter to Hermione?" Draco said.

Part Two - The Wood of Thorns

"*What* letter to Hermione?" Draco said.

Harry stiffened and bit his lip. "Look, I know you said you didn't want to talk about the letters, but -"

"Letter," Draco interrupted. His tone was cold and precise. "Not *letters*. I didn't say anything about not wanting to talk about any letters you may or may not have written to people *other* than me."

"Yeah, well." Harry got to his feet, the mood of closeness between them irrevocably spoiled for him. "Every time I bring up those fucking letters, you go mental, so no thanks, Malfoy. Just drop it."



Draco stood up quickly, if what he was doing could be said to be *standing* - he was alert, poised on the balls of his feet, like a cat ready to pounce. His eyes were feverishly bright. "I want to know," he said. "I have to know. You wrote Hermione a letter? What did you do with it? Where did you leave it?"

"With yours," Harry said stiffly.

Color was coming and going in Draco's face in bright shifting tides. "And what did it say?"

"That," Harry said, "is none of your business." He turned, unable to look at Draco. An irrational rage was building inside him - so many times he'd tried to talk to Draco about that stupid letter, and Draco had behaved as if Harry had just performed an Unforgivable Curse on his pet owl. Now, suddenly, Draco wanted to talk about it, wanted to make Harry break the promise he himself had elicited.

Well, fuck him.

"It's private," Harry said - and felt his arm seized and jerked back as Draco spun him around so they were facing each other. Draco's cold fingers burned against his arm, five slim, icy wands digging into the skin. "It *is* my business," Draco said. His voice shook, like a violin string wound so tight that it vibrated at the slightest touch. "It is very much my business, Potter, so tell me, tell me right now -"

"No," Harry said. "That letter was for Hermione. If she didn't show it to you, she must have had her reasons."

Draco's hands were balled so tightly into fists at his sides that the skin looked translucent. "Sure, she had a reason," he said. "The reason that *she never got any bloody letter because you never bloody wrote one* -"

"Of course I wrote one!" Harry yelled, losing his head completely. "I can't lie to you - and why would I even bother? It's none of your fucking business in the first place if I write a letter to my girlfriend, it's nothing to do with you -"

Draco laughed, unpleasantly, a sound of bitter amazement. "You don't get it, do you?" he said. "You and your letters - and all your lies about loyalty

and friendship and *caring about people* and all that cant, it's just words to you, isn't it, everyone's always loved you, the whole world loves you, and whatever I could give you, it was nothing to you, just one drop in the ocean of how much everyone loves you - nothing special, nothing different, nothing you couldn't do without." He spoke with a rapid despairing intensity as if it no longer mattered *what* he said, or how he said it. As if nothing mattered anymore. "And how do you think it feels to know that the one person in the whole fucking world that you can't do without, can do just fine without you?"

The one person in the world you can't do without - Harry stared, his rage turning to frustration. "How can you say that? How can you even think that for one second, that I can do just fine without you?"

Draco was breathing hard, his cheeks flushed scarlet despite the cold. "Because," he said, "you *said so*."

"When? When the hell did I ever say that?"

"In your letter," Draco said simply, and, taking a much-creased, much-folded, and worn-to-the-point-of-translucency piece of parchment out of his shirt pocket, he slammed it up against Harry's chest. "If you forgot what you said - go ahead and read it. While you're standing here looking at me. Read it right now."

"Save her life?" Lucius said. "What on earth would I want to do that for?"

Tom gazed at him through lidded eyes. He was clearly in pain. Lucius knew what Tom in pain looked like; he had seen Tom through innumerable agonizing magical transformations during which the very bones inside his skin had melted and transformed. Clearly, now, Tom was barely able to keep himself upright and was in considerable agony.

A small blossom of excitement began to unfurl inside Lucius' stomach.

"I need you to save her life," Tom said, "because if she dies, I die. We are linked." He looked down at the girl in his arms, and a peculiar expression twisted his features: there was loathing in it, and a strange exultation. "We

are joined, she and I, by an indissoluble bond. What death divides, it will destroy."

"Is that so?" said Lucius. He turned away from Tom, hiding his expression, and began to make a pretense of looking for his wand among the objects on his desk. His heart was beating fast. Never had Tom come to him like this before, never in the Manor, where Lucius was at his most powerful... "How peculiar."

Tom moaned. Lucius turned, wand in hand, to see that Tom had slid to his knees. He still cradled the girl against his chest, his head bent over her, the pale strands of his hair mixing with her scarlet. There was blood on the front of his shirt, the cuffs; a great deal of blood. Lucius wondered how much of it was Ginny's; he could not see much blood on her, only some in her hair, and splashed on the white column of her throat. They made a strange Pieta, the murdering boy with the unconscious girl in his arms.

Tom glanced up as Lucius turned away from the desk. His lips were drawn back from his teeth in a snarl. "Hurry, Lucius, you fool - what are you waiting for?"

Lucius twirled the wand between his fingers - and saw, as clearly as if it were that very moment, the figure of a boy, dark and slender, twirling a wand between slim, pale fingers, and smiling - and oh, that smile, so disdainful and so arrogant, admitting of no flaw, no weakness...

"Lucius!" Tom's bark ended in a bubbling cough. "Attend to her! Can't you see she's dying?"

"Oh, yes," Lucius said. "I can see that very clearly." The wand spun between his fingers. Tom's eyes on him were very blue. Lucius gazed beyond him, seeing and feeling the Manor all around him, its power wedded to his, its magic running in his blood. *I am the Master of Malfoy Manor, Lucius thought, and this ruined boy on his knees before me, is nothing more than a shell of what he was ...*

Lucius raised his wand, pointed it; Tom's eyes widened and his grip on Ginny loosened fractionally, but Lucius was already speaking. *Exige --*

The Manor roared. Lucius stepped back hastily as the floor of the library ripped open; great sheets of stone sprang up through it, encircling Tom and Ginny and closing them instantly inside an unbreakable marble crypt.

Harry read the letter over once, then twice, then, although he felt sick, a third time. It had obviously been read many times before. The parchment was thin and the ink had blurred and there were small tears in the paper where it had been folded.

Harry held it out to Draco. "I didn't write this," he said.

Draco didn't make a move to take it. "Of course you did," he said.

"No," Harry said. He was amazed how calmly they were both speaking. As if it was an ordinary discussion, this desperate conversation here in this frozen field under a wilderness of stars. "I didn't."

"Hermione enchanted the letter," Draco said. His eyes were on Harry, a clear and lucent gray. "To identify who had written it." He paused. "It identified you."

"Some of the words are mine," Harry said. "But not in those combinations. It's as if someone came along and rearranged all the letters. Although who would have done something like that - and how it could be done - I don't know."

"You don't know," Draco said. His voice was flat, almost affectless, but Harry could see the drumbeat of pulse at the base of Draco's throat, the grim tightness to his lips. "Someone came along and changed the original letter you wrote, and wrote this instead, and you don't know how it could have happened."

"That's right," Harry said. His tone was flat, but his mind was racing - surely there must be something he could say, some words that would break down the walls upon walls that Draco had raised to protect himself from Harry. If only Draco would let him in -

"You could Veritas me," Harry said.

Draco blinked, and looked at him more narrowly. "A Truth spell?"

"That's right," Harry said.

"They hurt," Draco said.

"I don't bloody care." Harry felt himself shaking. "If it's the only way you can satisfy yourself, Malfoy -"

"*Satisfaction*," Draco hissed. "Is that what you think this is about? Some point of honor?"

"I -" Harry began indignantly, then cut himself off, knowing that there was no angry or defensive reply he could make that would force this scathed and embittered boy to accept Harry's version of events as the truth. Words were Draco's genius, not his, though Harry knew enough by now to know that this was a knife that cut two ways. Like an expert fisherman caught in his own nets, Draco snared himself easily in the traps of his own words. So brilliantly could he argue the case of Harry's guilt that even Harry could not convince him otherwise - though every word Draco spoke was a knife to his own heart.

Draco was looking away now, the muscles at the sides of his mouth knotted with strain. "I won't do it."

Then let me tell you this way, Harry said - throwing all his strength into it, all the force of his own desperation gathered to break down the barriers inside Draco's head. *I can't lie to you with my thoughts, you told me that yourself -*

"Stop it!" Draco reeled back as if Harry had hit him, the look on his face halfway between astonishment and anger. "I told you to stay out of my head."

There's no other way. If Harry had been able to really think about it, he might have been surprised at the lack of opposition he was encountering; he felt Draco pushing him away, but it was a weak resistance, as if Draco lacked the strength to really fight him. Instead, Draco staggered back away from him, as if the only possible escape from Harry was a physical one. *I didn't write that letter*, Harry told him. *I'd never seen it before you showed it to me - and I didn't write it -*

Stop it! Draco was still retreating, his face averted, hands flung up as if to ward Harry off. *Stop -*

I would never have said any of those things, I don't think a single one of them are true. You know what the real letter said? What I really wrote? Do you want to know?

Draco froze. He was still looking away from Harry, but at least he no longer seemed to be fleeing. Shivering, he drew the ragged edges of his cloak closer around him. Feeling almost invisible, Harry said:

I told you I couldn't stand to leave you, that it was the greatest punishment I could imagine for myself, doing this without you. I said you had taught me what it meant to put your faith in someone, to let that faith make you brave -

In the distance the sky had begun to lighten. And as Harry spoke, Draco tensed all over, like a troll or a night-elf turned to stone by the sun's first rays. Harry began to wonder if he would ever move again.

And I said - I said that the thought of you, would guide me home.

At that, Draco did move - on the sound of a sharp indrawn breath, he raised his head, and stared at Harry. His hand fell away from his cloak, and the cloak, released, fell open, and showed the base of his throat where a hard pulse beat like a live thing under the skin, struggling to get out. His eyes looked very dark in his face, as if they had drunk up the sky's indigo and it had turned them black. "Is that true?" he said, wonderingly, and for once there was no artifice in his voice and no distance.

"You know it is," Harry said. "And there's more -"

"No." Draco shook his head. "I don't need to hear it. Harry, you -"

"I remember every word," Harry said.

"Yes," Draco said, and then, "You must have wondered - wondered why I was so angry after I'd read it."

"I don't know," Harry said, "I thought maybe you'd thought it was - a bit too much."

For a moment Draco stood where he was, very still, and then he began to shake. Frightened, Harry took a step towards him, and only then did he realize that Draco was laughing - a hiccupy, startled sort of laughing. "Potter - " he said, between hiccups, "*you're* a bit too much."

Harry blinked at him in astonishment - sometimes he really did wonder if Draco was a bit mad. "So you can tear this up, then?" he said, and held the letter out though Draco didn't take it, jut stared at it. There was a look on his face Harry recognized. He'd seen it on Fred and George's faces when he handed them that bag of gold at the end of fourth year. He'd seen it on Hermione's face when she'd realized he hadn't died in the bottomless pit outside Malfoy Manor. It was a look of bewildered gratitude.

"You didn't write it," he said. "You really didn't write it?"

"Of course I didn't write it," Harry said, suddenly weary of the whole thing, "and what could ever have possessed you to think that I had - why I would ever say those things -"

"You left," Draco said.

He said it very quietly, and without accusation, but it stopped Harry in his tracks. Two words only, but Harry felt them like painful lacerations.

"You said you weren't going to leave," Draco said. "But you left - without even telling me you were going." A faint pinkish tinge had risen to stain his cheeks, and Harry was reminded of the earliest times he had ever seen Draco blush, and had enjoyed it, taking it as appreciated proof of the other boy's discomfiture and pain. "And I know how I sound -" Draco added, with a faint familiar snarling curl to the edge of his mouth, "-and I know how little it matters in the face of everything. I mean, you're not just anyone. Your promises aren't anyone's promises. I know that better than almost anyone. The safety of the wizarding world rests on you. And that always has to come first." He shrugged, a poised and weary gesture. "You wouldn't be you if it didn't."

"I couldn't take you with me," Harry said. "You were ill. You could hardly walk."

Draco's eyes darkened. "I'm walking now - aren't I?"

"Well, yes," Harry said. "But that's because you're cured."

A faint wash of color spread across Draco's face. For some reason it reminded Harry of the time Hermione had slapped him, and the red mark of her hand had stayed on his cheek for several minutes. "Cured, of course," he said. "But you didn't know that at the time, did you?"

"I did actually," Harry said, half-apologetically. "I heard them talking - Snape and Dumbledore, that night I left - after you fell asleep. They were talking about the antidote. And it was just after - " He broke off, trying to gather the words to explain what he wanted to say. He had never been good at explaining the intangible; that was Draco's department. "You know," he said, "how sometimes you make bargains with God, or Fate, or whatever, inside your head, that if God will just do this one thing for you, if this one thing can just be made to happen, you'll do whatever - whatever you have to do?"

He broke off. Draco was looking at him with an odd steadiness. "I know about bargaining with God," he said.

"Well, I made a bargain with God in my head that night - that night that I left," Harry said. "That if an antidote could be found for you, I'd go away, on my own, not risk any more lives, leave the rest of you to be safe. Stop being selfish."

Draco's lips parted in astonishment. "You did *what?*"

"So when I heard Snape tell Dumbledore they'd found an antidote for you, it was a like a message - after that, I *had* to go. And I knew if I waited, you'd convince me I was wrong, because you're much better at convincing than I am. And then I would bring you with me and something *would* happen to you - you'd be hurt, or killed - and I'd know it was my fault, because it would have been. I'd given my word, you see -"

"My God, Potter," Draco said in a terrible voice. Then he turned and walked away. It took Harry several moments before he realized that Draco

wasn't just pacing while he thought, he was well and truly stalking off into the underbrush between the trees. Harry blinked a moment, then plunged after him.

The forest grew high and thickly enough that the ground between the trees was largely bare. Roots as thick as a dragon's tail snaked over and under each other, buckling the half-frozen ground. Shafts of weak wintry light pierced the darkness at rare intervals. Between the shafts of light, Harry could see Draco. He was standing between two arched tree roots, at the base of a stunted oak. Harry remembered another forest, another year, the sky lit up with a green death's head and Draco twirling his wand in the trees' shadows. *Mudbloods and Muggles first.*

"You running away, Malfoy?" Harry asked, trying to sound as light as possible, under the circumstances. "You haven't made it very far."

"Story of my life," said Draco, with a pure, undiluted bitterness. Overhead, leaves rustled in the icy wind. Scattered dawn light caught the strands of his hair as they blew across his face, dull ivory threaded with silver. He didn't move to push them out of his eyes. "I suppose there ought to be some sort of aphorism for an occasion like this. Something in Latin perhaps. I can't for the life of me think of one, though."

Harry took a step forward into the clearing. Dead leaves rattled under his feet, and the bones of some small woodland animal, stripped bare and white, clanked together where he had kicked them. He shuddered a little - *This place feels like death.* "Come on." He held out a hand to Draco. "We still have a long way to go."

"You have no idea," Draco said. He raised his head, looked around the clearing. "Nothing ever changes between us, does it, Potter?"

"How can you say that? Everything's changed between us."

"You always get the best of me, don't you? Every time I think I've got the limits of you figured out, you do some incredible, stupid, *Gryffindor* thing." The bitterness had gone from his voice, and now he just sounded defeated. "You know, it was easier there for a while to think you hated me. Because then -"

"Because then *what?*"

"Because then there was less to want to live for," Draco said. His eyes seemed the only light thing in the shadows, bright as coins in the darkness.

"There's nothing wrong with wanting to live," Harry said with some bewilderment. "Look, come on out of there. We can talk while we're walking."

Draco's mouth curled up at the corner. "*Veritas vos liberat,*" he said. "There, I've thought of it. Although, it's funny - I don't feel very free." He began to walk towards Harry, his hands in his pockets, his booted feet kicking up the dried corpses of leaves. There were more white bones under them. A strange prickle of apprehension ran up Harry's spine. "Do you want me to translate?"

"I doubt I could stop you," Harry said.

"It means," Draco said, and he had come close enough now that Harry could see the morbid, scintillant amusement in his eyes, "that the truth will -"

He did not finish his translation. There was a sudden loud noise, as of tearing earth, and a wide black pit opened up in the ground exactly where Draco was walking. Caught between one step and the next, Draco pitched forward into it, vanishing without a sound.

"*Crucio,*" the Dark Lord hissed.

Nothing happened.

Wormtail looked astounded. Voldemort merely narrowed his eyes, and tried again. "*Crucio!*"

Nothing continued to happen. Hermione stood where she was, blinking, her mouth slightly open, clearly in no pain. Ron remained frozen, his heart beating hard against the inside of his ribcage. His instinct was to fly to Hermione and protect her - but against what? She seemed fine.

Wormtail cleared his throat. "Perhaps if you stood a little to the left, Master -"

Voldemort shot his servant a look of icy death. "Do you think I do not know how to cast a simple Excruciating Bane, Wormtail?"

Wormtail looked from Hermione to the Dark Lord, and said nothing.

"It is as I surmised," Voldemort went on, stepping closer to Hermione, who shrank back. "She is protected."

Wormtail's eyebrows went up. "Protected by what, Master?"

"By the Fourth Worthy Object," Voldemort said. "By the Cup. Clearly she carries it on her person, for it conveys upon the bearer the blessing of immunity from curses." He smiled at Hermione, never a pleasant sight. "I shall give you one chance, then, little girl," he said. "I know you have the Cup. Give it to me."

Hermione tossed her damp hair back and glared at him defiantly. "Certainly not," she said.

"You're not denying you have it?"

Hermione pressed her lips together. "I'm not giving you anything," she said. "You can't hurt me. You just said so."

"I can lock you away in a windowless dungeon and leave you to starve, then remove the Cup from your corpse," Voldemort pointed out.

"Then go ahead," Hermione said.

"The Cup will likely protect her even then, Master," said Rhysenn, from her place on the floor. She had taken a gold comb in the shape of a butterfly out of her hair, and was toying idly with it. "It has powers beyond the ken of humankind."

"Beyond the ken of humankind," Hermione muttered. "Who *talks* like that?"

"I am not," Voldemort said, "humankind." He turned his snake's gaze on Hermione again. "I may not be able to harm you," he said, "but I can harm

those you love. How would you like to see your friend here -" and he gestured at Ron, "-tortured, disemboweled, gutted before your very eyes? How would you like to dance to the music of his screams -"

"You can't hurt him, either," Hermione said, looking bored. "You need him just like you need the Cup. He's as necessary a tool as the knife or the mirror -"

"I am *not* a tool," Ron muttered.

" - Because without his blood," Hermione went on, shooting a quelling gaze at Ron, "and the transformative power of his Divining abilities, the Four Worthy Objects can never come together to form the Tetragrammaton. Only Ron's blood can bind them. You can't even torture him," Hermione added, with a clinical detachment that Ron found disheartening. "You need his mind whole. If he goes mad, he's not a Diviner anymore."

"I could torment him merely to the point of madness -"

"Ron's madness point is pretty low," Hermione said. "He's a wimp, really."

"I am not -" Ron began indignantly.

Hermione glared. "Yes, you are. All the Dark Lord would have to do is poke you with a toothpick and you'd go absolutely barking."

"I wouldn't."

"You would too."

Rhysenn chuckled aloud.

Hermione fixed her with an angry gaze. "That's right, laugh," she said. "You're the one who told me that the Dark Lord couldn't hurt Ron in the first place -"

Voldemort emitted a shout of rage, and whirled on Rhysenn. She cowered back, suddenly as white as her white dress. "You! Lucius' pet!" he spat.

He lifted his wand. Rhysenn raised her left hand as if to protect her face, the butterfly ornament she had been clutching tumbling to the floor. Ron

could not repress a sudden surge of sympathy for her. He started forward

-

And a cultured cough broke the silence. "Master," said a familiar, drawling voice. "Has my servant done something to displease you? If so, let me have the disciplining of her. I would not want you to trouble yourself," Lucius added, and took another step forward into the room, as silently and gracefully as he had entered it. He was dressed richly in dark green robes, and a small smile hovered around the edges of his sharply sculpted mouth. "Not," he said, "when I have such good news for you..."

The crypt Lucius had made had walls as smooth and hard as marble; Tom had bloodied his knuckles on one of them. It had been a short outburst of rage, and futile. He was too weak to cast the kind of spell that might have broken down the enchanted walls, and with every passing moment he grew weaker still.

The bitterness of Lucius' betrayal was like acid in his mouth. It was not that he thought that Lucius had cared for him, nothing like that, but Lucius had *belonged* to him. It was as if his own dog had turned and bitten him. Of course, when he had been a child, a stray puppy *had* bitten him. Later he'd broken the mutt's neck and left it dead in the street. If only he could break Lucius' neck in similar fashion - but such pleasant fantasies were denied him by his own ebbing strength. He had not the energy for hatred. Not when all his strength was bent on the girl in his arms, on holding and keeping the fragile mortal spirit inside her alive, one moment at a time.

In the darkness he sat still as a stone, holding Ginny in his arms. He could feel the tenuous life inside her, the slight rise and fall of her chest, the beat of her blood. He could feel it ebbing outward, like the tide pulling away from the shore. With all his strength, he willed it to stay. He had never learned healing magic; he had never wanted to. Only spells to hurt and to crush and to destroy. He could no more hold her life inside her than he could turn back all the tides of the world. And so he sat, and held her, and waited for her death, that would bring his own.

When Ginny's eyes fluttered open, the first thing she saw was clear blue sky, rising high above her. The unmistakable, cloudless sky of midsummer.

She sat up slowly, looking down at herself in surprise. No blood, no visible wounds on her body - and she was wearing a long dress, of a very pale, peachy pink, the sort of dress she'd never pick out herself. It had a lace hem, and there were small pink sandals on her feet. Ginny blinked, baffled - the last thing she remembered (and she remembered it very clearly) was hurling herself over the balcony at the Parkinson's house, watching the hard polished floor flying up to meet her. The crunch of bone as she struck. Pain and blackness.

There had been a voice in the blackness, too, whispering to her. *Wake up, Ginny. Wake up.* A familiar voice, dark and sweet, threaded through halting breaths. *Ginny, wake up.*

Well, she thought to herself. I'm awake now.

She stood up, the long dress fluttering around her bare legs. She was standing in the middle of a flat, grassy meadow that stretched away behind her. The grasses were thickly sprinkled with wildflowers: bluebells big as a fist, sprays of golden amaryllis, lush violets. Rising in the distance was a castle - but not a castle like ancient Hogwarts, or Slytherin's dire fortress. This castle looked like a birthday cake, all silvery-white, with big gold spires and glowing, stained-glass windows.

Ginny blinked again. "Crikey," she muttered under her breath. "Where *am* I?" It was odd - wherever she was, she had the nagging feeling she'd been here before. But surely she'd remember a place like this. She turned away from the castle, looked behind her - and froze.

Someone was coming towards her through the wildflowers. Someone tall and blond and lanky, dressed in a ruffled white shirt, tight black trousers, and knee-high shiny black boots. Someone whose familiar gray eyes lit up as he saw her - saw her and rushed through the flowers to gather her up in his arms.

"Ginny!" Draco cried. "My Ginny, my darling - thank heavens you're safe!"

Slowly, Voldemort lowered his wand. "Good news?"

He sounded, Ron thought, as if he were identifying a particularly bizarre and unusual species of plant.

Lucius glanced from Ron to Hermione, frowned in distaste, and returned his attention to the Dark Lord. "Yes, Lord, good news. I have identified the wizard who has killed so many of your supporters."

A frown line appeared between Voldemort's brows. "Is he known to me?"

"One might say that," Lucius replied, flicking an invisible speck of dust from his sleeve. Ron could not help but be reminded of Draco. In many ways he and his father were very much alike.

"That is, certainly, significant, Lucius," Voldemort said. "However, it must wait. At the moment I am trying to retrieve the Cup from this wretched Mudblood girl. She proves resistant to torture."

"Ah." Lucius' eyes raked Hermione; he looked bored. "That is because she is wearing the Cup on her belt."

Wormtail gave a high, nasal gasp. Hermione went white. Even Voldemort looked startled. Only Rhysenn did not react; she was staring at Lucius with a sort of desperation that made Ron feel profoundly uncomfortable.

"I don't see anything!" Wormtail exclaimed in his unpleasantly squeaky voice. "Just -"

"Ah," Voldemort interrupted, ignoring his sputtering minion, "the flask, is it, Lucius?"

"I should say so," Lucius said. "Clearly she has Transfigured it. Clever - and quite difficult. It takes a high level of magic to Transfigure a Worthy Object."

Hermione's hands flew to her waist. Ron knew immediately what she was trying to conceal: the bright silver flask he had noted there earlier, with its dark blue stopper. "Don't touch me!" she shrieked. "Don't you -"

"Silence!" Voldemort's hand flew out like a striking snake, bright lines of light lashing from his fingertips. Hermione screamed as her belt snapped open and slithered through the loops on her jeans, writhing like a live thing. The flask tumbled free and sailed through the air. Voldemort caught it expertly, his long white fingers closing around it.

He laughed aloud. "I see," he said. "Ingenious, yes..." He tapped it with the tip of his finger and murmured, "*Revelatus*,"; the flask shuddered, and reformed with the suddenness of a toad turning into a teapot in McGonagall's class. Suddenly it was the Cup Ron remembered having stolen from the museum on that class trip so long ago. Hermione let out a strangled cry and lowered her face into her hands.

"Beautiful," Voldemort murmured. "Beautiful..." He turned to Wormtail. "Go and prepare the Great Chamber for the ceremony of the Tetragrammatron, Wormtail. As for the girl..." His narrowed eyes raked Hermione. "She is of no further use. Kill her."

"Yes, my Lord," Wormtail replied.

"No!" Ron shouted and lunged forward, trying to put himself between Hermione and the Dark Lord. He didn't get far - Voldemort swung his wand towards Ron and hit him with a savage Stupefying curse. It was like being cracked across the back of the neck with a Beater's bat. Ron fell stunned to the floor as Wormtail raised his silvered hand with a vicious grin, pointed it towards Hermione -

"Wait, my Lord," Rhysenn protested suddenly. "It would be best not to kill the girl in front of the Diviner. It might unhinge his mind." Voldemort looked uncertain; Rhysenn glided smoothly to her feet, and over to Hermione. "I will do it," she said.

Voldemort appeared to hesitate.

"It might be best, my Lord," Lucius said. "Wormtail will only botch the job and let her get away."

"True." Voldemort waved a hand at Rhysenn. "Finish her, then. Outside."

Rhysenn nodded, then snapped her fingers, and Hermione was pulled to her feet as if on strings. "Walk," Rhysenn demanded, and Hermione began to shuffle towards the door, her eyes blank and staring.

Ron could not even cry out. He felt as if his tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth as Rhysenn propelled Hermione to the door and then out of it. Hermione glanced back, once at Ron, before the door shut behind her. She looked strangely calm, almost happy. Ron closed his eyes.

For several long moments, Ginny didn't move. Partly this was because she was immensely startled and partly, she had to admit, this was because she was enjoying the sensation of being held tightly by Draco. His arms were as strong and slender as she remembered, although the ruffles all over his shirt front and cuffs did itch, and for some reason, he reeked of magnolias.

Eventually he began to pepper her face with kisses. "My angel," he said. "I feared I had lost you."

Ginny drew back. "Really, Draco," she said. "There's no need to take the mickey." She stared. "Malfoy! What's that on your lip?"

Draco looked shifty. "What? Nothing. There's nothing on my lip."

But there was. Crawling across Draco's upper lip was what looked like a hairy blond caterpillar. Ginny gazed at it, riveted. "Malfoy," she breathed. "Have you grown a *moustache*?"

"I thought you liked the moustache!" Draco, looking upset, put his hands on his hips. Ginny noted that the trousers, which laced up in front, did not provide all the coverage one might ideally have wished. She averted her eyes - although that merely brought her gaze back to the moustache, which was no good either. It was so hard not to stare.

"I've never seen it before," she pointed out. "I'm sure I'll get used to it...eventually."

Now Draco looked testy. "Are you *sure* you're all right? You didn't fall down the stairs when the pirates attacked? Maybe hit your head or something?"

"Pirates?" Ginny abandoned herself to staring at the moustache. "No, look - the last thing I remember was being in Pansy Parkinson's house. I was fighting with Tom -"

"Tom? Who's Tom?" Draco stared at Ginny. Ginny stared at Draco's moustache. She was more confused than she could ever remember being.

"Tom *Riddle*," she said. "Only the most evil wizard who ever lived."

"The most evil wizard who ever lived is the Dark Wizard Morgan," said Draco in a tone of great superiority. "Poor darling. You must have hit your head during the battle." He suddenly lunged at her and swept her up in his arms like a storybook heroine, with the ease of someone who'd done it dozens of times before. "Never fear, dearest," he declared as he started back towards the castle. "Your Tristan is here to take care of you."

Ginny goggled. *Tristan?* she thought, disbelievingly. She only knew one Tristan - and he didn't exist. Or at least, not really. Only between the pages of a book.

But then, she'd known the pages of a book to come alive before.

She raised her head from Tristan's shoulder and gazed around the meadow one more time. Suddenly she remembered why she thought she'd seen this place before. She had seen it before - the meadow, the wildflowers, even the boy and girl embracing, his blond hair tangling with her scarlet locks - of *course* she'd seen it all before.

On the cover of *Passionate Trousers*.

"*Malfoy!*" Forgetting his trepidation, Harry raced forward and spun in a circle, staring around him. He saw nothing - the clearing was empty. Leaves rattled like dry bones, and the dry bones under them cracked beneath his feet as if he were standing on ice. The sky high, high above the

trees mocked him with its frost-blue emptiness. Harry cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted. "MALFOY!"

No sound answered him. There was no birdsong here, no rustle of forest animals - the place was a tomb of sickening silence. Harry imagined he could hear his own heart beating, a rapid staccato like Muggle gunfire. *"Malfoy!"*

When Draco answered him, it took Harry a moment to realize that the answering, itself, was silent. *Could you not yell like that?*

Harry spun around again; the clearing was still empty. "Where are you? What happened?"

I'm not sure, exactly. Draco's mental voice sounded as bewildered as Harry felt. *I stepped on something funny - a tree root maybe - and then the ground just opened up and dropped me about six feet down.*

You didn't make a sound, Harry replied, and shivered. *I thought -*

Yes, well, I was yelling like Millicent Bulstrode that time she walked in on Neville Longbottom alone in the Herbology classroom rolling around naked with those Fluttering Ferns. Not my fault you're deaf.

"Neville had a perfectly good explanation for that!"

I'm just reporting what I heard, Potter. Draco sounded amused, and for a moment Harry relaxed - he had forgotten what it was like to have this other, living presence in his head, comforting and yet familiar as his own self.

Look, Malfoy, you have to tell me where you are, so we can get you out.

I don't know where I am, Draco said crossly. *It's a sort of dirt cell or a cube, bare walls with roots poking through. I can see light way above my head. It's a little lighter down here than it is in the Slytherin dungeon. More consistently decorated, too.*

Really? Harry had begun to pace the clearing, sunk in thought.

Oh, yes. The Slytherin dungeon is this ridiculous mixture of period Victorian furnishings and Restoration sensibility. Not to mention the Classical vases - I've told Snape several times that they have no place whatever in a -

I MEANT, can you really see light?

Oh. Draco subsided. I can, yes.

And you stepped on a tree root? Is that what you think happened? Some sort of - trigger?

That's what I think, yes, Draco began, then added, suddenly alarmed, But that doesn't mean you should -

Don't try to protect me, Malfoy. I can take my own risks, Harry said. He was eyeing a large tree root with an appraising gaze. It humped up out of the ground at an odd and twisted angle, far from the surrounding trees. He raised his foot.

Draco sounded panicked. Potter, I'm not trying to -

Harry brought his foot down, hard, on the root. It sank into the ground, tipping him forward. He stumbled and toppled over, a cry of startled surprise torn from his throat as the world turned itself upside down. A moment of falling and he hit hard-packed dirt with a bone-jarring thud. He rolled with the fall, as he'd been taught to do in Quidditch, and fetched up at Draco's feet.

Draco looked furious. There was dirt smeared on his cheek, and a rip in the shoulder of his cloak where a branch had poked through. "- protect you," he finished, and glowered.

Harry blinked and sat up. The cell was as Draco had described it - small and square, its dirt walls snagged with branches. They grew so thickly across the walls, especially the wall just beside Draco, that no dirt was visible through them. "Protect me what?"

Draco shook his head, more in sorrow than in anger. "You really do have a tiny, tiny brain, don't you Potter? I swear, there are species of kelp out there that could probably beat you at chess."

Harry took his wand out of his pocket, and shook dirt off it. "Ron beats me at chess."

"My point is proved," Draco said. "I was saying, though it hardly matters now, that I wasn't trying to protect you. It's just that we're both stuck down here now. Makes the possibility of rescue more remote, you see."

"That's true." Harry raised his wand, and pointed it at the thick net of branches covering the wall beside Draco. "*Nullus veneficium ager*," he said. The branches trembled for a moment, then seemed to wither away and vanish. Behind them was a gaping black hole in the wall, wide as a doorway. It led away into blackness. Harry slid his wand back into his pocket. "Let's go," he said.

Draco was smiling, just a little, with the right side of his mouth. "Then again, perhaps you do have your uses."

"Yeah," said Harry. "I've been told that."

"Put me DOWN!" Ginny yelled, for the fifth or sixth time, as Tristan trudged placidly under a huge portcullis and through a set of tremendous double doors and into the castle.

"Not until we are well within the castle walls, my sweet," he replied.

Ginny began to pound on his back.

She continued to pound as they wound down long corridors, through an arched doorway whose panels were chased with pearls and silver, and into a sumptuously decorated grand drawing room. The walls were papered in cherry-colored watered silk, the windows hung with tasseled gold drapes. There were rosewood chaise longues scattered at intervals around the room, each upholstered in a deep jewel-toned velvet. Sprawled on one of them was a young man with long black hair, dressed in burgundy satin. A foam of white lace spilled from his wrists as he sat up. He stared at Tristan, who had just dumped Ginny unceremoniously onto a pink chaise and was trying not to pant.

"Cor," he said, with some interest. "Did she try to run away *again*?"

"Not at all," said Tristan. "She became lost while out plucking flowers in the meadow."

"You know what they say, Tris," said the dark-haired boy. "If you love something, set it free. If it doesn't come back to you, hunt it down and chop its head off." He chortled to himself, green eyes sparkling. It was only then that Ginny recognized him. He was Harry - a very different Harry. Harry as he might have been if the Malfoys had raised him, perhaps, vain and spoilt. Although it wasn't as if Harry had been raised by good, kind people anyway, Ginny reflected. Perhaps he simply had a core of goodness and kindness in him that outside evils could not touch. This boy, however, clearly did not. There was a nasty glint in his eye as he looked at Tristan.

"Don't start, Sebastian," Tristan sighed. *Sebastian*. Ginny tried desperately to remember his function in the book, but couldn't. Perhaps she had been drunk with Blaise when she'd read that part.

There was a step on the stair then, and Ginny craned her head to see who was descending the gold spiral staircase above them. It was a woman - she caught sight of a long, shapely leg terminating in a red stiletto heel. As the woman reached the foot of the stairs, her full splendor was revealed. Long and ink-black hair, a red leather corset and black garter belt decorated with a pattern of gold wasps, a thick gold choker around her slender throat. Rhysenn Malfoy, Ginny knew. And also -

"Lady Stacia," Sebastian cried, leaping eagerly to his feet.

Stacia waved a slim hand at him. "Relax, Sebastian," she purred. "It is not yet time for your daily spanking."

Meekly, Sebastian subsided back onto the chaise from which he had sprung. Ginny noticed that Tristan was also gazing at Rhysenn-Stacia with his mouth open. She felt a flash of annoyance. Even in a romance novel, Draco still couldn't be bothered to pay attention to her, and only to her. "Really, Tristan," she snapped.

He jumped, then looked petulant. "You should talk," he said. "After that incident with Sven..."

"I couldn't help it,' Ginny said, no longer knowing whether she spoke as herself, or Rhiannon. "There's just something about a pirate... "

"Well, he was hardly the last of them, was he?" Tristan said hotly. Ginny realized she rather liked him angry - he seemed more like Draco that way. In fact, if she looked away from his upper lip -

Ginny snapped her fingers, and pointed at Tristan. "You!" she announced. "Go and shave, this instant."

Tristan opened his mouth to protest, then seemed to think better of it. He stalked from the room. After a moment Sebastian got up and followed him, looking shifty. Ginny had no time to spare for him, however. She turned on Lady Stacia and glared at her accusingly. "You know," she said, "if I'm going to hallucinate *Passionate Trousers*, it seems unfair that you should be in my hallucination. You're my least favorite character."

"I know," said Lady Stacia, cherry lips curving into a grin. "But this isn't a hallucination, pet. At least, not exactly."

"Then what is it?"

"You are dying," said Stacia. "Your body is suffering, bleeding out its life. Your dreaming mind lives its own struggle, fighting to make peace with itself, to find a kind of sense in your life. To discover a last meaning which might carry you across that final breach."

"When Draco died," Ginny said, "he saw a river."

"He was murdered," said Rhysenn. "He saw the lands of the unavenged and slaughtered. You have taken your own life, in good cause. It is a noble death you will find."

Ginny looked around helplessly. "And this - this is the way my mind is trying to make sense of my death? With *Passionate Trousers*?"

Rhysenn examined her nails. "Each must find his or her own meaning, I suppose," she said. "Besides, the meaning you found in that book was only the meaning you gave it. The characters were what you dreamed into them. A Draco who would love you forever and for all time. A Ginny brave enough to fight for love, to find adventure -"

Ginny was shaking her head, red curls flying. "Tristan isn't Draco," she protested.

Stacia lowered her hand and smiled a thin and curling smile. "He is what you always wanted Draco to be, isn't he?" she said. "It seems likely you will not live to see the real Draco again. So why scorn this last comfort? This is meant to be what you always wanted, after all."

"But it's not," Ginny said. "It's ridiculous."

"Perhaps you don't know what you want," Stacia suggested, flicking the tip of her whip idly against her boot. "Concentrate, dearest. What is it you want more than anything else? What is your happiest memory, the greatest day or night of your life?"

Ginny half-closed her eyes, lulled by the snakelike rhythm of Stacia's voice. "Well, there was one night, I thought - but it didn't turn out the way I wanted in the end."

Stacia reached forward and chucked Ginny under the chin. "Now it can, dear - now it can."

As soon as the door shut behind Hermione, Voldemort turned to Wormtail. "Take hold of the Diviner," he snapped. "I do not want him trying to rush after the girl when his strength returns." Avidly, Wormtail bent and seized Ron tightly by the arms and yanked him upright. Ron was astonished at the strength of Wormtail's metal hand. The grip on his arms felt like hot bands of iron were contracting around his skin.

Voldemort eyed Ron thoughtfully, then glanced at Wormtail. "The boy, also, must be prepared for the Ceremony. His blood is required."

He needs your blood, Rhysenn had told him. Lucius glanced at Ron with slight interest. "Will the ceremony require all his blood?" he asked.

"It hardly matters," said Voldemort. "If he is in the room when the Ceremony is performed, he will die regardless. There are magics too powerful for any human being to experience and survive. This is one of them." His tone was indifferent. "It is the death I had planned for Harry

Potter. It is only fitting he meet his end while watching me ascend to ultimate power."

"But Harry isn't here," Ron said. His body still felt board-stiff, but there was note of lashing triumph in his voice. "You never managed to capture him, did you?"

Voldemort slitted his red cat's eyes. "You are mistaken, Diviner. Even now Harry Potter approaches the castle. I have sensed his approach. I have seen him in the Mirror, making his way here. He is stubborn. It will not be long now."

Ron felt the look of horror that passed over his own face, though he tried to hide it. "Harry? Coming here? Alone?"

"Not alone, precisely - Lucius' son is with him," said the Dark Lord. "But he hardly poses a danger, half-dead as he is. I am not concerned. If they keep on at their present pace, they should be here by nightfall, just in time for the Ceremony." Voldemort smiled. "Let's just hope they don't find their way into the tunnels," he added. "That could conceivably delay them quite a bit. There are some nasty...nasty things down there." He licked his lips, his scarlet eyes seeming to glimmer like pools of blood. "Very nasty things."

What kind of Diviner am I, that I can't see any of this? Ron thought despairingly. *Harry - I've failed you so badly...*

The door opened then, and Rhysenn stepped through, her demon's face still and white as a mask. The front of her dress was torn, as if someone had clawed at it with desperate handsa wave of sick faintness passed over Ron. "It is done," she said. "The girl is dead."

"It's bloody dark down here, Potter. Can't you make that light any brighter?"

"No. If there's something else down here in these tunnels besides us, I don't want it to spot us before we spot it."

"Yes, much better for it to sneak up on us in the dark."

"I'd hear it. Now come on, Malfoy. Try appreciating the view or something."

"What view? We're buried underground. Then again, I suppose for someone brought up in a cupboard, this must be a scenic vista of unparalleled beauty."

"It *is* beautiful. Look at the way the walls glitter - and the stalactites, they look like they're clustered over with gems, all red, blue and green. It's like being inside a jewelry box."

"Is it?"

"You sound a bit wistful. Can't you see for yourself?"

"Of course I can. Great view. Prettier than a Polyjuice prostitute."

"What? Ow. OW! You made me walk into a stalactite, you pillock."

"Hey, I'm not the one who frequents brothels."

"I wasn't *frequenting* it. I just wound up there. It was an accident. I'm not even sure how it happened."

"Isn't that what Neville Longbottom said when Millicent caught him naked with the Pulsating Peonies?"

"Neville had a knack with plants, is all."

"I'll say."

"It just seemed like a good place to hide out."

"I wouldn't call it a *good* place. Weren't you worried someone would recognize you?"

"I think I blended in pretty well with the three dozen *other* people who all looked like Harry Potter."

"Did you try to chat with yourself?"

"No. That would have been creepy."

"I don't know. Given the opportunity, I'd probably chat myself up a bit. Wouldn't want myself to feel overlooked."

"Well, there were certainly plenty of you to chat up, if one was so inclined."

"Of course there were. I'm sure I'm a very popular choice."

"Sometimes your arrogance astounds even me. Aren't you even a *little* disgusted?"

"Like it would help if I was. So did you try to chat with *me*?"

"..."

"Oh, come on. You can tell me."

"I refuse to talk about this anymore, Malfoy."

"Well, did you -"

"No."

"Spoilsport."

The rose garden was empty and lovely under the stars, the ground dusted with a light sugar coating of snow, though the air was not cold. High stone walls blocked Ginny's view of the rest of the castle and the flowered springtime meadows that fell away from the castle and down the endless, rolling hills that surrounded it.

Seasons contradicted each other here, or seemed to, but it hardly mattered. They did what she wanted them to do. She was inside her own dreams, after all.

She smoothed down the material of the shimmering green dress she wore and glanced around the garden for the third time in as many minutes. The air here smelled of roses and woodsmoke, the sky was dusted with glassy shards of stars, and she could hear faint music coming from very far away, as she had that night so many weeks ago, sitting alone on that

bench in the rose garden, listening to the music that filtered down through the windows of the Great Hall. They always played *Greensleeves* at midnight. As if on cue, it began playing now, somewhere out in the invisible night. *Alas my love, you do me wrong.*

"But I never would," he said, a soft voice in her ear.

He had come towards her along the path of crushed shells and stones so quietly that she had not heard him approach. He stood there in front of her now, the bright moonlight clustering his pale hair with icicles, his eyes like chips of glass. He wore black, as Draco would have, the only color about him the green ring burning on his pale left hand.

She felt her hand clench tightly in her lap. "You never would what?" she asked him.

"Do you wrong," he said, and sat down on the bench beside her. Even the smell of him was the same - citrus and spices and boy-soap.

"You shaved," she said.

"Well," he said. "You asked me to."

She turned to him, hands in her lap still. In the moonlight, his pale face was a mask. Her heart flew up into her throat, for the first time since this strange dream-hallucination had begun, because suddenly he was *Draco*, in a way he had not been before. Draco, with his closed-off eyes and unreadable expression. Draco, who she loved but could never know - or perhaps, whispered a small voice in the back of her mind, you love him precisely because you cannot know him.

She pushed the voice back. "You look different," she said.

He only nodded. His hand came up and cupped her chin lightly. Her pulse quickened - this was happening too fast. She pulled away, trying to remember what they had talked about that night - they had talked about Harry, she remembered, and then she had kissed him and he had drawn back from her and she had accused him of being in love with someone else.

He sat looking at her now, blank-faced. She remembered something she had thought once about Draco: *like a beautiful, empty house...you could dream anything into him.* "I brought you a gift," he said.

She smiled, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. "Nice of you to think of me."

He didn't reply, merely reached out and dropped a small wooden box, wrapped with black ribbon, into her hand. Something about the carelessness of the gesture recalled Draco to her again, and she reached to untie the ribbon with an anticipation that nearly matched the tremulous anticipation she would have felt had this been how that night in the rose garden had truly played out...didn't it?

The box fell open. Inside was a thin chain, glittering silver. A pendant hung from it. The pendant was also silver, but a darker shade, showing its age. Words were inscribed on the back: *J'aime et j'espere.*

"I don't know what that means," Ginny said.

"It means, 'I love and I hope,'" he replied, turning to face her at last. "Can I...will you let me fasten it on you?"

She nodded, and turned, lifting up her hair, feeling his fingers light against the back of her neck as he closed the clasp. He spoke softly, into her hair, his voice nearly a whisper. "The pendant...it's been in my family for years. I wanted you to have it because - because I do love you - I think I loved you before I ever knew it. I struggled so hard to tell myself that what I felt for you wasn't love. That it was only friendship, or loneliness. But your image - that image of you I carry with me always, in the back of my mind, in my heart - it's never left me. Not for -"

She whirled on him, letting her hair fall, the pendant bouncing against her throat. "*Who are you?*"

He sat still, looking at her, a beautiful statue with blank white eyes. "Who do you want me to be?"

"Yourself," she said, her voice harsh.

He raised his face, and the bright cold air caught his hair. There were glints of icy green and frost-blue deep in his empty gray eyes, just like there were in Draco's, but she wondered, with a catch at her heart, how she could have mistaken his blankness for Draco's tightly bound restraint. So many times in her dreams she had gone over that night in the rose garden, willing it to end differently. And perhaps it was true that this had been what she wanted - tasteful gifts and halting words of love, sincerity evident in each stumbling syllable - but those were her dreams alone, they had nothing to do with Draco, the reality of him, or what he might want.

It was real love she wanted, not the trappings that made up its form. And it was Draco she wanted, his own real self, not the colors and shapes that made up his image. If she could not have that, then she did not want imitations. She wanted only herself; that would be enough.

She leaned forward and kissed him - Tristan, Draco, whoever he was - lightly on the mouth. His lips were cool and soft; it was like kissing air. When she drew back, she looked at him with pity. He was only a blank wall against which she could cast whatever shadows she might choose, after all - only a dream she had abandoned. "I'm sorry," she said.

"But you could have anything you want here," he said. His voice held the plaintive quality of the last of the childish yearnings still inside her.

"Anything you desire or imagine."

"All I want," she said, getting to her feet, "is to wake up."

She did not stay to see if he reacted; she had forgotten him already. She was already running up the path, then through the rose bushes, heedless of the thorns that tore at her legs and arms, scoring long and bleeding lines against her skin. She felt the pain but it didn't matter - her heart was pounding out the words *wake up, wake up, wake up, wake up*. Blackness fell around her; there was no more rose garden, no castle, only darkness and her own laboring breath. *Wake up. I want to wake up.*

Wake me up, Tom.

Wake me up.

There was something down in the tunnels with them. Harry had known it for some time now, though he'd tried to keep up his chatter with Draco regardless. He wondered if Draco knew, and if he didn't know, if Harry should tell him.

They had been walking for a long time now - long enough that Harry could see the occasional chink of daylight spilling down through tiny gaps in the walls of the tunnel. He saw other things, too. Shadows that oozed away from them as they approached. A hooked and spiny foot, like the leg of a giant crab, flicking away around a corner. At one point he heard a noise - a sort of wet thump followed by a long, slithering, dragging noise - that made his hair stand on end.

So far the light of his wand seemed to be keeping them away. He hoped they'd manage to get out of here before they met something that didn't mind light. Like -

Draco's hand fell on Harry's shoulder, startling him. "Potter - do you see that?"

Harry tensed all over, his hand straying towards his sword hilt. "See what?"

"That patch of light, up ahead. It's looks like - no, I'm sure it is. A gap in the rocks."

Harry squinted. Draco was right - he could see the glimmer up ahead, like light spilling around a half-opened doorway. Relief spilled through him. "Well done, Malfoy. And here I was starting to think your night vision was going," he joked.

Draco took his hand off Harry's shoulder. "I seem to be able to make out the contrast between light and dark better than I would have thought," was all he said.

Harry didn't have the inclination to follow that up; he was already walking quickly along the corridor of the tunnel, the light up ahead growing brighter and brighter as he neared it. "Let's get out of here, Malfoy, before we -"

Hands seized him, yanking him sideways, slamming him up against the tunnel wall and knocking the breath out of him. His head struck a ledge of sharp rocks and his vision exploded in stars. When his eyes cleared, he looked first for Draco, and found him, caught and held as Harry was, his arms behind his back.

The creatures that held him were vampires. Harry recognized them from the street in Prague. Here underground their dead white faces and leering red mouths were ten times more horrible. Most of them were wrapped in stained rags instead of clothes. Harry didn't want to think about what the rags might be stained with. Draco looked disgusted and angry, wincing away from the cold grips on his arms. He didn't look frightened, but then he rarely *looked* frightened. Harry was about to send out an experimental thought inquiry when a musical voice echoed down the corridor.

"Before you *what?*" It was Gabriel, approaching them, stepping nimbly around the patches of sunlight that spilled from the widening chinks in the tunnel walls. "Before you run into something you don't like?"

Unlike the others, he was dressed not in rags, but in well-cut robes. Heavy jeweled rings sparkled on his clawed fingers. Black hair hung in a sheet around his papery face and his pupilless eyes sparked.

"Once before you escaped me," he said to Harry. "Once before I was forced to return to the Dark Lord empty-handed. Not this time." He grinned a sharp-fanged grin. "I'm sure the Dark Lord won't begrudge me a little of your blood before I bring you to him," he said. "In fact, he would likely prefer you in a weakened state. As for your friend -" he jerked his head towards Draco - "I am sure you will enjoy watching us feed on him until he is dead. Although never let it be said that I am not merciful," he added. "If you like, you can close your eyes."

It was Draco, not Harry, who spoke first. Harry, fighting for breath against the rage and horror swelling in his chest, stared as Draco cleared his throat and addressed Gabriel, his tone cool and polite. "It's a good plan, except for one thing," he said. "You wouldn't want our blood - it's poisoned."

"You're lying," Ron snarled, as soon as he could speak.

Rhysenn only looked at him, her pale face marked with pity. "I am not," she said. "She lies dead in the Ceremonial Chamber. I took this," and she reached down into her sleeve and drew from it a thick gold chain, "from her lifeless body."

Ron felt his mouth fall open. It was Draco's Epicyclical Charm.

In that moment, he knew Hermione to be dead. The Charm could only be given willingly by the wearer, or taken from the wearer by force after he or she had died. It was part of the Charm's magic. And she would never have given it up willingly. Never.

Ron felt stunned and disconnected, as if he were dreaming. A great ball of rage and grief and anguish was swelling inside his chest, yet he felt curiously outside everything, as if he were floating high above it all, looking down. But when he fell... *Hermione...Hermione!*

"Ah." Lucius sounded amused. "Might I have that? I did create it, after all."

Voldemort flicked a hand at Rhysenn. "Give it to him."

As Rhysenn glided across the room toward Lucius, she passed close to Ron. For a moment, she paused, her wide black eyes fixed on him as if she were trying to tell him something. "You must understand," she murmured softly. "This is the only way."

Ron spat at her.

Rhysenn jerked back, her eyes flashing, then went across the room to Lucius. He took the Charm from her, and placed it around his own neck. "So light," he marveled. "I did not recollect it as so light."

"Your son is nearly dead, Master," said Rhysenn. "The life force flees from the Charm as his life leaves his body."

"Indeed," said Lucius. "That serves to remind me..." He turned to Voldemort. "My Lord," he said. "I do not in any way wish to hasten you. But time grows short. The man I told you of - the one who murdered your Death Eaters - he is dying."

Voldemort had returned to fondling the Cup, a greedy look on his face. "Very well, then. Let him die. Later I will feed his corpse to the ghouls in the wine cellar."

A flash of impatience passed over Lucius' face. "My Lord...this man...he may well possess something of far more worth and importance to you than a few Death Eaters -"

Voldemort stopped fondling the Cup. "He has killed my servants," he said grimly.

"Yet he may well become," said Lucius, "the greatest servant you have ever had."

Voldemort lowered the Cup, though his fingers continued to caress it. "Very well. Bring him here."

Lucius nodded and raised his hand. Then, with a decisive motion, he twisted the heavy silver ring on his finger into a single three-quarter turn.

"*Poisoned?*" Gabriel's eyes narrowed. The grip on Harry's arms loosened as the vampires conferred among themselves in unpleasant, sibilant voices. Harry, fumbling as carefully as he could for the sword at his hip, wondered what on earth was going on in Draco's head. Of all his stupid schemes, this had to be the most crackpot, the most harebrained and ridiculous -

Gabriel laughed. "Oh, you are delightful," he said. "Even if you were poisoned, mortal poisons have no effect upon *our* kind. We are not like you, who can be killed with a cut, a fever, a whisper of sickness."

"This poison," Draco said, "is different. It will kill you, too."

Despite himself, Harry was impressed - if he hadn't known better, he would have believed Draco himself. He began calculating whether there was any way for Draco to make a run for the sunlight while he held off the rest of them. Although there were so many - scores of red eyes disappearing into the darkness, row on row...

"Only sunlight can destroy me." Gabriel looked irritated now, his lip curling over his fangs. "Come here, boy." One of his clawed hands shot out like a striking snake and seized hold of Draco's arm, yanking the boy close to him. His other hand came up and traced the line of Draco's cheek, down from the corner of his eye to the angle of his jaw. Draco kept his eyes straight ahead, not looking at Harry, his response to Harry's desperate inquiries only a deadly flatness. *Just stay where you are, Potter. Just don't move.*

But Malfoy -

Just stay where you are, Harry! Draco shouted, his internal voice so loud that Harry staggered back, momentarily dazed. When he could focus his eyes again, he saw that Gabriel had drawn Draco close, one arm around the boy's back as if in the parody of an embrace, the other under Draco's chin. As Harry stared in horror, the vampire bent and sank his teeth into Draco's exposed throat.

The first thing she was conscious of was pain; the second, the taste of blood in her mouth. Ginny gasped in air, and almost fainted again at the pain that lanced through her. It felt like a dagger had been plunged into her side. *I must have broken at least one of my ribs*, she thought, and then, *Where am I?*

She was lying on something hard, her head pillowed slightly higher, her legs folded under her - she could feel shooting pains in one of her knees. Slowly, she opened her eyes- blinked, shut them, and then opened them again.

Blackness. Not darkness, but blackness. She could see nothing at all.

Terrified, Ginny cried out in terror, struggling to sit up - and felt arms suddenly come up around her, catching her by the shoulders, fingers digging in. "You're alive." In the darkness, she did not know the voice. Terror was a live thing pounding inside her chest.

"I'm blind," she whispered around the blood in her mouth. "I'm *blind*."

"No." She heard a faint scraping sound, and then, to her immense relief, light bloomed all around her, illuminating the inside of what looked like a box made of veined black marble. There were no doors in the box, and no windows. It was a crypt, without any means of escape. "You are not blind. But I thought you were dead."

She knew the voice now. Twisting away from the grip that held her shoulder, she turned to look at Tom.

He was leaning against one of the marble walls, his face intent as he stared at her. He was thickly covered in blood - his hands, his shirt, his lap, even his hair. But he seemed unwounded. With a jolt, she realized he must have been holding her as she lay unconscious. Her stomach lurched at the thought.

"You tried to kill yourself," he said. Even in the dim light, the poison-blue of his eyes was visible.

She wiped her hand across her mouth; it came away bloody. "I tried to kill *you*."

"And yourself in the process," he said. "I was impressed, Virginia." His voice was curving, serpentine. "I had always thought you to be both weak and stupid. Now I see I was only half-correct."

Tom, you sweet talker, Ginny thought wryly. "Like you care if I die," she snapped, backing as far away from him as she could get.

"If you die, I die," Tom said. "Therefore I attempted to save you." His face twisted, suddenly ugly. "Treachery prevented me. Lucius' treachery. I will kill him, slaughter him -" Tom ranted on as Ginny's thoughts whirled. Back at the Parkinson's she had wanted to die - but now, treacherously, she was glad to be alive. Not grateful to Tom for having saved her, but glad to be alive. She thought of poor, dead Pansy and felt a stab of pity. "I will boil his blood, peel his flesh from his bones, and drink from the goblet of his empty skull!" Tom finished, shouting.

"So you aren't going to kill me," Ginny said.

Tom was panting. "No, you stupid little - " He broke off. "I cannot kill you without harming myself," he said. "We are bound. My life tethered to your worthless one."

"Lucky me," Ginny said.

"If ever we escape from this crypt, you will be lucky," Tom said, his blue eyes dancing over her with a bleak amusement. "You will remain the one person in this world I cannot harm or kill. I shall have to think of another use for you."

Ginny, remembering the scene on the landing at the Parkinson's, felt herself cringe back from him. The kisses - his hands on her - there had been a sort of tortuous pleasure in it, like the pleasure of biting down on a broken tooth.

He seemed to read her mind. "Don't worry," he said, with a curling sneer. "If I raped you now, in the state you are in, it would kill you. Normally I wouldn't mind -" He laughed at the expression on her face. "-but I have hardly the strength now." He sobered, his expression blackening. "I weaken as you do - we will both die here, I expect, trapped in this vile crypt. Such a waste."

Ginny knew he didn't mean her. She also knew he was likely correct - she was still dying. Black spots danced in front of her eyes. "Tom -" she began.

But he had jerked upright, staring at the ring on his left hand. "He is calling me," he hissed. "How dare he - take hold of me, Virginia! *Take hold of me!*"

Ginny only cringed away from him. With an oath, he seized her by the wrist. She cried out, feeling the bones grind together in her hand. Then a tugging began inside her, as if she had seized hold of a Portkey. A moment later she was hurtling through space, Tom at her side.

Draco's body stiffened all over instantly, and Harry saw his arms go limp, swaying at his sides as the creature fed on him. Harry flung himself forward but the other vampires were too quick for him; he found himself being seized and dragged backward, flung to the ground. His arms were

jerked behind his back, his wrists held. All about him was the low sound of the vampires' sibilant whispers. Their laughter rose around him -

And abruptly stopped. In its place rose a discordant hissing of startlement and fear. The grip on Harry's wrists loosened and he managed to pull himself up to his knees, chafing his bloodied wrists and staring with the rest of them, unable to believe what he was seeing.

Gabriel had pulled back; Draco himself was standing upright, pale but steady on his feet. Harry could see the puncture wounds on his throat, dark as blood-drops but there *was* no blood - Draco's shirt was torn where the vampire had clawed it with long nails, but there was no blood there either - and Gabriel himself was on his knees, his puffed and distended face turning black, his razored hands tearing at his own throat.

Draco was looking down on him, his gray eyes flat as mirrors. "I told you," he said. "I told you what would happen."

Blood gushed in hideous freshets from Gabriel's torn throat. His eyes bugged as his head whipped from side to side, mouth open as if he were entreating help from his fellow monsters. But the other vampires only backed towards the tunnel, gurgling in horror, their hands held out as if to ward off an army of crucifixes.

It was Harry, in the end, who got to his feet, drew his sword, and approached the agonized vampire. He was struggling feebly now, like a dying insect, blood running from his prone body in rivulets. Harry raised the sword and drove it down, piercing Gabriel's heart. He gurgled once and died, flames leaping from his corpse. Within seconds, he was a pile of ashes.

Harry raised his head and looked at Draco, who met his eyes with a sort of quiet desperation. It was then that Harry saw that Draco *was* bleeding. It was just that the blood had no color. It ran in pale silvery rivulets down over Draco's collar, staining his shirt with a bright phosphorescence.

If he had not known before, if even after what had just happened he could have denied it to himself, Harry knew now. He looked at Draco's poisoned blood and something inside him cracked and broke. He felt it inside himself, slicing at his internal organs with its razored shards.

He wondered if it was his heart. But hearts were meant to be soft, not hard and brittle. He stared at Draco in horror. "You're *not* cured," he said. "You never were."

When Draco replied, his voice was soft and even. "Turn around," he said. "There's still one behind you."

Harry spun and saw that there was, indeed, still a vampire hovering in the mouth of the tunnel, red eyes hanging on the spectral gloom. The sword was still in Harry's hand, he tightened his grip on the hilt. If the thing took a step towards them he would kill it. He felt like killing something.

It spoke. "*Tu*," it said to Draco. "*Tu esti mort ca si mine.*"

Then it vanished down the tunnel with a sideways scuttle, like a crab or a spider. Harry stared after it, then felt a tug on his arm. It was Draco, looking more subdued than Harry had ever seen him. "Come on," he said. "We have to get out of here before anything else comes after us."

Harry had taken several steps after him when he realized he was still holding his bloodied sword. Sheathing it, he followed Draco out of the cave and into the sunlight.

Barely had Lucius twisted the ring on his finger, when there was a *pop* like the sound that followed Apparation, and two crumpled figures appeared at his feet, looking as if they had been hurled there. Ron saw a blond boy, curled on his side - wondered for a moment if it was Draco, but no, the hair was too dark a blond - and then stopped thinking about it at all as his eyes came to rest on the second figure, the girl in the torn jeans with the tumbling shawl of blazing red hair ...

"*Ginny!*" He struggled to get to his feet, but Wormtail still had tight hold of his arm. It was like being gripped in a metal vise. "Ginny!"

Painfully slowly, Ginny raised herself up and looked at him. Then she smiled - a sweet smile of recognition, the way she had smiled up at him through the bars of her crib just after she was born. "Ron," she said. "Oh, Ron, you -"

She broke off as the boy next to her picked himself up as well, struggling to a sitting position. Ron realized with a shock that the boy was Seamus Finnegan, although he was wearing a surprisingly poofy white shirt, and seemed oddly different in a way Ron couldn't quite put a finger on. Also, he was covered in blood. Ron stared at him. Seamus Finnegan, murderer of Death Eaters? It seemed unlikely. Ron called out to him, but Seamus just stared at him blankly.

"Lucius...?" Voldemort said, staring at the two struggling teenagers with evident distaste. "I await your explanation for this."

"My Lord," Lucius began, taking a step towards the place where Ginny sat huddled on the ground, hands hugging her stomach. "It seems that-

At that moment, Ginny cried out, and slipped from her knees to the floor, her head rolling to the side. It seemed clear that she had fainted. Instantly, Seamus was at her side, his hands on her, cradling her so that her head fell back. "She's dying!" he barked at Lucius. "You fool! See what you've done?"

Dying? Horror seized Ron - this couldn't be happening. Hermione was dead, and now Ginny was - but he wouldn't let it happen. He couldn't. "*Ginny!*" Ron struggled against Wormtail's grip, shouting at the top of his lungs. "Let me go - let me go, you fucker! *Wormtail!* Can't you see that's my sister? That's *Ginny!* You knew her when she was a baby! Let me go, you bastard!"

Wormtail made a sound in his throat, halfway between a howl and a groan, as if what Ron had said had enraged him. Suddenly Ron felt the metal fingers of Wormtail's hand clamp down on his throat. He would have cried out, but he could not breathe. He felt his own eyes roll up in his head, and blackness descended.

The gap in the cave wall was narrow enough that after Draco wriggled through it, he had to turn around and tug on Harry's arms to pull him through after. Harry popped out like a cork from a bottle, feeling scraped raw, and looked around.

They stood among tumbled boulders at the bottom of a narrow gorge that ran between two towering cliffs of gray stone. A black river ran along the floor of the gorge, swollen with water that foamed and frothed over enormous rocks. On the other side of the river, Harry saw what looked like a narrow pathway cutting up and along the cliff. The steel-gray sky above hung heavy with the promise of snow or something worse. It was the most desolate landscape Harry had ever seen.

He turned back to Draco, who was leaning against one of the boulders, eyes half-closed. His drained face was as gray as the wintry sky above them. It seemed to Harry that lately Draco was always leaning against something - walls, furniture, trees. He had thought that Draco was trying to indicate how bored he was, how little he cared for Harry's dramatics. Now Harry realized that it was more likely that he had just been trying to conserve his strength.

"Malfoy," he said, and Draco's half-lidded eyes opened on a flash of silver. "What did that thing say to you?"

Draco's voice was flat. "It said, *You are as dead as I am.*" He looked away from Harry, turning his head, and Harry saw the puncture marks on his throat again, even uglier in the sunlight - raw wounds edged in phosphorescent blood. "It wasn't wrong. I'm walking, but I'm dead already. And I don't know how much longer I can keep up the walking part."

"I don't understand." Harry's mind raced. "The antidote -"

"There never was an antidote," Draco said gently. "Oh, Hermione liked to call it that. But it was never meant to cure me, just slow down the process of dying."

"Slow it down by how much?"

"A few weeks, I think. It doesn't matter. When Hermione was taken..." Draco opened his hands wide. "The antidote, such as it was, went with her. I've none of it left now."

"Why didn't you *tell* me?" Harry's voice was harsh. "We could have stopped, made more -"

"I don't know how to make more, Harry." Draco's smile was maddingly placid, as if poison and exhaustion had leached out of him even the ability to care about his own death. "Only Hermione knew." He paused. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry."

Harry just stared. *I'm sorry*, Draco's mouth said, but his eyes said, *I'm so tired, I don't care anymore*.

"Sorry for what?" Harry said finally. "Sorry for dying? Sorry for not telling me you were dying? I know why you didn't tell me. You thought I knew."

Draco nodded, a small gesture, as if he were afraid even that would tire him out. He wasn't looking directly at Harry, but a little past him, as if he were wondering how they would ever manage to ford the river boiling over the gorge's floor. Harry could see the reflection of roiling black water in Draco's mirror-gray eyes.

"I didn't know," Harry said. His voice was nearly a whisper. "Please believe me - I didn't know."

As if startled by the pleading in Harry's voice, Draco looked at him sharply. His mouth was bloodless white, the blue shadows under his eyes the only color in his pale face. The black water boiled at the backs of his eyes. Harry saw as if for the first time how the poison had eaten away at Draco's beauty, leaving only bone and shadows behind. Like a lovely painting that had had acid poured on it. He wondered how he could ever have thought that Draco was well. "I know you didn't," Draco said. "I saw you realize."

"Thank you," Harry said softly. Some part of him was almost shocked at the way they were behaving, all their previous anger at each other gone, each treating the other with care and precision, like mourners at a funeral.

"I wasn't apologizing for dying," Draco said. "I was apologizing for not coming with you."

"But you have come with me," Harry said, and only then did he realize what Draco meant. A thousand birds of panic opened their wings inside his chest. "No. You can't mean that. You can't want me to leave you here."

Draco only smiled a little - less a smile than a twitch of the mouth - and looked past Harry again, his eyes filled with leaping water. "When I died before," he said, "I saw a river. And when we came out of the cave I thought perhaps I had died again and was back in that place. And I was glad, thinking about crossing that river. That river you can only cross one way. I was glad, thinking I could rest."

"You told me you didn't want to die," Harry said.

"I don't," Draco said. "I want to stay with you. Watch over you. Follow you always. It's what I was meant to do. Blood binds us, Harry, and some fate more inextricable than that. And I want more selfish things. No one wants to die at seventeen. I want to be young and to live, and to be with the person I love, and I want to travel and see the world. And I want to get married and have children some day, and spoil them rotten so they grow up to be foul little bastards, and I want to die in bed when I'm a hundred and ninety, hexed to death by a jealous husband."

"Now you're going to tell me we can't always get what we want," Harry said.

"I would never say that," Draco said. "But I can barely stand up, Harry. I don't know how far I can walk and soon I'll be blind, too. Where you're going, I can't go. I simply can't get there. And I'll just slow you down."

Harry reached out then and took the other boy by the wrists. Holding Draco's wrists felt like holding bundles of dry twigs. Harry could feel Draco's pulse through the cold skin - each beat of his heart pumping poisoned blood. "If you can't walk," he said, "I'll carry you. Physically, or by magic, or whatever I have to do. And if you go blind, I'll guide you. Take some of my strength - I have more than enough. *Take it.*" And he held Draco's wrists tightly, as if he could somehow transmit his own vitality to the other boy through bone and skin, through the magic that bound them together. The pulse under his grip quickened, and he looked up at Draco's face; color had bloomed along Draco's cheekbones, bright red spots of it. "Take it, Draco," Harry said. "Because I won't leave you here."

"Harry," Draco said, and there was an odd hitch in his voice - he paused, and when he spoke again, he sounded more like his old self. "Harry, you're crushing my wrists."

A surge of despair ran through Harry, sharp as a knife-thrust. He let go of Draco's wrists and stepped back from him; he whirled, and stared at the river, fighting the urge to cry or yell or bash his own hands against the rocks. "I'm so stupid," he said in a half-whisper. "I don't know what I was thinking - I can't give you my strength. Strength can't be given - not like that."

He heard the crunch of pebbles behind him as Draco walked up to him; felt Draco standing at his shoulder. For a moment they stared at the gorge together in silence: at the fierce river, the tiny, jagged trail that wound through rocks and bare thornbushes on the other side of the water, at the steep wall of the cliff. Then Harry felt Draco's hand light on his shoulder. "It can, though," Draco said. "And you have - you have."

Harry turned to see the determined look on his friend's face, and his heart jumped up in his throat. "You mean...?"

"We should go," was all Draco said in reply. "It'll be easier to cross that river before nightfall." He set off, walking slowly and carefully, like an old man - but he was walking. Harry stared for a moment, and then raced after him.

It was her third strange awakening in as many hours. When Ginny opened her eyes and saw, hanging above her, a dark blue velvet canopy rising from the four mahogany pillars that made up the corners of her four-poster bed, she merely closed her eyes again. *Great*, she thought. *I'm back in Passionate Trousers. Maybe I'm actually dead this time.* She lifted her hands to cover her face - and felt the rough graft of bandages against her skin.

She opened her eyes again, and sat up. She was in a small room whose walls were made of carved stone. Somehow she was tucked into a linen-sheeted bed with a coverlet made of a heavy, velvety material embroidered with a pattern of black thorns. Incense smoked from a coppery brazier near the bed, and a gold-framed mirror hung on the opposite wall. In it, she could see herself, a small flame-haired figure swathed in bandages. There was one around her head, and others on her arms and hands. Pushing the coverlet aside, she saw that someone had

dressed her in a plain cotton shiftlike nightdress, and had wrapped bandages around the worst cuts and scrapes on her legs.

She wondered who it had been. Gingerly, she moved her arms and legs, expecting shooting pain - but the pain was gone. She got up and went over to look at herself in the mirror. She looked pale, but otherwise unharmed.



There were no cuts on her face, only fading bruises the color of old parchment. At the throat of her gown was a glitter of silver. She put up her hand and felt a thin chain under her fingers. Drawing it out, she saw the round silver pendant that hung off it with a surge of disbelief: *J'aime et j'espere*. Her thoughts in a whirl, she recollected the moonlit garden of her dream, the painful awakening inside the crypt with Tom, the way he had clutched her as they were whirled away -

She gasped and dropped the pendant. *Ron*. She spun around as if expecting to see him behind her, but the room was empty. Surely she'd seen him, hadn't she? Or perhaps it had been another hallucination? She'd also thought she'd seen Lucius Malfoy, and a terrifying-looking man with bone-pale skin and red eyes like a cat's...

The sound of a door opening snapped her from her reverie. She turned, and saw Tom.

Her hand flew to her mouth. How had he come in? She could not make out any doors in the walls of this room, nor a single window. And there was something different about him. As he walked towards her, she saw what it was, and recoiled.

There was no longer anything about him that was Seamus. He looked like his old self, the diary-self she remembered from dreams and clouded memories. Hair black as ink, skin white as paper, blue eyes like twin gas flames lit by unhealthy fires. He wore dark, old-fashioned clothes, a jacket long out of fashion, a white shirt, a dark robe thrown carelessly over it. Black hair spilled down into his eyes. He was grinning.

"Virginia," he said. "Did you miss me?"

"Tom," she whispered. "What have you done to yourself - what's been done to you?"

"A glamour," he said, holding his arms out with a wicked leer. "My elder self assisted me with it. Do you like it?"

Horror surged up into her throat. "Your elder self? You mean *Voldemort*?"

"I do indeed," he said. "Lucius brought us to him. Very clever of Lucius, playing us both off each other like that. I admire that. It doesn't mean I won't kill him for it, later, but nevertheless. Admirable."

"I thought you hated Voldemort. I thought you wanted to destroy him."

Tom's grin became even wider. "That was before," he said. "Really the old man seems quite fond of me. He healed you, at my request, installed you in these chambers, found me new clothes, restored my appearance...and he has promised me a seat at his right hand when he rules the world."

"Oh, Tom," Ginny said. "You'd never be content at anyone's right hand."

"True." Tom's grin faded to a secretive smile. "But he does not know that. He has shown me how the Ceremony will take place. It was very instructive. One man must stand in the center of the circle and speak the name of God when it appears in the mirror. He thinks it will be him." The blue eyes burned. "I disagree."

"You'd betray your own self?"

"The old must give way to the new," Tom said, prowling towards her. There was really no other word for it. He stepped as softly as a panther as he came towards her and reached out his hand to touch her hair. "The wizarding world will crawl at our feet when this is done," he murmured.

Ginny jerked away from his hand. "*Our* feet?"

Tom looked at her consideringly. "I intend to rule with you at my side," he said. "I have long pondered that which binds us, Virginia. I thought at first it was hate, but that seems too simple. Lucius suggested that it was love, but that is absurd. Finally I understand what you are to me. You are that which tethers me to the world. When the Ceremony is complete, it will be easy to lose myself in the magnificence of my own power. I will be able to part seas with my left hand, transform mountains to rubble with my right. I could destroy the world in a heartbeat - but then what would be left to rule?" He was not touching her, but Ginny imagined that she could feel the drift of his fingertips across her hair, her cheek. "You will prevent that," he said, so softly that she could barely hear him. "It is you who will remind me of what is real."

"I'd rather die," said Ginny, but her voice was weak. She felt herself drowning in the plush embrace of his voice, the blue of his eyes. She imagined what it would be like to feel that way forever. It frightened her more that anything ever had.

"Never," said Tom. "You will never die, sweet Virginia. You will live forever, always at my side. You will be there to remind me of the flesh I arose from, even when the rest of the world has sunk to flame and ashes. At the end of the universe, we will be together, and after it, together, we will rule the void."

He smiled at her like a light going out, and Ginny wanted to scream, but found she could make no sound. She held tightly to the frame of the mirror as he turned and walked away from her, the light gleaming along the silver braid on his cloak. The sound of a door opening came again - although she could see nothing - and he vanished, without a backward glance towards her. Ginny's fingers let go their grip on the mirror and she sank soundlessly to the floor.

Draco Veritas Chapter Fifteen

Part One: Brightness Falls

"Man," said Aidan Lynch, glancing around him. "Harry Potter has *utterly* trashed your flat, Vik."

"Don't call me Vik," said Viktor Krum, stomping irritably around the bedroom in a circle. His dark eyes took in its shambles: the closet torn open and ransacked, papers blowing around the floor in the cold draft from the open window. A blanket had been flung over the floor and was marked with the filthy prints of muddy boots. "If Harry survives whatever's happened to him, I shall certainly be sending him a large bill for damages."

"I'll give him one thing," Aidan said, lifting a coil of shredded rope off one bedpost. "Bloke knows how to party."

"So what's in here?" Sirius asked, ducking into the room. He looked haggard, his dark hair hanging around his tired face. "Any clues?"

Aidan stuffed the rope into his pocket and shrugged. "Nothing really. Harry changed clothes, took some weapons. There's a burned stain from some liquid in the kitchen, but I don't know what it is. You find anything?"

Sirius shook his head. "Someone used the living room fireplace to communicate, but the ashes are too cold for me to tell anything specific." He glanced at Viktor. "It was kind of you to offer Harry sanctuary," he said a bit more gently.

"It was Fleur who offered," said Viktor. "I agreed because she pressed me." He surveyed the wreckage glumly. "My mother crocheted me that blanket," he said, bending to lift it off the floor.

He froze.

"What is it, Viktor?" Sirius asked, tensing.

"Blood," said Viktor, casting the blanket aside. The floor underneath it was stained dark with smeared, blackish blood. Aidan, kicking away papers, saw that a thick line of blood led towards the door.

"Someone was dragged," he said. "Someone bleeding - wounded - and then lifted -"

"Don't worry," Remus said, appearing in the doorway. "It wasn't Harry or Draco." He looked at Sirius and shrugged wryly. "There's a dead body on the roof. And..."

"And what?" Sirius asked, still a little pale.

Remus sighed. "You'll see."

They trooped up the stairs, Viktor leading the way. It was almost sunset, the western sky over Prague streaked with rose and gold. The dead body was that of a man in black clothes, He lay with his back arched in a bow, his throat gaping wide open. All around him, a lake of blood spread across the roof tiles.

And there were thestrals.-- five or six of them crowded around the dead body, dipping their muzzles into the blood. They looked up when the men arrived on the roof, whickering nervously.

"It's me," Remus said. "Even the horses of the dead don't care for wolves."

Viktor, looking grim, was staring at the body. "One of Voldemort's men," he said. "The thestrals, they are just vermin. Shall I chase them off?"

"I don't know what you're all on about," said Aidan plaintively.

"Lucky you," said Sirius. His eyes were haunted.

"They're not 'just vermin,' " said Remus. Sweeping his cloak around himself, he slowly walked towards the thestrals. Two of them backed away, one taking to the air. He paused, murmured softly. Even more slowly, he approached the largest; of them. Bending, he spoke into its quivering ear. It whickered back, a thick, guttural unpleasant sound. Remus straightened. "The boys left from the roof," he said. "They took a thestral and headed for a stronghold somewhere in the Romanian mountains. This one knows where it is, and will take us there, if we want to go."

Sirius' mouth was hanging open. "I didn't know you spoke thestral."

Remus smiled faintly. "I have mastered a number of dead languages."

"And yet your puns have not improved," said Sirius. He approached the thestral as well. Grabbing hold of its mane, he swung himself up on its back, then held out a hand to help Remus up as well. Remus clambered onto its back, and took hold of Sirius cloak to steady himself.

"Shall we follow you?" Viktor asked, eyeing a thestral with some distaste.

"No," said Sirius. "You two stay here and get hold of Dumbledore. Tell him where we're going. See what he can do about sending someone after us. Hell, tell him to come himself. I have a feeling we're going to need all the help we can get. Viktor - thank you for your help."

Viktor nodded.

"And Aidan?"

Aidan raised his head. "Yes?"

"You're a prat," said Sirius. He dug his knee into the thestral's side, and it took off into the night sky.

"Hello, boys," Draco said, half to himself. "It's evil time."

They were standing on a ledge overlooking a shallow valley. The path dipped away steeply behind them, winding down the mountain through cruelly sharp rocks and slippery shale. The valley was ringed with mountains, their ice-covered tops lost in cloud.

In the bowl of the valley stood a fortress. Harry had been expecting something more ornamental, reminiscent of Hogwarts, with its lofty crenellated turrets. This structure had very clearly been built for defense: behind tall ramparts, its bulwarks and ravelins were of thick, roughly dressed stone; the only windows were narrow lancets high on each blank face; and a guard tower stood at each salient. Harry cocked an eyebrow. "Impressive."

Draco indicated the fortress with a wave of one thin hand. "Ah, the memories," he said nostalgically. "I used to spend summers here as a boy. When the servants misbehaved, the house gryphons used to carry them

out to the distant mountains and drop them off the peaks. Once my mother's Pekingese was eaten by vampires. Those rosy-colored days of boyhood," he finished with an elegiac smile. "How soon they fade."

Harry scrubbed a filthy hand across his forehead. It came away even dirtier. "Nice summer place, Malfoy. Where'd you spend Christmas? Mordor?"

"Disney World, actually, but the resemblance is stronger than you might think."

"If you say so." Harry peered into the swiftly darkening twilight. He could see guards patrolling at the base of the fortress, moving in steady black columns like ants. Fires burned atop the roof, sending black tendrils up into the dark blue air. Harry took another step forward, his boots crunching on shale - and something metallic. Surprised, he glanced down. Something gold gleamed among the grayish shale.

He bent to pick it up. It was a cloak pin of intricate design, made of a brassy dark metal, badly dented. A dark red stone slept in the center of it, like a half-closed eye. With its intricate design he knew it instantly. "This is Ron's," he said.

Draco came to stand beside him. He had made the journey up the mountainside much more swiftly than Harry would have thought possible. He looked tired now, but no worse than before; only the shadows under his eyes were slightly more blue. "That is Weasley's, isn't it?" he said. "I remember him wearing it around all the time. Always struck me as odd he'd wear a petrified basilisk eye as a bit of jewelry. More of a Slytherin thing to do."

Harry closed his hand around the brooch. "That means Ron is here," he said quietly.

"That's why we're here, isn't it?" Draco said.

"Yes, it just - seems so real all of a sudden." Closing his hand around the pin, Harry slipped it into his pocket. Then he drew his sword, and a long, shuddering breath after it. "It's time," he said. "Take your sword out, Malfoy."

Draco looked at him, a steady but distant look under half-lidded eyes, as if he peered under a glass. Grey shale dust filmed his hair and clothes. He looked like a ghost. He leaned forward and kissed Harry on the cheek; a quick kiss from lips dry with exhaustion and dirt.

"Ave, Caesar," he said. *"Morituri te salutant."*

He pulled back, and Harry blinked at him. "Does that mean yes?" he asked.

Draco drew his sword out of its scabbard; it glimmered dully in the light of the setting sun. "It means we all die someday," he said, and pushed past Harry, so that of the two of them he was the first to set his feet on the last path that led to the fortress.

"Never," said Tom. "You will never die, sweet one. You will live forever, always at my side. You will be there to remind me of the flesh I arose from, even when the rest of the world has sunk to flame and ashes. At the end of the universe, we will be together, and after it, together we will rule the void."

He smiled at her like a light going out, and Ginny wanted to scream, but found she could make no sound. She held tightly to the frame of the mirror as he turned and walked away from her, the light gleaming along the silver braid on his cloak. The sound of a door opening came again - although she could see nothing - and he vanished, without a backward glance. Ginny's fingers let go their grip on the mirror and she sank soundlessly to the floor.

She didn't know how long she sat there, curled around herself, fighting tears. At length a noise made her raise her head - a door closing or opening, very far away. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, rising to her feet. Tom, she thought with dread. He's come back.

Almost without volition, her right hand lifted to clutch the pendant around her neck. "Tom?" she whispered.

"No," said a familiar voice, "not Tom." She heard fabric rustling, and then two white hands appeared out of nowhere, and then a familiar, frizzy

brown head. Ginny blinked in stupefaction as the invisibility cloak fell away, and Hermione stood in front of her in torn jeans and an old Puddlemere United shirt. She was shaking her head. "Honestly, Ginny," she said. "The messes you get yourself into."

"Hermione!" Ginny almost wanted to hug the other girl, but Hermione's scowling expression forbade her. "I'm so glad to see you - I mean," she added hastily, "not that I'm glad you're here, because this is clearly a terrible place to be, I'm just, you know. Glad to see a friendly face," she finished lamely. "And glad you're safe."

Hermione sighed. "I'm not safe," she said. "None of us are."

"I know," said Ginny. "I just talked to Tom - he's planning to -"

"I heard," Hermione said, with a dismissive wave of the hand. "I was listening. Sorry to eavesdrop on you like that, but I wasn't exactly expecting Tom to burst in when he did. And I definitely wasn't expecting him to start declaring his love like that. Ginny, don't you think you're taking this whole bad boy thing of yours a little far?"

Ginny sank numbly onto the bed. "He doesn't love me. You heard him. I just remind him of his mortality or something."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "That's what he says. The truth is, he practically slavers when he looks at you. It's sick, it's disgusting - and we're going to use it to our advantage." She held out the bundle she was carrying to Ginny. "Put this on."

Ginny opened the bundle. It looked like a pile of fabric - swath after swath of glowing blue-green cloth. She held it up. Robes, with an ornate bodice of green and gold embroidery. "You want me to wear these?"

"No, I want you to bake them in a pie." Hermione shook her head irritably. "Yes, I want you to wear it. I need you to talk to Tom for me. The prettier you look, the more likely you'll melt his little black heart and he'll give you what you want."

"You want me to ask him to call off the ceremony," Ginny said. "He'll never do it, Hermione."

"No." Hermione shook her head slowly. "I don't want you to ask him to call it off. I want you to make absolutely sure it happens."

The reflection staring back at Ginny from the mirror was of someone she didn't know. The blue robes, thrown on over the white nightdress she'd been wearing, made her look solemn, regal - someone to be reckoned with.



She pulled back her wildly curling hair with a ribbon, and turned to face Hermione.

Hermione nodded. "You look great."

"Thanks," Ginny said woodenly.

Hermione smiled, showing her dimples. "Rhysenn said the dress was enchanted: it's got an Impresarius charm woven into the fabric. Apparently the Malfoys wear them when they want to look more

impressive and sway other people's opinions more easily. What do you think?"

Ginny squinted. "Rhysenn? You got this dress from her?"

Hermione nodded.

Ginny shook her head. "Are you starkers? You can't trust her. And you're acting awfully strange."

Hermione sighed. "I know. I'm sorry." She sat down on the bed, running her fingers through her unruly mop of hair. "I'm a little hysterical, I guess. I had this whole plan, and, well -" She broke off, squeezing her eyes shut. "We only have one chance, Ginny. One chance to stop all of this. And I thought I'd be doing it with Harry here, but he's not, and I'm so worried about him I could die, and Draco, too. I thought I'd have them with me, but I don't - I'm totally alone, and I'm so frightened."

"You're not," Ginny said. "Alone, I mean."

Hermione opened her eyes. She looked at Ginny again, and this time seemed to really see her, not just the culmination of a plan wrapped in expensive fabric. "I know," she said, her voice softening. "Thanks for being so brave. Do you want to go over it again?"

"No," Ginny said slowly. Did she really have the kind of power over Tom that Hermione seemed to think she did? She doubted it, somehow. "No, I understand the plan. I know what you want me to say."

Hermione nodded. "Good." She looked exhausted, her pale face marked with dark lines under her eyes, her cheek smudged with bruises. "You must tell no one that I'm alive or that you've seen me, Ginny. Not Draco, not Harry, not anyone. Understand? Promise me, please."

"I understand," Ginny said gently.

Hermione smiled weakly. "I know you do. I trust you." She stood up, swirling the cloak around her shoulders, and vanished. "I'll guess I'll go take care of my end of things," said her voice, coming from somewhere to Ginny's left.

Ginny sank down on the bed in a rustle of rainbow silk. "Hermione?"

"Yes?"

"Good luck."

"There's no door. Why didn't you tell me there wasn't a door?"

"There used to be a door." Draco sounded as tired and exasperated as Harry felt. "I mean, if there wasn't one, it's certainly slipped my mind how we got in and out of the bloody place." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Maybe we should take another circuit of the walls."

"We've already walked around the place three times," Harry replied, chancing another peek round the boulder they'd chosen to hide behind while a troop of guards passed. The guards were gone, but there was still no door, no entry into the castle at all. It seemed a ridiculous situation to be in, but there it was. "We're going to have to think of something else. Fortunately..."

Draco groaned. "Don't say it!"

"...I have a plan," Harry finished.

"And I actually thought I might reach the end of my days without having to hear you say that again."

"It's a good plan," Harry said, hoping his injured tone covered the break in his voice. He hated it when Draco talked about his death; he knew why the other boy was doing it, but he hated it just the same.

Draco slouched against the boulder. "Lay it on me, Potter."

"Well, clearly, one of us has to get inside -"

"I'd say both of us have to get inside. Already your plan is flawed."

"It's not flawed."

"Sorry, I should have said 'extremely flawed' or perhaps 'flawed up the wazoo.' Although I despise vernacular slang, as you well know."

"Shut up a second, Malfoy, and listen." Harry paused a moment to organize his thoughts. "Okay, there's no door, right? So the only way to get inside is either through the windows or by getting up to the roof."

"The walls aren't going to be easy to climb," Draco said, raising his eyebrows. "They make those things sheer for a reason, you know."

"I know," Harry said. "I wasn't suggesting we climb."

Draco's eyebrows stayed up. "Then..."

"One of us has to *wingardium leviosa* the other," Harry said. "I think you ought to do it to me. Then I'll make my way down through the fortress and let you in."

"Because, of course, you know the way so well?" Draco's tone was cutting. "Clearly, if anyone's being catapulted into the upper reaches, it ought to be me. I know the way through the castle, I know how to find the front door, and I know what back ways to take in order to avoid the guards. In addition," he said, "I really haven't got the strength to *wingardium* a mouse, much less a strapping bloke such as yourself."

"So you agree it's a good plan, then?"

"I didn't say that," Draco pointed out. "It's a terrible, stupid plan. I can tell you, for one thing, that it's harder to *wingardium* someone than you might think. I can tell you that from experience -"

"I know," Harry said. "Hermione told me about that, but you were both using Lifting Spells then. This will go much more smoothly. Besides," he added, "you haven't got a better idea, have you?"

Draco stared at him.

"I didn't think so," Harry said. He stood back, raising his right hand. The scar along the palm shone white in the light of the rising moon. "Are you ready?"

Draco stepped away from the boulder, looking resigned. "Stupid Gryffindor plans," he said, "they bookend my life." He put his hands in his pockets. "Go ahead."

"*Wingardium leviosa!*" Harry cried. He felt the familiar energy pulse through his hand, and then Draco rose into the air, not with the familiar forward-directed motion of broomstick flying, but as if he were being lifted on invisible strings. As Harry raised his hand higher and higher, Draco rose quickly, until his bright hair melted into the darkening twilight and he became a black speck, rising swiftly but steadily up the fortress's side. Harry stepped back out of the shadow of the boulder, squinting his eyes --

And backed directly into a platoon of guards who were rounding the corner of an outflung buttress. He heard them shout in angry surprise as he stumbled, and one grasped at his upraised hand. He saw the black speck that was Draco jerk wildly before being flung hard against the fortress wall. Then his view was blocked as the guards, weapons drawn, surrounded him.

Once Hermione had gone, Ginny sat and stared at herself in the mirror that hung opposite the bed. She looked strange to herself, incongruous and barely real, her pale, anxious face standing out above the brightly colored fabric of her dress, and the dark bed hangings falling all around her.

Hermione had said that Tom would come to her. She wasn't sure why she'd believed it, but it beat the alternative, which was to accept that her future would consist of being Tom's concubine while the wizarding world collapsed around her into ashes and dust, and everyone she knew and loved died.

Yes, going with Hermione on this one was really the best option.

She'd often wondered what exactly Tom's interest in her was -how it could be explained or described. She felt as confused now as ever. He didn't love her, of that she was sure, whatever Hermione might say. But there was something in the way he looked at her that was like - that was like the way Draco looked at her.

Maybe it was merely that they both wanted her. She knew Draco had wanted her, once. It wasn't that he'd kissed her; she knew him, and he was perfectly capable of kissing - thoroughly and expertly - people he didn't care for at all. It was the very slight tremble in his wrists when he took her face between his hands. That tiny weakness spoke to her more than any words he was ever likely to say.

Assuming they ever even saw each other again. Ginny rose from the bed, intending to splash some cold water on her face. Halfway across the room, she stopped and stared. A dark shape hovered outside the window, too large to be a bird, coming closer and closer -

The window exploded inward in a wave of shattering glass. Carried with it, like a bit of driftwood carried on an incoming tide, was Draco Malfoy. He struck the ground and crumpled, amid a rain of silvery shards.

Ginny raced to where he lay on his back amid the glittering pile, one arm over his face, like an enchanted sleeping prince whose glass coffin has just been smashed to bits all around him.

"Draco?" she whispered, kneeling to him, heedless of the glass. She drew his arm gently away from his face. For a moment she felt certain that he was dead. The impact of striking the window had been formidable - and he was so still, sprawled amongst the jagged bits of broken glass, the thin bright lines of a dozen shallow cuts visible on his face, his hands, his clothes sliced to ribbons - she leaned closer, her hand still gripping his.

"Draco?"

He opened his eyes. They roamed her face, his expression dazed. His lips parted and he spoke, his voice soft and almost bewildered.

"Ginny sodding Weasley," he said. "What the hell are you doing here?"

The pain was intense. It was the first thing he had become aware of on waking. His wrists, tied tight behind his back, hurt sharply, and there was a dull ache in his shoulders. His head felt as if someone had bashed it in with a stovepipe. Groaning, Ron rolled over, and stared about.

He was lying on a metal platform. It hung from the ceiling of the Ceremonial Chamber, each corner secured by a long iron chain. It was far too high from the ground for him to jump, even if his hands and feet had not been tied and the floor had not been made of very hard stone.

The chamber was circular, the walls tapering to a conical ceiling whose apex was open to the sky. Ron could see stars, and a sliver of icy moon. The floor was bare, polished green stone, swirled through with rococo designs. A huge five-pointed star had been drawn upon the center of the floor in some kind of reddish-black fluid that Ron hoped was paint. Objects had been set at four points of the star: a mirror, a dagger, a sword, and a cup. He recognized the cup instantly; it was the one he, Harry, and Hermione had stolen from the museum.

The ceremony is about to begin, he thought listlessly. Looking to the side, he could see Wormtail busy at work, fixing a row of iron rings to the wall. When he stepped back, Ron could see that they were shackles. Voldemort stood beside the pentagram on the floor, deep in conversation with a young man with dark hair.

The double doors to the chamber opened then, and Rhysenn hurried in, her dark hair flying behind her. She approached the young man and whispered into his ear. He nodded curtly, bowed to the Dark Lord, and left the room, passing Lucius, who was just entering. He stepped back to let Tom pass, a strange smile on his face, then turned to Voldemort. His voice, when he spoke, was clear and carrying.

"The guards have reported seeing intruders outside, my Lord," he said.

Voldemort let out a long hissing breath. "Potter?"

"Yes, my Lord. It seems so."

Ron's heart leaped up in his chest and slammed against his ribs.

"My son is not with him, Lord," Lucius added.

Voldemort raised his eyebrows.

"He may have died on the trail up the mountain," Lucius suggested.

"Wormtail!" Voldemort called. "One fewer pair of shackles needed."

Wormtail straightened, his silver hand gleaming. "Well, that's a relief." Ron didn't know if he meant the shackles or Draco's probable demise.

"Potter," Voldemort breathed. "At last. As soon as he gets here, Lucius, we will begin the ceremony."

The ceremony. Ron knew this would mean his death, and yet his heart was singing. Harry was here; Harry had come for him. For the first time in what seemed like weeks, Ron felt the stirrings of hope.

"Sodding Weasley, indeed," Ginny said, crossly, sitting back on her heels. "That's very nice, Malfoy. You could at least pretend you're happy to see me."

"I'm not," Draco said, "happy to see you." He closed his eyes for a moment; Ginny saw how blue-black the lids were, and her angry response died on her lips. His eyes flew open, then, alarm lighting the pale irises. "Harry," he said, and got to his feet. Glass spilled off him as he stood up, a shower of razored confetti. He went to the broken window and leaned out, the set of his shoulders tight with anxiety.

Ginny joined him. "Was Harry with you?"

Draco nodded. "He flew me up here. He thought if one of us could get up to the roof, he could let the other one in...."

"And then what?" Ginny said. "You were planning on taking on all of Voldemort's guards, just the two of you?"

Draco shot her a wry look. "You make it sound like a stupid plan." He leaned further out the window, his tension deepening. There certainly seemed to be no one on the ground below: just bare black rock, unoccupied even by guards. He sighed and shut his eyes.

"Draco, what if -"

"Wait." He held up a hand, rapt in silent concentration. A moment later, his mouth quirked into a near-smile and he opened his eyes. "He's all right," he said. "He had to hide around the side of the castle. I'm meant to let him in if I can." He rubbed the back of his neck with a long-fingered hand. "I don't suppose you know the way to the front door?"

Ginny shook her head. "I don't even know how to get out of this room. There are no doors, and just the one window. And you smashed it."

Draco nodded wearily. "You might want to *Reparo* that."

"I haven't got a wand."

Draco reached into his sleeve and drew out his wand. To Ginny's surprise, he handed it to her without hesitation. There was something strangely intimate about holding another witch or wizard's wand in your hand. Draco's seemed infused with his personality. She wasn't sure how it felt about being held by her, either. If wands could be said to have moods, she would have described his as coolly amused.

Draco smiled faintly at her. "Go on, there's a good girl."

She raised her hand and performed a quick *Reparo* spell on the window. As the glass pieces flew back together, forming a seamless square, she chanced a sideways glance at Draco. He was bone-white, his eyes sunk into hollows, his lips a bloodless line. "Draco," she said, lowering the wand. "Maybe you should sit down."

He nodded, exhaustion so plain in even that small movement that her heart sank. As he walked to the bed, she saw how carefully he moved. His grace had not gone, but it seemed tempered with a hesitancy she had never associated with him. He leaned back against bed cushions patterned with black thorns, and examined his hands. They were laced with tiny cuts, a fretwork of darker lines against the white skin. "You know, I don't remember this room at all," he said. "Perhaps it's meant as a prison. There must be some way out of it, though. Other people can come and go, right?"

"I think so," Ginny said uncertainly. She hadn't seen Tom leave; she'd been hiding her face. It occurred to her that she ought to tell Draco about Tom. Slowly she sat down on the edge of the bed, looking at him. His hair

against the black bedlinens looked very fair. Black had always been a good backdrop for him; it showed up his icy beauty well. He was still beautiful, even spare and drawn as he was, but with a strange translucency. "I wasn't paying attention when -"

"Shush," Draco said suddenly, and sat up. "I like your hair like that," he said, and lightly touched the ribbon that held it back. He smiled then, the old wry twist of his mouth that always made her pulse jump. "I love and I hope," he said.

Ginny felt the blood leap in her cheeks. "What?"

"Your necklace," Draco said, and his hand dropped from her hair to touch the hollow of her throat. "*J'aime et j'espere...*I love and I hope. Where did you get that pendant?"

"I don't remember," she lied.

"Ah." Draco dropped his hand. "Curious. My mother used to have one much like it, that my father had given her. Apparently it was a Malfoy heirloom." He smiled faintly. "But love can hope where reason would despair...it's a nice sentiment, isn't it?"

"Not really," said Ginny. "I know how you loathe sentiment."

"I meant sentiment in its more specific sense, dearest," Draco said, with an airy wave of the hand that recalled his old self. "A sentence considered as the expression of a thought; a maxim; a saying; a -"

"Don't," Ginny said. Her tone was so sharp that Draco broke off, blinking.

"So fierce," he said. "I thought you liked it when I was pedantic."

"It's not that," she said, winding the bedclothes tightly in her fist. "It's just I wish you wouldn't call me dearest, not right after you say you aren't happy to see me—"

Draco's eyes had gone a slatey gray. He stood up, his hand gripping the bedpost. "Such a funny little thing you are, Ginny - what would you do if you were trapped in a burning building with no hope of escape?, Invite all your friends in to toast marshmallows?"

"Don't make fun of me." Ginny glanced away from him, but too late; a few hot tears splashed down on her bare arm, making her jump. "Ginny," he said. His tone was sharp, almost warning. "Not now."

"What's the difference?" she said drearily. "There's no way out of here anyway. *And I promised Hermione that I would stay*, she was about to say, but that promise was superseded by the other she had made, not to mention Hermione's presence to anyone.

"Promised what?" Draco said. "And there must be a way out." He walked over to the wall and tapped on it, then moved aside a portrait. There was more blank stone under it. "I deplore your defeatist attitude, Ginny. Stone walls do not a prison make, nor -"

"Stop it!" she said fiercely, standing up. The blue robes spilled around her, their heavy weight as much a reminder of her situation as chains. "I *hate* it when you do that - "

"Well, if you hate it," Draco said, "that certainly supersedes our current desperate situation. I wouldn't want you to be upset." His tone was acid.

"I'm not like you," Ginny said. "I can't be a heroine all the time just for it's own sake. I need something to fight for."

Draco turned away from the wall, letting the picture fall back in place. "And you think I can give you that?" he said, looking, for the first time, almost uncertain.

"I don't know," Ginny said. "Can you?" She took a step towards him. "Just once, I want you to answer me something, and I want you to be serious, and not say anything in Latin, and not quote anything, and not make jokes, and not spout off any poetry. Do you think you can do that?"

Draco shook his head. "Be careful what you ask for," he said, "without my Latin and my poetry and my jokes, you know, I'm just ordinary, Ginny."

"But I want you ordinary," she cried. He flushed though his eyes were clear as glacier ice. "And it doesn't matter - you never could be ordinary, even if you tried."

"Flattery will get you everywhere," Draco said, though there was a resigned look on his face, as if he were on his way to the gallows. "I remember," he said, "once, when you gave me the strength to fight. I suppose I owe you as much back. Less would be - dishonorable. So ask me, ask me whatever you must."

"Do you love me?" she said.

For a moment he was absolutely still, only the nervous movement of his hand, curling inward, showing that he had even heard her question. Finally, he said, "You really want to know?"



"Yes," she said.

"We're trapped in a prison, any help is continents away, Voldemort is about to subjugate the entire world to his evil will and the best we have to

look forward to is very messy deaths, and you want to talk about our relationship?"

Ginny nodded. "I want to talk about our relationship."

"It's going to be very hard to do that without any poetry," Draco said plaintively.

Ginny fixed him with an unflinching stare. "Try," she said.

"And we have time for this before Armageddon?"

"If you have a better suggestion," she said, "make it."

He looked almost amused. Shrugging, he went over to the wardrobe and rapped on it. It made a noise much like the noise of any wardrobe when you rapped on it. "I've never told anyone I loved them before."

"But you must have," Ginny said, surprised. "What about Hermione?"

"She asked me once, and I said yes. But I never offered it. It would have seemed like an insult," Draco said, his tone thoughtful, and Ginny knew he was telling her the unvarnished truth - if not about the way he felt about her, then at least about the way he felt. "To her and to Harry. No, I couldn't have done that."

"Blaise, then?"

"I liked looking at her," he said, "and I liked that she loved me, but no, I never loved her, not the way you mean, and I never told her I did. It would have been a lie." He hesitated. "I used to think I couldn't fall in love, and then I thought that if I did it would kill me, and now I know that neither is the truth. But love hasn't killed me, although sometimes," he said wryly, "it's made me wish I were dead. I never asked you, did I," he finished with a trace of a smile, "if you loved me?"

"I've told you I do," she said. "And I know what you think: that I love you because in my head I've made you out to be something that you aren't. But it's not true. I don't think you're some hero on a white horse who's going to rescue me, and I don't even want that. I just want you the way you are."

"The way I am," Draco said, a faint, puzzled tiredness in his voice.

"Yes, the way you are, and that means the bad things too." She stopped abruptly. The room was still; Draco was still, waiting. She felt an uprushing of words--all the thoughts about him that she had kept so carefully in check. " - You're cowardly sometimes, and you laugh everything off that you don't agree with, and you're selfish, and afraid of your own feelings. You despise weakness, and that means you're capable of real cruelty towards the helpless, and you despise your own weakness most of all, and that means those who love you have to watch while you hurt yourself. And right now," she added, half as an afterthought, "you look terrible."

He laughed, but it sounded like choking. "Ah, hit me where it hurts. -"

"But I know the good things about you, too," Ginny rushed on, her voice cracking. "And I know that when you love people, you love them completely - so I suppose there's no point asking you if you love me - because if you did, you'd know it."

"No." He looked as stricken as if she had slapped him. "No - oh, God, you have got hold of the wrong end of the stick, haven't you? And it's my own fault." He took a step towards her, and now they were close enough to touch, though he didn't reach for her. "Ginny, I'm the *last* person who would know. I'm not sure I've ever managed proper love, not in all my life, only passions where they weren't wanted and nothing where they were. It's no one's fault, or no one but my father's perhaps - I've only learned the difference between love and hate this past year... I'm a child and perhaps what you need is someone more ... grown-up. Finnegan, even," he said, and his voice was both grudging and strangely sad.

"I don't want him," she said. "I want you - I only ever did want you."

"I know," he said, "it's not fair, is it? To either of us, really."

"But you do know the difference between love and hate," she whispered. "You love Harry -"

"Until I die," Draco said. "Although I suppose that isn't saying all that much."

"It's a different sort of love, I suppose," Ginny said, and when Draco said nothing to that, she went on: "You love Hermione - you were in love with her. That night in the rose garden you as near as told me so."

"I wonder sometimes if I fell in love with Hermione because Harry loved her," Draco said, thoughtfully. "So much of Harry transferred itself to me when we switched places - and that was the strongest emotion in his heart; perhaps I took it on myself. Not that that banishes or changes the emotion, I suppose, but it might explain it."

"You still love her," Ginny said, accusingly.

"In a way, yes," Draco said, lightly, "but I have put it away, with other childish things - and yes, I know, I'm quoting. I'll stop. Look at me, Ginny, please." She looked at him. She could see the fever in him, but his eyes were very clear, and lovely in their clarity. When he died, those eyes would shut forever, she thought, and banished the thought with an inward sharp wince. "Believe me," he said, "Hermione doesn't stand between us, and you mustn't blame her. It isn't because of her that I can't tell you that I love you. I'm the one you should blame and hate. This whole stupid situation has robbed me of the chance--the perfectly ordinary chance--to learn to fall in love where and when I might choose to - robbed us both, I suppose. If I could choose, I would love you with all the love my rags of heart were capable of, but I need time for that - and time is the one thing I don't have. I'm dying, and love can't grow in a dying heart, any more than you can grow a flower in darkness and water it in blood. Can you understand that?"

"No," she wanted to say, but it would have been unkind. And through her sadness, she felt a great, strange pity for him: to die without loving and having that love returned did seem cruel to her romantic heart. Underneath all his layers of bitterness and indifference she knew Draco would feel the same, would know that lack, and the torment of regret. "I almost understand," she began, "I wish that you could-- "

She broke off, hearing a noise behind her. Slowly turning around, she saw a flicker of movement near the wardrobe in the corner. A moment later, Tom stepped into the room.

Apparently, Harry thought, you could lie through telepathy, provided that you were very careful and the person you were talking to was very tired and distracted. He'd told Draco that he had run from the guards, and this was true. And he'd also told him that he was hiding behind a rock on top of a hill, and was all right. This was true as well. What he hadn't mentioned was that he'd been spotted behind the rock, and wasn't likely to remain all right for very much longer.

The guards had caught sight of him a few minutes ago, and had begun circling the rock he was hiding behind in a wide circle. Slowly, the circle began to tighten. Realizing the jig was up, Harry straightened up and stepped out from behind the rock, turning to face the guards as he did so. He heard them laugh.

He dropped his sword, raised his hand high. He no longer feared to be detected by Voldemort; he would take as many of them down with him as he could.

They were pounding up the hill towards him, a sea of moving black robes. He opened his mouth, ready to speak the Killing Curse - and light blazed from his hand. He staggered back, shocked. He hadn't spoken a spell, so how -? From the runic band on his wrist a bright light began to blaze. The light grew: a glimmer at first, then brighter and brighter, and he saw Voldemort's soldiers fall back, hands thrown up over their faces. They were screaming, as if the light pained them. One by one they fell, staggering, stumbling back, and their cries filled the night.

Harry would never be able to describe the precise color of the light. It was red, but no red he had ever seen before. More red than sunset, more translucent than blood, brighter than fire. It lit the sky like daylight. It was too bright to look upon. He cried out and turned his face away, but even then he could see the afterglow imprinted on the backs of his eyelids.

Then it vanished, silently and instantly. The sky went dark. Slowly, he opened his eyes. He was standing in a field of corpses; all around him in a circle lay Voldemort's dead guards, their bodies twisted, hands still flung up to ward off some terrible blow. He bent to pick up his sword, and only when he straightened up did he see that the runic band was gone, - having done what it was made to do, it had sifted from his wrist in a fine spray of black ashes.

Tom moved towards her. Ginny braced herself for the look of shock and dawning anger on his face when he saw Draco, her mind whirling through a series of useless excuses. *Tom, I'm so sorry, I never -*

"Ginny," he said. "Rhysenn told me you wished to see me. You do realize that I'm quite busy at the moment?"

She stared at him. He looked back at her, boredom and impatience evident in every line of his face.

Very slowly, Ginny turned around and looked behind her. Draco was nowhere to be seen. In a way, it was worse than Tom's sudden appearance. In her surprise, she sank down on the bed, open-mouthed.



"Cease gaping at me, Ginny," Tom said sharply. "'Stand up."

She rose to her feet obediently, and the heavy folds of her robes spilled down around her, silver and blue, green and gold. A hot light flared up in Tom's face, the look of a goblin staring at a bank vault full of Galleons. His sensual mouth curved. She had time to think only that Hermione had

been right, when he closed the distance between them and gathered her wrists in one hand. His other hand went to her hair and caught the ribbon that bound her plait, tugging it sharply free. Ginny flinched, but he ignored her, his long fingers catching in her hair as he shook it down over her shoulders.

"I prefer your hair down," he said.

"Whatever you like, Tom."

He dropped the ribbon. It curled on the floor like a coiled snake. "Is this why you wanted to see me?" he asked, brushing the backs of his knuckles against her collarbone, a languid caress that made her shiver half-unpleasantly.

"No," she said quickly, and although he didn't take his hand away, he did cock an eyebrow curiously. "I wanted to ask you if I could come to the ceremony. I want to watch you ascend to power."

"There's a good chance the ceremony will kill your brother," Tom said, offhandedly, twirling a lock of her hair between his fingers.

"I know," Ginny said, "but I must learn to bear these things, mustn't I, if I'm going to rule the world at your side?" She wondered if her nausea and anger sounded in her voice - and if the gig would be up if they did, but Tom merely smiled lazily, and caught a handful of her hair between his fingers, dragging her face closer to his. She knew he meant to kiss her, and it took all her strength not to pull away. His mouth was cold, and tasted of ice and wine on the verge of becoming vinegar.

The kiss ended, and Ginny stood, the world tilting around her. "You won't learn to bear these things," Tom said. "If you aren't born with the ability to bear them, you can't learn it, but that's just as well. You're more lovely when you're unhappy." He let her go. "It doesn't matter what you want," he said matter-of-factly, "the Dark Lord wants you all in the Ceremonial Chamber to watch him take power. I expect he will chain you to the wall. I may leave you in your chains when it is all over," he added with a smile, "and take my pleasure with you that way; I think I would enjoy that."

He bent to kiss her again, when, suddenly, the windowpanes rattled; Ginny turned in time to see the whole room illuminated with a flash of

frighteningly bright scarlet light. It seemed to bathe the room in blood. She cried out and cringed, though the reddened sky was already fading back to black. "What was that?"

Tom had let her go; he was staring at the window with his hand half-raised. Without another word, he turned on his heel and stalked from the room, vanishing as he neared the wall. How does he get out of here? Ginny thought. She wondered what the scarlet light meant, and why it had startled Tom. Had Harry killed Voldemort at last? Was there some Gryffindor equivalent to the Dark Mark?

A thump sounded behind her. She turned to see Draco clambering out from under the bed. He stood up, coughing and looking somewhat the worse for wear. "I take it Voldemort has gotten rid of the maid service," he said. "There are some quite appalling dust bunnies under that bed. I swear one of them was looking at me."

Ginny was staring towards the window. "What was that light?"

"I don't know," Draco said tensely, "but it's a good thing it went off like that, because in another second I would have been out from under the bed and chopping that slimy git's hands off. Has he hurt you?"

"Tom wouldn't hurt me," she said dully.

Draco leaned against the bedpost. "Come here," he said, and she went, although she was growing quite tired of back-and-forthing where some boy had told her to go. Still, this was Draco, and she loved him, and he was only asking because he was too ill to make any more effort than he must.

Draco touched his fingers lightly to the skin above her collarbone, as Tom had done.

"What are you doing?"

"Looking for bruises," he said. "The last time I was in the same room with you, my Ginny, it wasn't you at all. It was a prostitute Tom had paid to Polyjuice herself into your likeness. And he'd strangled her, and left her dead on the whorehouse floor."

"What were you doing in a whorehouse?" Ginny asked, astonished.

Draco grinned crookedly. "I was young; I needed the money."

"Oh shut up," Ginny grinned back. She paused. "You're serious. - That really happened?"

He nodded.

"Oh," she said faintly. "That's so disgusting. And that poor girl. It's my fault, isn't it?"

"No," Draco said. "And I think we've all had enough of blaming ourselves for things we couldn't possibly have been responsible for, don't you?" He regarded her quizzically. "He loves you, you know." he said. "He may be a deranged psychopath who kills everyone in his path, but in his own sick, revolting way, he does love you."

"Well," Ginny said. "There are worse things than not being loved, aren't there?"

A flash of great sadness passed across his face. "Some," he said, and bent to pick up the ribbon that had fallen at her feet. "Do you want this?"

"No," Ginny said. "If I wear it, it will only make Tom angry."

"Then I'll wear it," Draco said, and wound it around and around his left wrist, and tied it there. He put out a hand, and pushed the heavy hair, all draggled where Tom had ripped his fingers through it, back from her face. "If I get a chance to kill him for you," he said, "I will."

She touched the ribbon, smooth as the skin under it. "I thought you weren't the white knight dragon-killer sort," she said, trying for lightness but only sounding sad. And it was true: he didn't look much like he could kill a dragon, now, pale and thin and filthy with dirt, leaves caught in his cloak, marked and scarred by glass and bramble scratches. And still, he was the only boy she'd ever really loved. "I want you to know," she said, "I understand what you were trying to say before - about why you can't love me - and -"

"Fancy words," he said, and leaned in and kissed her on the mouth. He tasted of fever, cold salt, and determination, and a bitterness like tears. When he pulled back, his beribboned wrist grazed her cheek. "Sorry," he said, half-smiling, "After Tom, perhaps you're a bit tired of being suddenly kissed -"

"Oh!" Ginny interrupted, suddenly realizing, "I was going to watch how Tom got out of the room, and I didn't see it. He just vanished. Damn it -"

"I was watching him," Draco said. "He went through the mirror. I was just waiting to make sure that we'd be clear when -" Suddenly, his hand tightened on her shoulder, his eyes unfocusing. He stepped back, away from her. "Harry's got past the outside guards somehow - he's found the front door. There are more guards there. He wants our help. Come on - quickly." Seizing her wrist, he drew her after him through the mirror, which parted around them like water, and into the hallway beyond.

Ron, chained to his platform, saw the dark square of open sky above him turn from black to red in a single flare, bathing the Chamber in bloodlight.

The doors to the Chamber flew open, and a bevy of guards poured in, chattering to Lucius in their harsh foreign tongue. Lucius turned to the Dark Lord, puzzled and pale. "My Lord, the guards you stationed outside are dead. All dead."

"Then Potter will have found the front entrance," Voldemort said. "Send these fellows down to the entryway to capture him." Lucius stared, and the guards shifted uneasily. Voldemort laughed. "It won't be difficult, my cowardly ones. Potter can be easily enough swayed by ... logic."

Ron stared up at the open roof above him, watching as the sky faded from scarlet to gray. He was lost in a memory of his own visions. *I saw the sky on fire*, he thought, and then, *This Divining power is the worst of punishments - to know, and to be able to change nothing.*

Sirius missed Buckbeak, who was a much better mount than this scabby thestral. Still, he had to admit that no hippogryph could fly as fast as the death-horses did. Without mortality to weight it down, the thestral skimmed across the sky like a loosed arrow. The added burden of Sirius and Remus seemed to slow it only a very little.

Remus was silent. Sirius watched the landscape sweep by and tried not to worry. They had passed over cities, then farmland, gray and brown in the drained light of evening. Lakes and ponds with showed as patches of silver, some frosted with white at the edges. Now they were rising into a mountain range that jutted from the earth like a jaw full of broken teeth. This was cold, unfriendly land and it wrung his heart to think of Harry wandering here, facing this last, bitter trial alone.

Remus saw it first. He cried out and tugged at Sirius's arm. Rising over the mountains, far to the east but far too early for sunrise, a tower of scarlet light flared in the sky. Too bright for fire, and too even, it rose like a pillar of blood, staining all the air around it a deep golden red.

"Harry," Remus said.

Sirius seized the horse's mane and dug his knees into its sides. "Let's see how fast this flea-bitten thing can go," he said, and the thestral shot forward, swifter than a Firebolt.

Ginny hurried after Draco, who seemed to know where he was going. Hallways, some of stone and some of black and green marble, flashed past as they ran. Cries, and the sound of metal on metal, grew louder as they went. At last Draco drew to a stop at the top of a wide, curving stone staircase. He thrust a hand behind him, holding her back. "Wait," he said.

They were standing above the Great Hall of the fortress. White and black alternating marble steps arced down to a broad pavement and a set of enormous stone doors bound in brass. They stood open, showing the night sky. The Hall was a blur of chaotic movement. Ginny could make out at least six black-clad soldiers, wielding knives, axes, and daggers. Harry stood on the bottom step, fending them off with a drawn sword. The blade was stained with blood. Several dark masses huddled on the

floor: some of Voldemort's guards had already fallen - wounded or dead, she couldn't tell.

Draco was staring down at Harry, and his hand dropped to rest on the hilt of his sword. She saw him smile a little, just with the corner of his mouth, and then Harry glanced up fast and gave a short nod before turning his attention back to skewering one of Voldemort's guards through the leg.

Draco drew Terminus Est from its scabbard and held it lightly for a moment, balancing its weight. The roses carved into the blade seemed to glimmer. He spoke to Ginny without taking his eyes from Harry: "You've never seen me fight before, have you?" he asked. His tone was even and conversational, but his gaze never left the figures moving below.

Ginny shook her head. "No - never."

Draco exhaled. "Well, brace yourself," he said. "You're going to want to sleep with me even more after this."

Ginny sputtered. "I would never - "

But he didn't get to find out what she would never do: he was already racing down the stairs, taking them recklessly fast; he passed Harry, leaped over the last steps, and flung himself into the thick of the crowd of guards. The sword in his hand flew around him, a blur of flashing light. Ginny leaned forward as far as she could, the railing of the stone banister cold under her fiercely gripping hands. Surely he couldn't be that good - but he was, she realized with an odd pang at her heart, this was clearly to Draco what Quidditch was to Harry. The sword seemed to dance in his hand, it both lived apart from him and with him, flashing out again and again among the tightly packed dark mass of bodies like the back of a silvery fish momentarily breaking through dark water.

In a few moments, the remainder of the guards lay strewn on the floor, dead or unconscious. Draco cleaned his sword on a dead man's cloak, sheathed it, and turned to Harry. "Good thing I showed up, Potter," he said, as Harry navigated through the bodies to his side. "Your technique was appalling."

Harry was shaking his head. He leaned closer to Draco and said something Ginny couldn't quite hear; he was pointing at the bodies on the floor.

Snapping out of her frozen state, she ran down the stairs, almost tripping over her long skirts, to join them among the sprawled bodies. The smell of blood in the air was heavy and electrifying. ". . . no wands?" Harry was asking.

"There are some fairly complex wards inside the fortress," Draco explained. "Besides, I doubt Voldemort lets them have wands."

"Ah," said Harry. "That explains why -" He glanced up, saw Ginny, and did a double-take. "*You're* here?"

"She follows me around," Draco said. "It's very embarrassing."

Harry's eyes widened. "Is Hermione here as well? Have you seen her?"

"She -" Ginny began, but froze at the heavy tramp of approaching feet. "More guards!" she hissed, stumbling as she backed up, nearly tripping on a corpse. Fighting the urge to cry out, she gestured to Harry and Draco that they should flee for the stairs. The boys drew their swords and the small group fled across the room - and stopped short.

Beneath the arch of the open doors at the room's north end was Lucius Malfoy. Wormtail stood beside him, hunched and shuddering in his tattered wizarding robes. Rhysenn drifted behind him, pale as a ghost, and behind her, filling the doorway and the hall behind them, were ten of Voldemort's black-clad guards.

Ginny heard Draco's sharp inhalation of breath. He was staring at Lucius as if he'd just been punched in the stomach, blank-eyed and struggling for equilibrium. She heard Harry whisper, "Steady on, Malfoy, steady on -"

Lucius looked at his son, his smile thin as a razor cut. "Why, Draco," he said. "I 'm surprised to see you. I'd have thought you'd be dead by now." He cast a critical eye over his son. "I'd say you're looking well, but we all know that's hardly true, don't we?"

Draco gripped the hilt of his sword, his knuckles whitening. "Father," he said. "You can't imagine I'd miss the opportunity to share my dying words with you."

Lucius raised his eyebrows. "I can't wait to hear them," he said.

Draco raised his arm. "Here's a preview," he said. Ginny heard something whip past her head and turning, realized that Draco had flung his sword at his father. The blade missed Lucius by inches and thumped point-first into the wall beside his head, where it stuck, quivering gently.

Lucius didn't blink. He glanced at the sword indifferently, and then at his son. "Haven't I always told you that swords are poor throwing weapons?" he said in a gently chiding voice. "I prefer a sharpened dagger myself."

Draco's face shut like a fan. "Come now, Father," he said flatly. "Not even a little afraid of me?"

"Not at all," said Lucius, and let his eyes drift to the corpses strewn about the hall. "If you'd wanted that sword to strike me, it would have."

Draco's face twisted. Harry stirred and stroked his arm lightly, but Draco seemed hardly to notice; he was staring at his father.

"You've killed all of the Dark Lord's guards," Lucius said to Harry. "That wasn't very nice."

"You seem to have a few more," Harry said, looking past him.

"Ten out of three hundred," Lucius said. "Rather a sad outcome."

Draco stared at Harry. "You killed *two hundred and ninety guards?*"

"Yes," Harry said.

"*How?*"

"Force of personality," Harry said dryly.

Draco looked Harry up and down, as if expecting to find that he had grown an extra pair of arms. His gaze lit on Harry's wrist. "Your runic band -"

"Yes," Harry said quickly. "Quite. Anyway," he said to Lucius, "I'd say I'm sorry I killed your guards, but we all know that's hardly true, don't we?"

For a moment, Ginny saw anger flash in the back of Lucius's eyes. Then he smiled, bringing his hands together, the fingertips touching lightly. "Well," he said, "we did kill your girlfriend, so I suppose this makes us even, young Potter. I know you like things to be fair."

Harry stared for a moment, as if the words made no sense. "What?" he said. "But - Hermione's my girlfriend."

"Yes," Lucius said. "And we killed her. Not very swift, are you? But then I suppose you don't have to be; you've got Draco for that."

Slowly Harry lowered his hand, the bloody-hilted sword still grasped in it. "It's not true," he said. He was very white. "It can't be."

It was Draco's turn to seize Harry's arm. "Potter," he said, and then leaned in and spoke very softly, saying something Ginny couldn't hear. Harry didn't look at him; he was staring straight ahead.

"She's too smart for you," Harry said to Lucius. "She'd never let you hurt her."

Ginny bit her lip hard. *Tell no one I'm alive - not even Draco or Harry*, Hermione had said. But the look on Harry's face - it was almost too much for her to bear. Surely Hermione wouldn't want Harry to be in this much pain.

"Rhysenn," Lucius said silkily. "The Epicyclical Charms, please."

Silently, Rhysenn came to his side and placed something in his palm. When he raised his hand, the fingers spread wide, Ginny saw the two Charms on their gold chains, dangling from his grip - the one that she had helped make in Harry and Draco's room, and the one that Hermione had brought back from Malfoy Manor after that first adventure, and had afterward worn around her neck. "Rhysenn took the Charm from her dead body," he said. "Didn't you, dearest?"

"I took it from her," Rhysenn said, her voice nearly inaudible. "After I kissed her."

"Ah, the kiss of death - your specialty," said Lucius. With a sharp flick of his wrist, he flung the Charms at Harry's feet. "Take them," he said. "They'll be little use to you."

They clattered to the ground at Harry's feet. Draco winced involuntarily, but Harry seemed hardly to notice. It was Ginny who bent down and scooped them up, sliding them into the silk pocket of her robes.

If the look on Harry's face was unbearable, Draco's was worse; he looked torn open. She wasn't sure if it was his own pain or Harry's that had shattered him so. She didn't move towards him; someone who looked like that could not be comforted.

"No!" Harry cried, and raising his sword, ran at Lucius, Draco's outstretched hand reached to hold him back just a second too late. Lucius drew his wand, mouthing the words of the Cruciatu curse -

And Harry seemed to trip - but there was nothing for him to trip over; it was more as if he had struck something, something Ginny could not see. He gasped, dropping his sword, and fell backwards, rolling to the side, as the green light of the Curse sailed harmlessly over his head. He rolled over and over, tangled in something - Ginny could see the flash of a white arm, and a tangle of brown curls, and then the Invisibility Cloak fell away, and it was Hermione, lying with her arms and legs tangled around him and her face streaked with tears.

"I couldn't," she sobbed, staring at Harry, who was lying on top of her, looking astonished. "I couldn't - you weren't meant to know - but it was too cruel, I couldn't do it. Oh, Harry -"

Harry said nothing, but, incredibly, smiled and tightened his arms around her. They clung together, her shoulders shaking and his face turned in to her hair.

Wrenched, Ginny turned away. And there was Draco, staring at Harry and Hermione, a strange look on his face. He was smiling, but his eyes were barren. She could see her own pain in the gray mirrors of them. She reached to touch him -he stiffened, going rigid, but not because of her.

Voldemort had arrived.

He strode up behind Lucius, Tom at his side. Ginny was struck again by his hideousness. Blood red and papery white he was, with thin black lips and nails like claws. How could this monster ever have been her beautiful Tom?

Voldemort halted, his lips curling back from his teeth. "Tom," he said, looking at Ginny, "your whore's got free somehow."

Tom said nothing, but his blue eyes met hers and burned like flames. She felt her skin crawl. He would make her pay later, she knew, if he could.

"Don't call her that," Draco said.

Voldemort glanced at Lucius. "Isn't that your son?"

Lucius nodded.

"And isn't he supposed to be dead?"

"Draco never does do anything on time," Lucius said. "It's why he's never first in his class." He sounded genuinely regretful.

"And there's Potter," Voldemort mused, glancing at Harry. He and Hermione were sitting up, still clenched tightly together. Hermione was murmuring into Harry's ear, his hands tight between hers. He was nodding intently. "And his girlfriend the Mudblood," Voldemort added, and his toneless voice sounded very nearly surprised.

"I thought they broke up," muttered Wormtail.

"Isn't she supposed to be dead as well?" Voldemort demanded.

"Yes," Lucius said. He looked profoundly annoyed. "Rhysenn!" he barked.

She crept to his side like a beaten dog. "Yes, Master?"

"You lied to me," he hissed.

"You know I cannot lie to you, Master."

"You told me you killed that girl," he said, pointing to Hermione.

"I told you I kissed her," Rhysenn whispered. She was trembling. "That usually kills them, but ..."

"Be silent." Lucius's hand whipped out, striking her to the floor. She fell at his feet, her black hair showering down around her, and lay motionless.

Detaching herself from Harry, Hermione rose to her feet. "It's not her fault," she said. "I played dead."

"I'm sure you did, Mudblood," said Lucius. He lifted his wand. "Now you'll have no need to play -"

"No, Lucius." Voldemort stilled his servant's hand. "I like an audience. Take her!" he barked, and the guards began to surge out from behind him, moving towards the children. "Remember, I have your Diviner friend tied up in the Ceremonial Chamber," Voldemort said, seeing Harry move towards his sword. "Touch another one of my guards - struggle at all - and I'll have him torn in pieces, slowly."

Harry relaxed. His face was a mask. Two guards came to hold him, two more Hermione. Draco turned to Ginny. He was paper-white, but his eyes were blazing. He caught at her shoulders. "Ginny -" he began, but another guard seized him, and tore him away from her. The guards began to march them down the hall, barely pausing to step over Rhysenn's prone body. Voldemort and Lucius followed, Wormtail creeping behind them.

Ginny had almost begun to wonder where her guard was, or if they intended to leave her here alone among the dead, when Tom was at her side. Sudden as a striking adder, he seized her, his hands digging into the soft flesh of her arms. She staggered and cried out, unable to stop herself.

"Ginny," he whispered, his voice a hiss like poisonous vapor. "My foolish, stupid Ginny. You are mine and mine alone, don't you understand that?"

"Yes," she said, looking up into his face. That lovely face she knew so well, the eyes like deep blue wounds. She could see rage, and behind that, a bright sharp agony. *I've hurt him*, she thought, wonderingly. *I've actually hurt him.*

He loves you, Draco had said: *In his own sick, revolting way, he does love you.*

The pain of impossible love; Ginny knew the look of it the way she knew the sight of her own hands. "I am yours, Tom," she said.

He shook her, hard. "I saw your ribbon around his wrist," he snarled. "Like a knight's favor - is he your noble white knight, Ginny? Is he going to save you?"

She shook her head.

"You're mine," he said. "You'll always be mine. You are what I tore out of myself to become what I had to become, and I am what you tore out of yourself to make me all your rage and all your hate, and all your poisoned love. You can never belong to anyone else but me!" His voice had risen to a near-hysterical pitch, and his eyes were wide and wild. "I saw how you looked at him, and I won't have it! You're mine, and I'll make you mine after the ceremony - I'll make you mine forever. Do you understand me?"

"You could make me yours now," she said.

For a moment, she thought he might break her neck on the spot, and risk the consequences to himself later. Either that, she thought, or he might take her up on her offer - something she didn't want to think about, but if it prevented him from ascending to godhood, might well be worth it.

Instead he just laughed, his grip on her arms relaxing. "My Ginny," he said. "How you do tease me." He kissed her forehead as if he meant to mark her, and let her go. "Nice try," he said, and took her hand.

Ginny said nothing. Hand in hand with Tom, she went down the corridor. In front of them, moving slowly because they were being dragged, were Harry, Hermione, and Draco. Voldemort walked behind, and Lucius beside him. Rhysenn, crumpled on the ground, did not stir as they passed.

This is it, Ginny thought. The last of it, the final battle. This is where it is all decided. This is where we die or live, where we save the world or lose it. This is the end.

Raising her head, she marched down the hall, keeping her gaze steadily in front of her, not looking to the right or left. Whatever happened, they

would meet it together - Harry, Hermione, Draco, Ron, and herself, as they had met so many things in the past, and triumphed.

She did not look to the side when they passed Wormtail, creeping along alone by the wall, his silver hand glimmering in the darkness. He cast a resentful look at her Weasley hair as she went by, and grunted to himself. "Bother," he muttered. "We're going to need at least two more pairs of shackles."

Part Two: Valediction

Ron saw the chamber doors open, and a guard enter, dragging a wildly struggling captive with him, her curly brown hair obscuring her face as she writhed and kicked. *Hermione!* he thought with immense relief, dragging himself as close as he could to the edge of the platform and looking down. *I knew she'd be all right!*

She was followed by a far more subdued Harry, whose hands were bound behind him, and Draco, whose hair was thoroughly mussed and who looked too sullen to put up a fight. Hermione, hissing and spitting, threw something of a tantrum over wanting to be shackled next to Harry: the end result of this was that she was bound to the wall at the end of the line of shackles, farthest from everyone else. This, Ron thought, was uncharacteristic of her, but he didn't dwell on it: he was distracted by the advent of Ginny, who walked into the room not under guard at all, but hand in hand with dark-haired Tom Riddle.

Where the others were filthy and beaten-looking, Ginny looked radiant, seeming almost to glow inside her blue satin robes. Her hair rained down around her shoulders, strawberry-gold. She showed no resistance to Tom as he carefully shackled her to the wall beside Harry, who offered her a stiff little nod. Draco, tied between Hermione and Harry, didn't look at her at all as Tom leaned in and fastened the iron manacles about her slim wrists, gazing at her intently as he did so.

Mum would certainly not approve of this, Ron thought with a dry hysteria, as Tom stepped back and surveyed his work appraisingly. "Very fetching," he said. "Like Andromeda, waiting for the Hydra."

"It was the Kraken," put in Draco, who was gazing at the ceiling.

"It wasn't," said Tom. "It was the Hydra."

"It was the Kraken, you undereducated yob," said Draco. "You know, books aren't just for storing up memories of your maladjusted, spotty adolescence, Riddle; some people actually read them."

Tom glanced over towards Voldemort. "Can we gut him now?"

It was Lucius who shook his head. "Not yet. We may need him," he said cryptically.

Tom's lip curled, but he didn't reply. Instead he leaned in and kissed Ginny, hard, on the mouth. Seeing her stiffen, Ron remembered his vision in which she had been dead, neck snapped, lying broken on a bed of her own fiery hair. He turned his face away.

Ginny watched Tom walk away from her, the bitter taste of his kiss still on her lips. She knew what the others must think of her. Except Hermione. Hermione ought to understand. She had only been following Hermione's orders, after all.

It was not that there was any part of her that wanted Tom, longed for his touch as she might long for the cool tang of a knife blade against her wrist, savored his beauty as she might savor the sweetness of poison. In no way had she been grateful for the freedom Hermione's orders had given her to respond to his caresses, acknowledge his deadly adoration.

No.

As he had fastened the shackles around her wrists he had leaned in and whispered in her ear, the words of the long-ago cast spell that had started all this.

As thou art bound, let us be bound

Thee to me.

Voldemort was already waiting inside the pentagram for Tom, his stiff posture showing his impatience. He held his wand in one white, spidery hand. Lucius stood outside the pentagram, arms folded, expression impassive. Wormtail knelt at Voldemort's feet, holding an open book up for the Dark Lord's perusal, a look of abject fear on his face. As Tom stepped grinning into the pentagram, a bright line of fire ran all the way around its edges, outlining it in flame.

Beside Ginny, Hermione sucked in a gasp of breath. "It's starting," she said.

The pentagram burned, and inside the fiery outline, Tom stepped to Voldemort's side. Ron, looking down from his platform, saw the Dark Lord greet his disciple with a frown. "At last you grace us with your presence, apprentice."

"Apologies, my Lord." Tom, hiding a smile, swept a graceful bow towards his older self.

"Take your place at my side," Voldemort snapped, and Tom did so. "And now, Tom - the bloodletting. Begin it."

Tom looked up, still smiling. Ron saw a dark brilliance flash in his blue eyes, and the sharp white of his teeth as he grinned, and raised his left hand. The tips of his fingers flashed a bright green fire, and an agonizing pain lanced through Ron's body. The skin of his arms burned as if hot pokers were being held against them. Screaming, he thrashed in his chains, but the manacles around his wrists were mercilessly tight. He felt a drawing pull against his veins, as if a vampire were sucking the blood out of him. He whimpered hoarsely as hot blood spilled from his slashed wrists and arms, dripping down his fingers and splashing onto the marble floor below.

"Ron!"

Hermione heard Ginny scream as Ron twisted and struggled on his platform, his cries of pain audible to them all. She turned to look at

Harry. His face was white and set. Draco was gazing at Harry, his teeth sunk into his lower lip. *And it begins*, Hermione thought. *This is what Voldemort wants us to watch. Each death worse than the previous one until only Harry is left.*

Ginny, sobbing, thrashed and struggled in her bonds, crying out alternately for her brother and for Tom. Some part of Hermione pitied her, and some other, more ruthless part, wanted to slap her into silence. What was the point of begging Tom Riddle for help or mercy? He didn't know the meaning of the words. He was standing beside the Dark Lord now, looking around in smirking pleasure as Ron's blood splattered down onto the floor in front of him. The blood sizzled as it touched the flaming lines of the pentagram. And as it touched them, they began to glow more strongly, the flames licking higher, the whole area inside the pentagram shimmering. It was almost beautiful, even more so as the Four Worthy Objects, mirror and cup, dagger and scabbard, began to glow with a fierce brilliance, like four separate torches.

Hermione began a swift series of mental calculations. At the rate Ron was bleeding, they had ten minutes, perhaps twenty, before he went into shock. After the shock, death would follow shortly. They were lucky, she thought, that Tom had gone for the wrists. If he had hit an artery, they would have even less time than they did.

Raising her hand as high as the chain would allow, she slid her fingers under the collar of her t-shirt, finding the lockpick she had tucked under the strap of her bra by touch. Then she went to work on her shackles.

Voldemort raised his black-draped arms to the sky, clearly visible through the open ceiling of the Ceremonial Chamber, and began to chant. "*Fulmen evoca! Callis inveni! Exitum reptat! Exitum! Exitum!*"

As he chanted, the strange light inside the pentagram turned from white to green. A fine silvery mist rose from the floor, half-cloaking the figures inside the five-pointed star. The mist drifted across the floor of the chamber, winding around the legs of the four shackled prisoners. It felt like cold fingers. Draco tasted it on his lips and shuddered. The taste was bitter as aloe.

He turned his head to the side. "Harry," he whispered, but Harry seemed not to hear him. He was staring ahead of him, white to the lips, his hands clenched so tightly into fists that Draco could see where his nails dug into his palm. Draco couldn't tell if he was staring at Ron, whose struggles were slowing, or at Voldemort. Or even at Lucius, standing impassively just beyond the perimeter of the pentagram. As Draco watched, he crossed and uncrossed his arms, and Draco saw the bright flash of the Malfoy signet ring on his finger.

He glanced down at his own hand, where the same ring burned on the same finger. When he was a child he had looked forward to being old enough to wear the Malfoy ring, to using its carved back to stamp his initials into soft sealing wax. He remembered the way the stone caught the light when his father reached, bare-handed, to swing him up in his arms, and a pain lanced through his chest, so sharp and so severe that for a moment he thought that it was the poison, burning him from inside.

The truth was that he still could not believe it. As a child, he had loved his father unconditionally. He had always known his father's love for him was not the same. That it was conditional love, contingent on the honor he brought to the Malfoy family. He had known that his father did not mind the sight of his son's blood, or the sound of his son's cries of pain. He remembered dead birds, their necks broken, and chairs lined with nails, and the memory of the scars up and down his back, the cicatrices of his family name. *I am a Malfoy.* The cold comfort of that.

But conditional love was still love. That his father might not love him at all had never occurred to him. He was his father's bone and blood after all, almost a perfect carbon copy, and surely that did not mean nothing? Even Voldemort seemed to hold some fatherly affection for his younger self. And yet Lucius faced the prospect of his son's death without blinking. *I am young. I can have more children.*

Draco looked away from his father, unable to bear it any longer. He saw Ginny, hanging limp in her shackles, and Hermione, working away at one of her manacles as if she could rip it off her wrist. Good old Hermione, he thought, refusing to ever give up. And then there was Harry, looking directly at him now, his green eyes lambent, like far-off water. He seemed to be gathering himself for something. "Malfoy," he said. "When I tell you to close your eyes, close your eyes, all right?"

Baffled, Draco nodded. "Yeah, all right."

Chains rattled as Harry reached his hand towards Draco, but even with their arms extended as far as they could reach, only their fingertips touched. Draco swallowed against the bitter taste in his mouth. "Potter, you -"

But Harry was staring upward. "Malfoy, the *sky*."

Draco jerked his chin up and stared. Through the open chamber ceiling, he had a perfect view of the black night sky above, spangled with stars like chips of ice. It had begun to roil, like the bubbling mixture in a potions cauldron. Streaks of blue and gold, violet and silver, hurtled across it, colliding in vast explosions that seemed to rock the heavens.

Jagged tongues of black lightning crackled across the sky. One stabbed down through the open roof, striking the ground of Voldemort's feet. Tom looked startled, but Voldemort only threw his head back, howling his chant to the sky. "*Fulmen evoca! Fulmen evoca! Fulmen evoca!*"

The Four Worthy Objects began to rise into the air. Now they hung at eye-level to the Dark Lord, each at one point of the star, a thin line of blue energy connecting them. Another jagged line of lightning struck the mirror; Draco wondered if it would shatter, but it merely began to glow with a terrible, eye-piercingly bright silver light.

Letters began to appear inside the mirror, rising slowly to the surface like a drowned corpse rising to the surface of water. Voldemort ceased his chanting abruptly, seizing at the mirror, drawing it towards him. He opened his mouth, shouted out a word, which Draco could not hear.

For a moment, there was perfect silence. Even the wind had stopped. The echo of the Word hung inside Ginny's mind, twisting and turning like a moth caught in a spider's web.

The mirror shattered in Voldemort's hands. He shouted hoarsely, raising his eyes to the sky. It had turned to blood. A roaring came from all around them, a terrible wailing howl, more unearthly than any scream, as if the heavens themselves were crying out in rage. Draco heard Harry suck in his breath. "*Shut your eyes! Shut your eyes, Malfoy!*"

Draco shut his eyes, just as the world exploded.

"Shut your eyes! Shut your eyes!" Hermione screamed, and Ginny did, covering her face with her hands for good measure. The ground under her feet seemed to rock and tremble, and there was a terrible smell of burning, and heat, heat like a bonfire, scorching her skin through the thin material of her robes. She gasped superheated air, almost screaming at the pain in her lungs.

She was not the only one screaming. Above the terrible roar of wind and lightning, she could hear other screams, higher and harsher than her own. Voldemort was howling like a mad thing, and over his howls she could hear - was that *Tom* screaming? She nearly opened her eyes at that, but suddenly there were hands at her wrists, and she felt the manacles that pinned her to the wall loosen and then open. She pitched forward and nearly fell, but was caught by firm hands around her shoulders. "You can open your eyes now," Hermione said.

Ginny's eyes flew open, and she stared. Hermione stood in front of her, unshackled, her face smeared with grime and smoke. Behind her, Ginny could see Harry unfastening Draco from his shackles, standing with his hands on the other boy's shoulders. Both of them were staring towards the center of the room, where the pentagram still burned, and Voldemort spun in its center, shrieking. As Ginny stared in amazement, she saw him grab for Tom, who jerked back in surprise, his arms flailing. His hand caught the edge of Ron's platform, tilting it violently. Ron, limp as a dishrag, rolled off the platform and landed on Tom, knocking him to the ground. Voldemort continued to scream, a high mindless wailing that went on and on like a police siren.

"My God," Ginny whispered. "What on earth is going on? I thought the ceremony was supposed to make Voldemort all-powerful -"

"It would have," Hermione said grimly, "if he'd done it right." She beckoned to Harry and Draco, who came towards them, keeping close to the wall. Thick black smoke was billowing up from the pentagram now, nearly hiding the figures inside it. Ginny could still see Voldemort, spinning and screaming, thrusting out his left hand again and again towards the sky. Beyond the pentagram, Lucius had backed up against the

far wall, his mouth open in stunned surprise. He showed no inclination to go to the aid of his Master.

As for Tom, Ginny could no longer see him - or her brother - at all.

"You did this," Draco said, arriving smoke-smearred and panting at Hermione's side. He stared at her, half in accusation, half in amazement. "Bloody hell, what did you do?"

"Double transfiguration," Hermione said calmly. "It's quite simple really, but I can't explain now. We have to get to Ron. Harry, your scabbard?" She held out her hand.

Staring at her with a mingled expression of love and slight terror, Harry handed her his scabbard, leaving the sword of Gryffindor bare in his hand. "I can't believe it worked," he said.

"Of course it worked," Hermione replied, taking the scabbard and shoving it through her belt. Then she gasped. Ginny followed her gaze and saw a figure emerging from the smoke around the pentagram. It was Ron, she saw to her surprise, but he wasn't walking - he seemed to be hanging limp in some sort of invisible net, carried along

by invisible forces. His head hung down against his chest, and his arms, the deep wounds on his wrists clearly visible, dangled at his sides.

"Ron," Ginny whispered. She tried to run to her brother, but Draco had seized her wrist in an iron grip and was holding her tightly.

"Wait," he said. "He's being brought to us."

It was true. Ron neared them, then crumpled at their feet, a puppet with its strings cut. The air shimmered above him, and Rhysenn appeared, the cloak of invisibility slipping off her shoulders. Her white dress was covered in blood from neck to waist, and blood stained her bare arms.

"You'd better hurry," she said, looking at Ron almost anxiously. "He hasn't got much more time."

Ginny choked back the sob in her throat, dropping to her brother's side as Draco's grip on her wrist loosened. Ron was terribly pale, half-soaked

in blood, even his red hair stiff with it. She touched his cold cheek lightly. "Hermione," she whispered. "Is there anything -?"

But Hermione was doing something very peculiar; she was unclipping a barrette from her hair, one of the bright, sparkling ones that Blaise had given her. She glanced at it where it lay sparkling in her palm, then whispered over it: "*Resolvo veneficus. Veritas.*"

As Ginny watched in amazement, the tiny barrette trembled in Hermione's palm, then suddenly sprang upward, growing and lengthening. The tiny sparkling jewels turned to great glimmering emeralds that clung to the handle of an enormous silver cup, the interior of which was carved with a pattern of waves and scales and glimmered as though it were full of liquid. *The Cup.*

"So *that's* how you did it," Draco said, sounding both amazed and delighted. "That flask, that wasn't the Cup at all - it was a transfigured fake! And Voldemort never thought to check it, since why would you bother hiding something that wasn't the real Cup? You're a genius, Hermione, you -"

"Later, Malfoy," Hermione said, and set the rim of the Cup to Ron's lips. Water spilled from it into his mouth, running down over his chin. "Come on, Ron," Hermione whispered. "Come on, now -"

He coughed, spitting water, the color returning to his cheeks in a flood. As Ginny watched in amazement, the wounds on his wrists vanished, sealing themselves back up, the skin knitting together seamlessly, leaving no scar. The healthy pink tinge returned to his face and his eyes opened, clear and blue. He blinked, staring around him in surprise. "Er," he said. "Hello, everyone."

Hermione burst into tears.

"Oh, dear," said Ron.

"Ron!" Ginny flung herself on her brother, hugging him tightly. His arms came up around her and he patted her on the back awkwardly.

"Er..." he said.

Ginny sat back, sniffing. "I thought you were..."

"I thought I was, too." Ron sat up, glancing around at the billowing smoke, the roiling sky, and the darting figure of Voldemort, shrieking and dashing inside in the pentagram. "What the hell is going on?" he demanded.

"The ceremony didn't work," Hermione said briefly. "One of the Objects Voldemort tried to use wasn't a real Worthy Object, and the whole thing disintegrated. Now Voldemort's trapped inside the pentagram. He can't get out."

"Great!" said Ron. He glanced around anxiously. "I mean, that's good, isn't it?"

"As long as it lasts, it's good," Rhysenn said. "I would estimate it will take another ten minutes or so for the effects of the ceremony to fade. Then he will be free. And very angry. I suggest you begin running away now."

Harry shook his head. "I'm not running," he said. He looked at Ron, and Ron at last raised his eyes to Harry, and their gazes met. All Ron's regret was in his eyes, all his stubbornness and his sorrow.

"Harry," he said, awkwardly, "Harry, if I -"

"Come on." Harry stuck out his hand. "If you don't- I mean, we could use your help."

There was the barest fraction of hesitation; then Ron took Harry's hand, and let Harry help him to his feet. They stood staring at each other, as if not sure whether they had license to grin foolishly yet. Draco looked away from them - and his eyes widened.

"Bugger," he said, eloquently. "Look who's *not* trapped in the pentagram."

From the center of the roiling smoke, a figure had emerged. Streaked with smoke and grime, his elegant robes hanging off him in filthy tatters, his blond hair was matted with ash. One of his sleeves was stained with blood. He stared around him malevolently, coughing on smoke. *His glamour's gone*, Ginny thought.

"Tom," she whispered. "But I thought - "

"It wasn't his spell," Hermione said. "So he isn't trapped in the pentagram like Voldemort is." She looked anxiously towards Harry. "What should we do?"

Tom staggered a few steps further from the pentagram, blinking, before his gaze snapped to Ginny. Their eyes met, and she shrank back towards Draco. Tom flung out his left hand, snarling, but nothing happened. His face twisted violently, lips curling back over his teeth. Then he turned and dashed from the room.

Ginny sprang to her feet. "No - we can't let him -"

"Wait." Seizing her arm, Harry turned to Draco. "Malfoy, you know the layout of this place better than anyone. Can you -"

Draco nodded. "I'll get him." He turned and sped after Tom, leaving the huge double doors standing open behind him.

Harry released his grip on Ginny, turning to Ron. "If Tom's free, then Lucius -" he began, but as he spoke, his grip on Ginny loosened. She tore free and dashed after Draco through the double doors.

Harry said a word Hermione had no idea he knew, and started after Ginny. She caught at his sleeve. "Don't," she said. "Draco will never let her go with him, anyway."

"I suppose so," Harry said dubiously, glancing sideways at Ron.

"She's safer out of here, isn't she?" Ron said dryly, glancing towards the pentagram, still gouting ash and flames. "Still, maybe I should -"

"I will go after her," Rhysenn said, rising to her feet with the grace of smoke. "I will make sure she stays out of harm's way."

She drifted out the door in a swirl of black hair.

Harry's dubious look came to rest on Hermione. "She's being awfully helpful," he said.

"Yes," Hermione said serenely, re-Transfiguring the cup into a barrette with a flick of her wand.

"I suspect you had something to do with it," Harry said.

"Maybe so," Hermione agreed, clipping the barrette back into her hair.

"You're not going to tell me, are you?" Harry said.

"I hardly think I'm the only one of us keeping secrets related to Rhysenn," Hermione said, brushing the dust off her Puddlemere United t-shirt.

Harry's mouth opened slightly, and he looked so appalled that Hermione, for a moment, felt sorry for him.

But then he *had* been locking lips with that succubus-creature only a few days after they'd broken up, and he hadn't told her. There was only so sorry for him that she could be. Then again, she'd kissed Draco, and hadn't told Harry, although there hadn't really been an opportunity to talk to him alone, aside from that time that Draco had left them in the bedroom together so she could talk to him alone. Maybe that would have been a good time to do it. Oh, dear.

"Harry," she began. "Look, I should tell you that Draco and I -"

"Arrrggh." It was Ron, interrupting with a strangled noise. He pointed. "Voldemort," he said, a bit indistinctly. "He nearly got out of the pentagram that time. Look, maybe we should..."

Harry was already tugging the sword of Gryffindor out of its scabbard. "I'm going in there."

"No!" Hermione protested, quickly. "Harry, you can't..."

"I have to." He looked at her, steady green eyes unwavering. "You know it."

"If this is some symbolic thing, Harry -"

"It's not," he said quietly. "That pentagram won't hold him much longer, you heard Rhysenn. And then what? We run? He may not have the God-like powers he wanted, but he's plenty powerful enough. Right now he's trapped, blinded, still reeling from shock. Right now, I have a chance. We have a chance."

"So you'll let us go with you," Ron said swiftly, coming up to stand by Harry.

"I wish you wouldn't," Harry said grimly. "I wish I could make you promise to wait here -"

"Never," said Hermione.

"Not a chance," said Ron, and looked towards the pentagram with hatred in his eyes. "He tried to kill me - drain my blood. Not to mention the kidnapping and the torture. No, I have my own scores to settle, Harry."

Harry nodded. "Do you have a wand, though?"

Ron shook his head. "No - they took it away from me."

"Give me your wrists," Harry said, and when Ron did, Harry transferred the now-frayed leather cuffs he was wearing from his wrists to Ron's. "These'll help."

Ron blinked bemusedly, looking at the cuffs. "Very stylish."

"Terror of squirrels everywhere," said Harry, and turned to Hermione before she could ask him what he meant. "Hermione?"

"I've *got* my wand," she started to protest, indignantly, but then his arms were around her and he was hugging her, hard. "I love you," he said, and kissed her, once, hard on the mouth, the sword of Gryffindor pressed between them. When he let her go, it caught on her shirt, tearing the hem of it, and Hermione put the back of her hand to her mouth and smiled around it at Harry, her eyes full of tears.

"Harry," she said, "be careful," which had always been her way of telling him that she loved him. And he nodded and turned back towards Ron, who had been pretending to inspect the cuffs.

"Are we ready?" he asked, and Hermione remembered an icy night in Hogsmeade, kneeling, all three of them in the snow and swearing that they would be together until the end. And here it was, the end, and she didn't feel at all ready for it.

"Ready," she lied, and Ron nodded. Harry began to walk towards the pentagram, and they followed him, the way they had followed him now for seven years. *God, please keep him safe*, Hermione thought, her eyes on Harry as he stepped into the pentagram. She glanced back at Ron, who gave her a nervous smile, then went to follow Harry -

And something struck her, knocking her sideways. "You little *bitch*," said a cold and icy voice, and she looked up into the winter-gray eyes of Lucius Malfoy.

"Draco, wait!"

Halfway down the corridor already, he turned, saw her, and cursed out loud. "Why are you following me? Didn't you hear what Harry said?"

Ginny stopped, her hand outstretched. "It's not fair," she said. "I should be the one to go after him."

"Maybe not." A bitter smile twisted Draco's mouth. "You have a history of not being able to quite say no to him."

"That doesn't matter - you shouldn't be the one risking yourself! It should be me! I'm the one who brought him back into the world, he's my responsibility!"

"I'll tell you what," Draco said.

Her lips parted in surprise. "Kill him? You can't kill him -"

□Oh?□ His tone was cold. □Why not?□

She hesitated. It would be so easy to tell him the truth: Because if he dies, I might die as well. And if that had truly been the only reason she was

reluctant for Tom's death, she would have said those words. But it wasn't. And she didn't.

"I thought so," Draco said, dismissively. He turned on his heel. Slumping against the wall, she watched him walk away in silence.

Lucius stood over Hermione, wand in hand, his face twisted with fury. Like Tom had been, he was filthy with ash, his fine gray robes smeared with it, his knuckles raw and bloodied. "*You* did this," he snarled, his wand hand utterly still as he trained the tip of it just between her eyes. "Filthy little Mudblood."

The Cup will protect me, Hermione thought, but her heart was pounding. There was such cold hatred in his eyes. She had rarely been spoken to with such hatred, not even by Snape - years ago, she thought, Draco had spoken to her like this. And if it had not been for Harry, perhaps this is what Draco would have become, a monster like his father, with a mind of winter and eyes that cut like the jagged edge of an icicle. "It's over," she said. "There's nothing you can do to me now."

"Hermione?" It was Ron, finding his way towards her through the smoke. "Hermione, did you -"

He broke off as he came into view of them and stared. Hermione could see what he was thinking - he had the knives in his hand, but what use were they, when Lucius had a wand? And Harry was gone, into the pentagram, probably locked in battle with Voldemort this very moment.

"Ron!" she shouted, holding up her hand to warn him to stay back. "It's all right," she added, foolishly, "he can't hurt me -"

Lucius laughed, a high snarl of a laugh, and seized her by the arm, yanking her into a sitting position. Before she could react, she felt his hands in her hair, tearing at the barrette. It came off in his hand, along with a large clump of her hair, ripped out at the roots. She cried out, reaching for it, but Lucius shoved her hard and she sprawled back onto the floor, gasping in pain and surprise.

"I should have guessed before," he said, "when I saw the look on your disgusting little Mudblood face as we were dragging you off. I thought I saw a gleam of triumph in your eyes. You're not stupid," he said, turning the barrette over in his fingers, "I'll give you that. You have a sort of narrow, vicious cunning to you, like a rat, or a weasel. I've heard that about your kind before. Something about the mixing of blood seems to encourage that sort of low cleverness. Ensuring that Voldemort got the wrong cup, now, that was a bit of cheap trickery there. And it nearly worked out for you, didn't it?"

He jammed the tip of his wand up under her chin, forcing her to raise her face to his. By far the worst thing about looking directly at Lucius Malfoy, she thought, was the echo of Draco that was there: the same fine-boned face, the same drawling, lazy, diamond-sharp voice.

"Get away from her," Ron said, but he hung back as if frightened that any move he made might force Lucius' hand.

Lucius laughed, a jeering, sharp laugh, and jammed the knife deeper into Hermione's throat, making her choke and gag. "*Avada* -"

"*No!*" Ron flung out his hand - and from the cuff around his wrist shot the thin blade of a knife. It flew across the room, burying itself in Lucius' arm, just above the elbow. Bellowing with pain, Lucius fell to his knees, the wand dropping from his hand, Gasping for breath, Hermione snatched it up, pointing it at Lucius. "*Stupefy*," she croaked, and light burst from the wand's tip.

Eyes rolling up in his head, Lucius crumpled to the hard marble floor, blood running in thin rivulets from his injured arm. Hermione raised her amazed eyes to Ron. "Ron," she said. "That was incredible. Where did you learn to handle a knife like that?"

Ron looked from the wrist cuff, to Hermione, and shrugged sheepishly. "Oh, you know." he said. "Around."

The taste of the smoke was bitter. Bitter on his tongue; bitter where it stung his eyes. Harry could feel the heat of the floor through his boots, knew that if he fell against it, it would burn him.

Sweat trickled down his spine, plastered his hair to his forehead. The sword of Gryffindor was heavy in his hand, the hilt slippery, and the blade banged against his leg as he walked. His wrist was starting to ache.

Nobody ever mentioned this sort of thing when they wrote adventure stories about heroic confrontations, he thought. Nobody mentioned the gut cramps of panic and tension, the hollow lightheadedness of fear, the coppery-bitter taste of hate and violence.

He could hear the Dark Lord screaming. The screams grew louder as Harry reached the heart of the pentagram. They were mixed with other screams as well. Harry's foot struck something; and he recoiled; it was Wormtail, he saw with horror, who had crawled towards him across the burning marble floor. His clothes smoked, as did his skin - red and blistered in some places, burnt nearly black in others. "Water," Wormtail croaked, seizing the hem of Harry's frayed traveling cloak with his metal hand. "For the love of God, water please -"

He raised his head then, and Harry saw that his eyes had been burnt out. There were only blistered white orbs where they had once been. He heard himself cry out in disgust and horror, and stumbled back, bile rising in the back of his throat. His cloak came off in Wormtail's grip and he was left shivering in his jacket and thin shirt. "Master," Wormtail croaked. "Master, *please...*"

He thinks I'm Voldemort, Harry thought with a bewildered nausea, and then the choking thick gray air in front of him parted and the Dark Lord loomed up out of the smoke. His chalk-white skin was smeared with patches of black char, and in his clawed left hand he gripped the hilt of the Worthy Dagger. With a howl of triumphant rage, he lunged forward, plunging the blade into Harry's chest.

Ginny watched as Draco vanished into the darkness at the end of the corridor. Then she slumped back against the double doors of the Ceremonial Chamber, her heart pounding wildly.

She wondered if she would feel it, the blade going into Tom, his life pumping out of him. Or maybe death would come down like a curtain, a neat severance dividing this life from the next.

Or maybe nothing would happen at all.

Or maybe Tom would kill Draco, but that was more horrible to contemplate than her own death. Especially since it would be her fault. *Coward*, said the voice inside her head, *cowardly traitor, coward, you let him go to face your own responsibility.*

"Decided not to go, then, did you?" said a voice at her shoulder. Ginny turned to see Rhysenn there. The folds of her white dress blew in the bitter, smoky air of the corridor, and her feet did not quite touch the floor. "I guess you don't need me to protect you after all."

"He wouldn't let me go," Ginny said flatly. "And you're right, I don't need you."

Rhysenn chuckled. "I'm sure he'll be fine, you know." She twirled, standing up on her toes, her black hair wrapping her slowly like ribbons around a Maypole.

"Who'll be fine?" Ginny asked, suspicion creeping into her voice. "Tom or Draco?"

"Does it matter? You're soft on them both, or so I hear. Either way, you win."

"That's not true," Ginny said, her voice sounding sharper than she'd expected. "Tom has to die. I'd kill him myself if - if I could," she finished, lamely.

"You could break his black little heart," Rhysenn said cheerfully. She had stopped spinning, but her hair still wrapped her, like swipes of black paint against the white of her dress and skin.

"No one dies of a broken heart," Ginny said crossly.

"I wouldn't say no one." Rhysenn tilted her head to the side. "He is curious, that one. At times he seems to radiate pure darkness, but at other times I think I catch a flicker of humanity in him ..."

Seamus, Ginny thought. Something tickled the back of her mind. "You suck souls out, right?" she said. "I mean, that's why you're called a succubus, isn't it?"

Rhysenn blinked. "Your etymology is poor, but you are not entirely incorrect. I draw the souls of men into myself, and feed from their power."

"Ah," Ginny said, her mind suddenly busily at work. "That's very interesting..."

The force of the blow sent Harry reeling back, Voldemort's malevolent laughter in his ears. Automatically he looked down, saw the dagger sticking out of his chest, and felt a strong urge to vomit.

Yet - there was no pain. Strangely, no pain at all. The dagger had gone through his jacket, just over his heart. He expected to see blood spreading out across the fabric. But there was nothing.

Voldemort had stopped laughing. He pointed a long, spidery finger at Harry. "You," he hissed. "This is all because of you. You are the reason the ceremony failed me! And your death - oh, such a death I had planned for you! Your tortures would have lasted for eternity!" He raised his left hand again, flung it towards Harry, hissing, but nothing happened. He howled again, raising his fists to the sky. "And now I am cheated even of this - the chance to strike you down with my own hand!"

He means that his Magid powers are gone, Harry realized. His thoughts were so clear, so strangely lucid. Maybe this was shock. He took another step back, closed his hand around the hilt protruding from his chest, and pulled. The dagger came free with a scraping noise.

"*Master!*" It was Wormtail again, having crawled, burnt and bleeding, nearly to Voldemort's feet. He reached out to catch at his master's robes, a terrible wheezing sound coming from his throat. "*Master, you can help me, please, help me!*"

Voldemort tugged at his robe, an expression of distaste twisting his lipless mouth. "Release me! You dare to touch me without my permission? Remove your filthy hands from my robes immediately -"

"But Master - Master, I am dying -" Wormtail whined, clutching harder. "Water, please, Master, just some water -Master, you promised I would live forever - *Master!*"

Harry looked down at the dagger closed in his fist. There was no blood on the blade. He put his hand to his chest. He felt no pain, only the rip in his jacket where the dagger had entered - and something under it, something flat and hard. *The inside pocket of his jacket.* Taking another step back, he plunged his hand into the pocket and drew out - a book.

The Malfoy Family Code of Conduct. With a hole through it, now, where the dagger had gone in.

"Draco's going to murder me," Harry said, aloud, just as Voldemort, lips curled back from his teeth, drew back his foot and kicked Wormtail brutally hard in the head. Wormtail crumpled, and fell like a stone.

Voldemort turned, fastening his gaze on Harry. His eyes narrowed in surprise. "What...?"

Harry dropped the dagger, then kicked it, sending it skittering away across the floor. "If you want to kill me," he said, "you're going to have to do better than that."

Tom, being in much better health than Draco, could run quite a bit faster, and would have escaped quite handily if it weren't for the fact that Draco knew the layout of the fortress much better than he did. So it happened that when Tom had reached the foot of the stairs and stalked his way to the great double doors that led to the front gate, he found Draco leaning up against them, holding Terminus Est in one hand and waving insolently at Tom with the other.

"Leaving so soon?" he asked.

A snarl rose in Tom's throat. All his plans, so well-laid, so gorgeously constructed, had just come down around his head. He could still taste the ashes of burning on his lips and hear Voldemort's screams in his ears. The mistake, he knew, had been in leaving the details of the ceremony to his older self. He had no idea what the Dark Lord had done wrong, but it seemed clear it had been something significant. The ceremony that had been meant to catapult them both to ultimate dominance had instead left them both half-dead, their magic paralyzed.

All in all, Tom was in no mood for the stupid insolence of teenagers.

"Get out of my way," he hissed, advancing on Draco.

"Dear me, no," Draco said, raising the tip of Terminus Est so that it pointed directly at Tom. "I'm afraid you can't pass - which, coincidentally, is what Snape always says to us before Potions exams."

"Cease your driveling and get out of my way, or I will -"

"Or you will what?" Draco replied, mimicking Tom's inflections with a sort of savage glee. His gray eyes were clear, burning like hot silver - his father's eyes. Though Lucius had never looked at Tom with such hatred. "Your magic has abandoned you, if I'm not mistaken, and I doubt you ever were much of a physical fighter." He brought the sword up a little higher; Tom could see, now, the pattern of black roses burnt into the blade. "If you've got a threat to make, I suggest you make it a good one."

"I have no wand, no weapon," Tom pointed out. "You wouldn't -"

"Oh, but I would," Draco said, and laughed shortly. "You've mistaken me for Harry." He moved forward then, so quickly that Tom did not even see the movement, only heard the faint rustle as the cloth over his shoulder slipped and parted, gaping open where Draco had cut it, leaving a patch of bare skin. As Tom stared, blood welled up from the thin cut bisecting his shoulder. "I will cut you down as I cut down your guards," Draco said, his voice flat and emotionless. "Only I will take a pleasure in hurting you that I did not take in killing them."

"But -" Tom flung up his hands in a gesture of distress, but his sharp mind was ticking quickly over his options. Draco was armed, it was true, and his skill with the sword was undeniable; but he was also weak, near death,

and likely half-blind. Escape was still an option - as was snatching up a sword from one of the fallen guards and counting upon greater strength and the element of surprise to allow him to run Draco through. "To kill a man unarmed, that's a cowardly, despicable thing - your father would be -"

"Don't you bring up my father," Draco spat, his eyes flashing before he collected himself. "And I suppose strangling unsuspecting prostitutes is an act of bravery? I saw what you did to that girl in the Midnight Club."

"She was only a whore," Tom said, backing up another step until his heel bumped against the prone body of a guard.

"But that was in another country, and besides, the wench is dead." The sword glinted in Draco's hand as he turned his wrist. "Is that your best excuse?"

"Don't quote Marlowe at me," said Tom. He glanced down. All he needed to do was bend, reach down, and the soldier's short dagger would be within his grasp. "It was an accident. I didn't mean to kill her. Rough play -"

"And Pansy? Were you playing with her? You do seem to have a predilection for killing little girls."

"She was in my way," said Tom. "And she belonged to a family that had betrayed me. I killed my own family. Why not hers?" He grinned, cocking his head to the side. "I find your recriminations surprising, I must admit. If the memories of Seamus Finnegan do not lie, you were not so unlike me yourself, once."

"Once," Draco said. His voice was steady, but the tip of the sword trembled just a little.

"But that was in another country?" Tom chuckled. "Before love cured you of your nasty ways. Touching, that."

The sword trembled a bit more, and Tom's confidence increased. If he could anger Draco enough that Draco rushed at him, he could duck him and seize the dagger. An angry man was an easy man to defeat.

"Do go on," Draco said. "Is this where you tell me that I'm prettier when I'm upset? Or do you save those blandishments for Ginny?"

Hearing the echo of his own words in Draco's voice, Tom gaped at him. And realized, belatedly, that the sword was trembling in Draco's hand not because he was angry, but because he was laughing.

Laughing at *him*.

"Oh, Ginny," Draco said, in a high and rather squeaky voice, "I do so prefer your hair *down*." He grinned at Tom. "Oh, yes, I was there. Hiding under Ginny's bed with the dust bunnies. You interrupted us, you know. Most unfortunate. We'd been having a lovely time before you showed up. I was playing connect-the-dots with the freckles on her lower back. You know, if you connect them all together they almost exactly resemble a map of Birmingham?"

Tom gaped at him. A burning tide of poisonous rage was flooding through his veins. He had never felt anything quite like it before. It choked him. He could not breathe.

"Poor girl, she was quite concerned that I might hurt myself killing you," Draco said, holding up his hand so that Tom could see the white ribbon, now torn and blood-stained, tied around his wrist. "She even gave me this as a token of her love. Remember it?"

With a roar, Tom seized up the guard's dagger and hurled himself at Draco. He had intended to plunge the blade into Draco's throat, but rage made him sloppy and the point of it went into Draco's shoulder instead. Draco hissed a curse, dropped his sword - useless at such short range - and seized hold of the front of Tom's robes, flinging him sideways as they went over together in a heap. Tom landed hard on his back, the wind knocked out of him, clawing at Draco's belt as he tried to drag the other boy down.

Draco jammed a knee into his chest, kneeling on top of Tom, and yanked the dagger out of his own shoulder. It came away, blade thinly smeared with phosphorescent blood. Wincing, he dug the tip of the dagger into Tom's throat.

Tom immediately ceased struggling and froze. Draco jammed the blade in harder, parting the skin over Tom's Adam's apple. Tom could feel the blood trickling down into his collar. *He'll really do it*, he thought, astonishment mixing with terrified rage. He looked up into Draco's flat gray gaze. *He'll cut my throat and walk away smiling. And Lucius always said his son was weak...*

Draco raised the dagger. "Good night, sweet prince, and may hordes of extremely unattractive demons drag you to your eternal torment," he said. "I only wish I could watch."

The blade fell -

"She'll die if you touch me!" Tom shouted.

The dagger jerked to a half, inches from Tom's throat. "What?" Draco breathed.

"Ginny," said Tom, panting in fear. "We're bound together. If she dies, I die. And if I die..." He bared his teeth in a rictus grin, hands spread wide. "Well, we don't know for sure, do we, but I suspect it won't *improve* her health - if she survives at all."

Draco didn't move, only stared down at Tom, his fine-drawn mouth gone slack with surprise.

"You know," Tom said, "you really *are* prettier when you're upset. Who'd have guessed?"

Harry heard Voldemort's intake of breath, sharp in the sudden silence. "You..." the Dark Lord hissed. "How...?"

"You know, I always thought if you killed me, you'd be wielding your wand," Harry said. "Not sneaking up behind me to stab at me in the fog."

"My wand was destroyed when the mirror was destroyed," Voldemort replied coldly. "As, once again, you have destroyed everything I have. You - a stupid little half-blood with cowardly traitors for parents. You, who have cheated me out of my life, my victory, and even my vengeance." He

took a step towards Harry, a cold, ugly light festering in his eyes. 'You, who should have been no more than an ant in my path, and crushed as easily. Tell me, *what have I done to deserve you?*'

"Gee," Harry said. "You want a list?" With a silent apology to Draco, he dropped *The Malfoy Family Code of Conduct*, and reached with his free hand into his belt, drawing out his wand. With his left hand, he held his sword, lightly, as Draco had taught him to. He did not like fighting with his left hand, particularly, but Draco had insisted that he learn.

Harry raised the wand in his hand.

Voldemort stopped dead in his tracks. "And now you will kill me," he snarled, "unarmed and helpless - so much for the vaunted bravery of the Potters. You are a coward just like your father, Harry -"

Harry flung the wand. It landed at Voldemort's feet.

"Pick it up," Harry said.

Voldemort stared at him, motionless.

"Pick it up," Harry said. "Pick it up and fight me, damn you. You ought to know how to use it - it's the same wand as yours."

"You are a fool," Voldemort said, and snatched the wand up.

For the first time in his life, Harry felt that Voldemort might have a point.

The Dark Lord pointed the wand at Harry. "*Flammifer sphaera!*"

A boiling sphere of flame erupted from the tip of his wand. It hurtled towards Harry, who ducked, flinging himself under it, and rolled to his feet. Silently, he thanked Draco for teaching him how to duck and roll with a blade in his hand and not impale himself. He flung his hand out towards the Dark Lord. "*Incendiaries globus!*" he shouted, but the fireball that exploded from his fingers and shot towards Voldemort was nowhere near as impressive as the one the Dark Lord had flung at him.

Voldemort ducked it, laughing, and came at him again, wand extended. "*Serpens.*" A thick black snake slithered from the tip of his wand and

rocketed towards Harry, fangs bared. Harry barely had time to whip his sword around before it was on him; the blade sliced it neatly in half, splattering Harry with noxious green fluid. The snake collapsed like a dropped rope, subsiding into ash. Nauseated, Harry skittered back, but Voldemort was already flinging another curse: "*Crucio!*"

Harry flung his arm up, and the curse hit the flat of his sword. The sword jerked in Harry's hand, a hairline crack fissuring the blade. Harry raised his right hand, fingers extended. His voice shook as he tried to speak, "*Signa -*"

"*Quasso!*" Voldemort shrieked. Harry tried to duck the red jet of light that sprang from the Dark Lord's wand, but it was following an irregular path; it leaped up, then down, and struck his right arm, just above the elbow. Harry screamed as the bone inside his arm shattered; he could hear it break, like a dry twig snapped in half.

Voldemort was walking towards him through the smoke, laughing. Harry tried to raise his right hand, point it at the Dark Lord, but it hung limp at his side, unmoving. *Focus*, he thought desperately, trying to clear the red burn of agony from his mind. *Focus, Harry.*

Voldemort stopped, looking down at him. Harry tried to raise the sword in his left hand, but Voldemort knocked it aside with an impatient curse. There was a terrible look on his face, a sort of yearning hunger. "Beg me, Harry," he said, almost in a whisper. "Beg me like your parents did - beg me to spare your life. This is how they died, you know - screaming, shrieking, and begging - howling broken on their knees. It took your mother some time to die, you know - she shrieked and shrieked for mercy - cowards, both of them, just like you -"

"She was begging you to save *me!*" Harry screamed. Black dots swarmed in front of his eyes; he didn't know if they were caused by the agony in his arm, or the rage in his soul. "She wasn't begging for her own life, she was begging for *mine!* That's not cowardice - it's courage - and I'd rather die than beg you for anything!"

Voldemort laughed as if he had been waiting for Harry to say exactly that. "Die, then," he said, and raised his wand, pointed it at Harry - Harry threw up his hand, knowing it was too late, Voldemort was already mouthing the words, green light sparking at the tip of his wand -

Voldemort screamed, staggering backward, the curse jetting from his wand but sailing harmlessly over Harry's head. Lowering his arm, Harry saw that Wormtail, not dead after all, had fastened his teeth into Voldemort's leg and was hanging on for dear life. Blood ran down the Dark Lord's leg and puddled on the floor. *Like a rat*, Harry thought, dazedly staring at the yellow teeth clamped into Voldemort's calf. *Just like a rat.*

Once again, Harry tried to raise his right arm, couldn't do it, and fell back against the ground. With his left arm, he reached for the hilt of the sword of Gryffindor, but it was too far away to reach it in time. His groping hand closed on a shard of broken mirror instead, its edges razor-sharp. He gasped in pain, then froze as, with a guttural yell, Voldemort jammed the dagger he held into the back of Wormtail's neck. Wormtail gurgled and let go, slumping to the ground, a bloody froth pouring from his mouth. Voldemort turned, grinning, raising the wand again, sweeping it towards Harry.

"*Avada Kedavra!*" he shrieked.

A jet of green light shot from the wand, directly at Harry. Desperately, Harry flung his left arm up, as if he could ward off the deadly spell, knowing the gesture to be futile.

But he had forgotten the shard of mirror that was clutched in his hand - a shard of not just any mirror, but the Great Mirror, one of the Four Objects worthy of the name of God. The green bolt of light struck the surface of the mirror - and rebounded, shooting back towards Voldemort, only this time it was a thousand times as bright as it had been, a thousand times as deadly.

There was only time for a look of incredulous horror to pass over Voldemort's face. Then the light struck him in the chest, with such force that it lifted him off his feet, flung him down against the marble floor with the sound of shattering bones. A howl of agony rose from him - a terrible, shrieking noise that seemed to go on and on as his body twitched and spasmed. Gasping, half-blinded by the brightness of the Unforgivable Curse, Harry struggled to his knees, dropping the shard of mirror to the ground, and began to crawl. He crawled to the sword of Gryffindor, seized it, and kept crawling, painfully, towards Voldemort.

The agony in his broken arm was excruciating. The wind tore at him, the acrid smoke choking his throat, and Voldemort's howls went on and on. *If only he'd die already*, Harry thought, but the spells Voldemort had put on himself, the ones designed to protect him, to make him nearly immortal, were working against him now. The Aavada Kadavra curse was eating into him, trying to kill him and failing, wracking his more-than-mortal body with agonies Harry couldn't even imagine.

And so, he crawled, the Dark Lord's shrieks ringing in his ears. It felt as if he were crawling a thousand miles, crawling from one end of the earth to another. When he finally reached Voldemort's side he raised the sword in his left hand, and thought again of Draco, who had insisted on teaching him to fight with the hand he didn't favor. In that, as in so many other things, he had turned out unexpectedly to be entirely right.

Harry brought the sword down in an arcing sweep that severed the Dark Lord's head from his body. The blade of the sword bit into the marble floor beneath Voldemort's neck, and his screams stopped, instantly and forever. There was only the sound of the wind. It was over. Harry slumped forward in a dead faint.

"So what should we do with him?" Ron asked, standing over Lucius' limp body. "Kill him?"

"No!" Hermione stood up, then whitened, swaying, and put a hand to her head. "No," she said, again. "We can't - he might know what the missing ingredient in Draco's antidote is."

"You'll never get him to tell you anything," Ron pointed out. "Not unless you torture him."

For a moment, Hermione's face was hard as marble. "I'm willing to do that." She swayed again, and held out the wand to Ron. "You'd better hold this," she said. "My head -"

Lucius screamed. Both Ron and Hermione jumped back, Hermione stumbling and catching at Ron's arm to steady herself. Lucius' scream went on and on, his back arching up from the floor. He thrashed from side to side as if in pain.

"What's going on?" Ron demanded, flabbergasted.

"I don't know," Hermione whispered. "Do you see that?" She pointed. Hovering above Lucius' head was a small, glimmering ball of bluish light. As they watched, it darted downward, disappearing into his open, howling mouth.

He went silent, collapsing back against the floor. Hermione, still gripping the wand, bent to his side and pressed her fingers against his throat. "He's alive," she said.

"What happened?" Ron said. "Did I mess up the Stupefy spell? I've done it before, and that's never - I mean, I've never seen anything like -"

Hermione was shaking her head. She looked at him over Lucius' prone body, and he saw the sudden light shining in her eyes. "I think," she said slowly. "I think this might mean that Harry's done it. I think he might have killed Voldemort."

She didn't tell me that, Draco thought numbly, staring down at Tom. Why didn't she tell me that?

He thought of Ginny, standing in the hallway, her hands out as if she could hold him back from going after Tom.

Nothing, she had said. It's nothing.

She had let him go, knowing he might kill Tom, knowing that it might mean her death if he did, and she had let him go anyway.

I am the cause of this. Tom should be my responsibility.

Tom was laughing. "I knew you couldn't do it," he crowed. "Love and dignity cannot abide in the same house - who was it who said that? Aeschylus?"

"Ovid," Draco said, and brought the dagger down, with savage force.

The blade missed Tom by inches, and the heavy hilt slammed into his temple. With a shudder, he went limp.

"I hate it when people misattribute," Draco said, to no one in particular, and dropped the dagger. He looked down at Tom with some satisfaction. His blue eyes were rolled up in his head, and his freckles stood out against his pallor. "That was for punching me in the museum, Finnigan," Draco added, and reached across Tom to grab the hilt of Terminus Est and drag it towards him.

Once it was thrust through his belt, he frowned. He didn't have enough strength, either magical or physical, to drag Tom back to the Ceremonial Chamber with him, and this was hardly the time to be interrupting Harry with logistics. Leaving Tom here was not an option. He'd wake up and escape, and all Draco's efforts would be wasted, not to mention that whole business of letting a homicidal maniac loose upon the unsuspecting wizarding world *again*.

Then again, he didn't much fancy spending the rest of his life sitting on an unconscious Tom Riddle, either. There weren't many men in the world Draco wanted to spend this much time pressed up against, and Tom certainly wasn't heading that particular list.

It was then that Draco's gaze came to rest on the black ring that gleamed darkly on Tom's left hand. It was the twin of the one his father had once given him, the carved onyx griffin with the Malfoy sigil on its back. *Ah*, Draco thought. With a grin, he reached down and twisted the ring, three times, around Tom's limp and unconscious finger.

The faint only lasted a few seconds. When Harry awoke, he was lying face-down in a pool of the Dark Lord's blood. Gagging, Harry rolled over and dragged himself slowly into a sitting position.

The smoke around him had begun to clear. He could see Wormtail, lying dead a few feet away, blind white eyes turned up to the sky. The wind had increased its howling. It tore at Harry's shirt with icy fingers, froze the blood that covered his hands and stiffened his shirt.

He raised his eyes to the sky. "Enough," he said, quietly.

The wind dipped and softened, curling around him like a lover's hand. Then it vanished, and there was only the clear sky far overhead, spangled

with the brilliant stars that Draco could no longer see. They glittered in their beauty, frost-white and lake-blue, with flashes of icy green. The clouds hung utterly still behind them, a net of pillowy lace flung across the sky. As Harry gazed, he thought he saw a shadow pass across the face of the moon, the outline of some great, flying beast, a dragon or a hippogryph.

He closed his eyes. When he opened them again, the shadow was gone. And he was tired, so tired, and the beauty of the sky meant nothing though he was dimly glad that he was still alive to see it.

He stood up, cradling his broken arm against his chest. Then he bent, and picked up his wand and his sword. The hilt of the sword was thickly smeared with blood. He looked down at Voldemort. The Dark Lord's head had rolled a little distance away and come to rest face-up, eyes staring at the sky, lipless mouth open to reveal the snarling teeth.

Harry had always thought he would feel triumph at this moment, transcendent triumph that would lift him off his feet. But he felt only a great and echoing emptiness, and a strange sort of sorrow. *Mum*, he thought, *Dad. I did this for you. You're avenged now. You can have peace.*

Silence answered him. Shivering, he turned around slowly. Through the fading smoke, he could see the distant outline of waiting figures. Somewhere out there were Hermione, and Draco, and Ron, and it was time for him to rejoin them.

And perhaps, just perhaps, he might never have to leave them again.

Moving slowly, like an old man, Harry limped out of the pentagram.

When Ginny stepped back into the Ceremonial Chamber, leaving Rhysenn in the corridor outside, she found that the choking smoke had begun very slightly to dissipate, though it still stung her eyes and brought a bitter taste to her mouth when she breathed. She blinked stinging tears out of her eyes, looking around for Hermione, Harry or Ron. She saw only the shattered ceiling above leaking starlight, the boiling smoke hiding the room's center -

And Draco, who had somehow managed to get back into the Ceremonial Chamber without passing her in the corridor. He was over by the wall, kneeling next to a prone Tom. Ginny hurried over.

"Did you kill him?" she asked, breathlessly, as she neared them.

Draco looked up. There was a hard edge to his expression, "You know I didn't." he said, and stood up. He prodded Tom with the toe of his boot; Tom didn't move. "Help me get him into the shackles," he said to Ginny.

It was harder than it sounded. Tom was dead weight between them, and Draco seemed to be making an effort not to look at her or touch her. When they closed the second manacle around Tom's wrist, leaving him dangling between them like a corpse in a dungeon, Draco turned away. "I have to find my father," he said.

"Draco," Ginny said. "Are you all right?"

"The ring brought me here so he must be nearby," Draco said, glancing down at the heavy silver band on Tom's limp hand. "And Harry? Have you seen Harry?"

Ginny shook her head. "No. I'd guess he's somewhere ... in there." She pointed at the swirling smoke. Shadows seemed to move inside it, though that could have been a trick of the light. "Draco, please -"

He looked at her, motionless, a slender shadow in black with blood staining his shirt - red, drying to black, not his own blood. "You stay here with him," he said. "Guard him with all the instincts of self-preservation you can muster."

"I should have told you," she began, stricken. "It's just that..."

He took a step forward, gripped her shoulders so hard that she gasped with pain as well as surprise. "Yes," he said. "You should have. Imagine our positions reversed, if you had been the unwitting instrument of my death, if I had tricked you into it."

"I thought you wouldn't hurt him if I told you..."

"And you wanted him hurt that badly?" Draco demanded, incredulous.

"No," Ginny said softly. "But I am afraid of the part of myself that doesn't want it. And Draco - I wanted you to be able to fight, to protect yourself, without worrying about me, with handicapping yourself out of fear for my safety -"

He pushed her away, so hard that she stumbled. "I thought you had stopped being a spoiled little child. I was wrong."

"I'm not a child," she said.

Gray eyes blazed in his thin face. "Don't you ever do anything like that again," he said, and turned and walked away. She watched as the smoke coiled around him, erasing him slowly until he had vanished from her sight. Then she turned back to Tom.

It was Hermione who saw him first, of course. The smoke clearing around him as he walked away from the pentagram, cradling his right arm against his chest. There was blood on his white shirt, blood on his hands, blood that had spattered his face, and the bloody sword of Gryffindor hung by his side. "*Harry!*" she shrieked, and ran forward, stumbling and then righting herself, racing through the smoke.

Ron saw Harry lift his good arm and put it around her, and bow his face down into her hair. They clung to each other, filthy and injured and matted with blood. They clung to each other, and Ron looked away.

He glanced down at Lucius, still limp as a dead fish. *Harry gets the girl, and I get Malfoy's dad*, Ron thought wryly, but the old resentment wasn't there anymore. He prodded at it, experimentally, like prodding at a sore tooth, but he felt nothing at all. He didn't really love Hermione, not that way. It had been a cobweb of dreams, a phantom flower fed on lies and old jealousies.

He looked back at Harry and Hermione. Hermione had let go of Harry's neck and was examining his arm. He saw her tap her wand against it, and Harry straightened the arm out and smiled. There was a great tiredness in his smile, and as he and Hermione walked towards Ron, Ron wondered if she saw it.

"So you did it," Ron said, as Harry neared him. "I knew you would."

For a moment, Harry's smile was real. "Yeah, I -" He glanced down and saw Lucius, and the smile was wiped off his face. "Is he dead?"

Hermione shook her head. "Ron Stupefied him."

Harry looked at Ron. "Wake him up."

Ron blinked, surprised. "What?"

"Wake him *up*," Harry said hoarsely, but Ron, wandless, shook his head. Harry raised his right hand, wincing. "*Enervate*."

Lucius' eyes flew open. He groaned, reaching for the dagger still embedded in his skin, and yanked it out by the hilt. He began to sit up, hand clamped to his arm, blood seeping out around his fingers. His teeth were bared. "My Lord Voldemort," he ground out.

"He's dead," Harry said. There was pure hatred in his voice. "This blood on my hands is his, as is the blood on my blade. And if you don't want yours to join it -"

"Draco," Lucius whispered. His eyes were wide, rimmed in red, his voice hoarse. "Is he all right?"

"Shut up," Harry said furiously, but his hand, clamped to the hilt of his sword, was shaking. "You're not fit to say his name, you sick, filthy murderer - you're worse than Voldemort in your way. He's your son - your *own son* -"

"Where is he?" Lucius' hands, curled into claws, reached for Harry. "The blast - was he injured?"

"You can save your crocodile tears," Harry spat. "Like you care."

"But Harry," Hermione said. Her voice was remote, horrified "He *does care*."

"I know you like to think the best of everyone, Hermione," Harry said, without looking at her. "But he gave up his paternal feelings towards

Draco years ago. Gave them over to Voldemort like they were so much trash."

"I know that, Harry," Hermione said quietly. "But Voldemort's dead now."

Harry turned his head towards her slowly, the confusion plain in his green eyes. "I don't understand," he said, and then a voice sounded behind him, a slim black-clad form taking shape as Draco stepped through the smoke.

"Harry," he said. He stood, blinking a little, eyes narrowed against the smoke. He didn't seem to see his father there, or Hermione, or Ron, or anyone but Harry. "You're all over blood -"

"Not mine," Harry said quickly. "Voldemort's. Well. Mostly."

There was a long pause. "So," Draco said, finally, "It looks like I've missed the excitement again, as usual," and there was relief in his voice, but his gaze stayed on Harry, taking him in slowly, lingering on each abrasion, cut, and bruise. "Your arm," he said. "I felt it break. But you're all right?"

"Hermione healed me," Harry said.

Draco lifted his hand, as if to touch Harry, his shoulders, his face and hands, to reassure himself-

"Draco," Lucius said again, in the same hoarse, new voice.

Draco dropped his hand, turning, his face a mask of surprise, and saw his father kneeling, hands clasped, and Ron standing behind him with the dagger. Draco didn't move, his hand still upraised, but Ron saw the edge of one pale eyelid twitch as Draco stared at his father.

"My boy," Lucius said, and staggered to his feet. "Please -"

"Shut up," Harry said, cutting him off, and turned to Draco. "He survived the blast," he said. "Peter didn't."

"Oh," Hermione said, sounding surprised, as if she'd heard this piece of information for the first time. She looked at Draco. "Tom...?" she asked.

"I knocked him out," Draco said. "He's shackled up against the wall. Ginny's watching him." He pointed.

Hermione looked briefly uneasy. "Just Ginny watching him? No one else? Are you sure that's a ..."

"Good idea?" Draco finished, raising an eyebrow. "Oh, I don't know. I have faith in her."

"Hm," Hermione said. "Still. Tom is - tricky. I'll go help her out."

She vanished into the smoke.

"Well, I'm certainly feeling the trust here," Draco remarked, but his voice was sharp and unamused. He glanced at his father and clicked his tongue disapprovingly. "You're looking a bit peaked, Father," he said. "Voldemort's total and ultimate defeat got you down?"

Lucius gazed at his son with haunted desperation. "Thank God, Draco," he said roughly. "Thank God you're all right -"

Draco's eyelid twitched again, but his voice was cool. "Really," he said, "you must be desperate indeed if you're trying these sort of tricks."

"There is no trick," Lucius said. "When the Dark Lord died, all his spells were broken. Everything he took from his servants was returned to them. *Everything*," he added, a mute appeal in his eyes.

Draco sucked in a short, sharp gasp of breath, his eyes widening impossibly until they seemed to fill his whole face, and even Ron felt a stab of pity for the horror in their depths.

"Malfoy," Harry said, taking a step forward, but Draco held out a hand to stop him, gaze still locked with his father's.

"That may well be so, Father," Draco said, a little of the color returning to his cheeks. "But that doesn't make you any less the sort of man who'd lie and cheat his way out of a desperate situation."

"You mean that they plan to kill me," Lucius said, looking from Ron to Harry, and back to his son.

"Probably," Draco said. "We can die together - a surprisingly poetic *denouement* for our particular family tragedy. The tragedy being that we happen to be part of the same family."

Lucius' breath hissed out of him. "Die together? But you -" A sudden horror flashed in his eyes, a groan breaking from his throat. "*The poison. Of course.* Oh God, what have I done? What have I done?"

He buried his face in his hands. Draco looked at him, a slight curl at the corner of his pale mouth. "Don't," he said, and his voice cut like a whip's edge. "Remember what it says in the Code of Conduct - 'Regret, like hot pink, is unsuitable to a Malfoy.'"

"*Draco.*" Lucius dropped his hands from his face, stumbling forward, his hands outstretched towards his son. "My son - my own blood -"

Draco didn't flinch away from him, too astonished, it seemed, to move. It was Harry who moved in a flash of black and silver, flinging himself between Draco and his father with a sharp bark of rage and the soft grating noise of his sword pulled from its scabbard. The tip of it rose like a bright silver dragonfly to hover just at Lucius' heart. "*Your blood,*" Harry said to Lucius, his voice tight with a savage mockery. "Before you flooded his veins with poison, you mean? How dare you talk to him like that? How dare you even look at him?"

Lucius shook his head, a little wildly. Ron could see where the thick fair hair, streaked with gray, was escaping from its neat black-tied tail at the back of his neck. It was more gray than he had remembered. "I do not need to look at Draco to see him," he said. "I see him every time I look in the mirror - he is blood of my blood, bone of my bones, flesh of my own flesh. He is my son and you have no right to keep me from him!"

"I have every right!" Harry thundered. "You're not his father - a father loves and cares for his children. My father died to protect his son - you murdered yours!"

"I'm not dead yet," Draco said, softly, and Harry, still shaking with rage, shut his mouth into a hard line.

Lucius turned his gaze on his son. "Draco," he said. "I know I have wronged you, but you must understand - it was Voldemort's spell, his

curse on me - when you were a baby I loved you as much as any child has ever been loved - before that love was taken from me."

"Taken from me," Draco said, "you mean. You gave away what was not yours to give."

"It was what he asked for," Lucius said, "and I was afraid."

Draco looked down at his feet, and then back up at his father, glancing through his lashes like a child. "I love you, Father," he said, and Lucius lurched forward, almost on to the point of Harry's sword. Draco stepped back, neatly, shaking his head. "But love isn't enough," he said. "It never is." He looked at Harry. "I need to talk to you," he said.

Harry's mouth was working. "I can't let him go," he said. "I'll leave him alive if you want me to, but I can't let him go."

"I didn't ask you to," Draco said. He was, Ron thought, remarkably calm, although Ron would never forget that first look of agonized horror in his eyes. "There's a small room, there, at the end of the Chamber," he said, and pointed towards the far end of the Chamber, where a small blue door hid in a recessed shadow. "With a door that bolts. I suggest Ron take my father there and stand guard outside with a dagger. Or maybe two."

"No," Harry said, and added, before Draco could say anything, "not with a dagger. With my sword." He lowered the blade, and handed it silently to Ron. Lucius made no attempt to run, only stood staring at Draco with the eyes of a starving man gazing at a banquet of food he can never have.

Ron raised the sword, and placed the tip of it between Lucius' shoulder blades.

"Move," he said, and Lucius did.

The two boys stood together in the swirling smoke, wrapped in a silence as intent as the silence on a battlefield after the combat has spent itself.

Icy air sifted down from the smashed ceiling. Harry shivered, his eyes on Draco as the blond boy watched his father receding into the smoke,

marched at swordpoint by Ron. A stranger would have thought his face blank of any expression, but Harry saw the tightness around Draco's mouth, the faint butterfly tremble of his eyelids, and knew that pain twisted his insides like a handful of knives.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Lucius had disappeared. Draco turned to look at Harry. His eyes were the same bitter gray-black as the smoke. "What for?"

"I don't know. Maybe I should have warned you. Told you about your dad - you know, not out loud. Prepared you."

"There are some things you can never prepare for," Draco said. There was a pale bruise rising on his cheek, and the collar of his shirt was torn. A frayed ribbon, tattered and bloodied, swung jauntily from his wrist. "It's not your fault," Draco said. "Just the universe, laughing at us as usual."

"I won't kill him," Harry said. "Not if you don't want me to."

Draco's eyes were remote, his voice slow and cool as the progress of glaciers. "You will do what you must," he said. "You always do."

"No," Harry said. He could feel Draco slipping away from him, water through his fingers. Deliberately, he reached out, and placed his hands on Draco's shoulders. The other boy looked at him, surprised. "I have done," Harry said, "enough killing in the name of light. And if you want your father to live, I will let him live."

"You would let him live past me, and not kill him in revenge for my death?"

Harry nodded.

"I am not sure I could say the same, were our positions reversed," Draco said. "But that's why you are the hero, and I am not."

"You would do it," Harry said, "for my sake."

Draco looked away. The ends of his hair brushed the backs of Harry's hands. He said, "Don't restrain yourself on my account. I know you need

to avenge your parents. I know only my father's death can ensure that. And surely he has earned your retribution."

"You won't forbid me, then?" Harry asked.

Draco said, "I want no part in this. I will abide by whatever decision you make."

"But Malfoy -"

"No." Draco looked back at him, his eyes the color of storm clouds. "Don't force my hand."

"He's your blood, your family," Harry said. "You'd be well within your rights -"

Draco raised his hand, and laid it over Harry's on his shoulder. "You are my blood," he said. "My family." Looking at Harry, he smiled faintly. "I must say, I thought -"

"What?"

"That your scar would be gone," Draco said simply. "Once Voldemort was dead. But it's still there. I'm glad. You wouldn't be you without it." He lowered his hand. "Will you do one thing for me?"

"What?"

"Take this." Draco drew Terminus Est and held the sword out to Harry. Tendrils of smoke twined the steel-gray hilt and dulled the pattern of black roses etched into the crosspiece. "I would rather that my father did not die on a Gryffindor blade," he said.

Harry dropped his hands from Draco's shoulders, and took Terminus Est. The sword was heavy in his grip, its weight and balance unfamiliar. "Yes," he said. "Yes, I will do this one thing for you."

Tom hung in his shackles. Hermione couldn't help but think how uncomfortable he looked, even unconscious. Blood had trickled into his fair hair from a cut across his temple. She thought of the strangled girl in

the Midnight Club and hoped it hurt a great deal. "We could kill him," she said.

"We can't," Ginny said. She was leaning against the wall, not looking at Tom, her eyes searching the smoke. Rhysenn drifted beside her, her black hair lifting like raven's wings on the gusts of cold, bitter air that blew at intervals through the chamber.

Hermione raised an eyebrow. *I wish I could trust her.* "Why not?"

"Because of Seamus," Ginny said. "If there's still a chance we could save him..."

Rhysenn looked confused. "Is his name Tom, or is it Seamus?" she asked. "I'm not sure I understand. Although," she added, and wrinkled up her nose as if she'd tasted something bitter, "There is something very peculiar about him - something unnatural."

"He has two souls," Hermione said. "One his own, and one possessing him."

Rhysenn looked startled for a moment, then laughed. "One of you is two souls in one body," she said, "and another is one soul in two. Remarkable."

"I wouldn't say Tom is one of us," Hermione said crisply. "And what do you mean -"

"*One soul in two bodies,*" Draco said, appearing as if out of nowhere. He had his hands in his pockets, and his eyes were unnaturally bright, the way they sometimes were when he was very angry, very agitated, or both. "That's rather poetic, for a demon."

"Draco," Ginny said, but he didn't look at her. Biting her lip, she turned and walked away - not very far; Hermione could still see her bright dress and hair through the smoke.

Ignoring her departure, Draco turned to Rhysenn. "I take it you've been Hermione's partner in all this?" he said. "Faking her death, slipping her lockpicks, drugging Voldemort's tea?"

"I never drugged Voldemort's tea," Rhysenn protested, looking taken aback. "Besides, he drinks coffee. Er, drank coffee."

"My point is that I never expected *you* to be all that helpful," Draco said, and Rhysenn smiled her cool, secret smile. "Bit like Chudley Cannons pitching in at the last moment to help out Puddlemere, wouldn't you say?"

Rhysenn blinked.

"Sports metaphors not quite your thing, I take it," said Draco.

Hermione gave a little grunt of impatience. "Draco, honestly."

"I merely meant that her loyalties lie elsewhere," Draco said blandly. "To wit, with my father. Or what seems to be left of him."

"They don't, actually," said Hermione. "She's meant to be loyal to the master of the English Malfoy family. Technically, that's you. Your father lost the title when he 'died', and never bothered setting about regaining it - because, well, why do you think?"

"Ah, legalities," Draco said. "They tell us everything we need to know about how things ought to be and nothing about how they are. My father is the Master of Malfoy Manor, Hermione. Every stone of the Manor knows it."

"But you are the last of the Malfoys," said Hermione. "Without you, there will be no more. And Rhysenn is pledged to protect the Malfoy line - and that means you."

"I didn't quite realize how it was," Rhysenn said calmly, "until Hermione explained it to me, and then I understood it perfectly."

"Yes, well, Hermione could convince an electric eel that it was a harmless rubber duck," said Draco. "Of course, that wouldn't help the poor bastard who tried to take a bath with it." He turned on Hermione. "I bet you told her I'd free her if she helped us."

"I did, actually," Hermione admittedly.

"Well, I can't," Draco said. "Only my father can. Maybe he will, too. Normally I'd say you had to catch him on a good day - namely, Saturday the twelfth of Absolutely Sodding Never - but who knows? Anything seems possible at the moment."

"You can if your father gives permission," Hermione said. "And he has. He says you can do whatever you want."

Draco's mouth twisted, and he gave a bitter little laugh. "Does he, now?" He looked sharply at Hermione. "You foresaw all this, didn't you?"

She shrugged. "I guessed."

"Blind Justice was never so cruel," said Draco, and turned to Rhysenn. "You do realize," he added, looking over his shoulder at Hermione, "that you're asking me to unleash an evil sex demon with the power to suck out men's souls onto an unsuspecting world?"

"Yes," Hermione said.

"I can suck out women's souls, too," said Rhysenn helpfully.

"An equally opportunity soul-sucker," said Draco, "the world needs a bit more of that, doesn't it?" He raised his hand, pointed it wearily at Rhysenn. "Rhysenn of the Malfoy Family," he began, "I hereby undertake to free you from the blood oath that binds you, and from the -"

"Wait!" Someone seized his arm. It was Ginny, her small face flushed scarlet. "Not yet."

Rhysenn stamped her high-heeled foot in petulant rage. "Oh, get rid of her!" she seethed. "We were so close - and you promised!"

"I didn't," Draco said, looking down into Ginny's upturned face, "Hermione did." Slowly, he lowered his hand. "What is it, Ginny?"

"Free her if you like," Ginny said. "But I need her to do one more thing for us -"

"No!" Rhysenn cried. Draco looked as if he couldn't help but feel a twinge of sympathy. He was probably tired of doing things other people asked him to do himself.

"It's my only chance to save Seamus," Ginny said. She looked directly at Rhysenn. "It'll only take moments. Please."

Rhysenn tossed her hair. "I don't care about your friend," she said. "Ask Draco."

Draco sighed. He raised his hand and pointed it at Rhysenn. "Rhysenn Malfoy," he said. "I hereby undertake to free you from the blood oath that binds you - *when* you have completed the task Virginia Weasley asks of you, and not before." He lowered his hand. "Do it, and you're free. Do you understand?"

Rhysenn nodded, her gray cat's eyes gleaming. "Yes, Master."

"Don't call me that," Draco said sharply.

"Thank you," Ginny said, and touched his hand.

It was Rhysenn who undid Tom's shackles, and used her spells to lift him, hanging limply, into the air. He hovered before them, ghostlike, as the four of them - Rhysenn, Ginny, Hermione, and Draco - made their way down the corridor outside the Ceremonial Chamber.

"There's a room at the top of the stairs," Draco said, "a sort of study - will that serve your purposes?"

"Most adequately," Rhysenn said. Her eyes were on Tom. She was looking at him, Hermione thought, like a cat might look at a trapped bird.

"Glad to hear it," Draco said. He sounded unusually subdued. Hermione wondered if it was Ginny's presence that disturbed him - she hadn't missed the strange looks that had passed between those two - or something else. He was trailing his hand along the wall as they went, almost as if he were steadying himself.

They reached the door and pushed it open. They stood in a tower room whose windows looked out over the valley and the mountains beyond them. The stars grinned down from the sky like naked daggers. The walls of the room were hung with gold and silver tapestries, and in the center of the room was a circular cage, its bars made of gold.

"Huh," Draco said, raising a curious eyebrow.

"Some study," Hermione said. "Nice cage."

"It was built to hold my mother," Rhysenn said. She waved her long-fingered right hand, and lowered Tom slowly to the ground just in front of the cage. Her eyes were bright. "You can leave us now."

"All right," Hermione said, backing away, but Draco stayed where he was, his eyes on Ginny as she knelt down by Tom's side and brushed the fair hair back from his face. She brushed the charred ash from the front of his ruined velvet robes, and touched the bruise at his temple. Then she looked up.

"Draco," she said, frowning a little, as if she'd forgotten that he was there. "You can't stay."

He looked at her for another long moment before tearing his eyes away. He walked to the door quickly and Hermione followed him. She turned back only briefly as the doors shut behind them, and saw Rhysenn kneeling down on the opposite side of Tom, across from Ginny, as if they were doctors and he were a patient they were examining.

The doors clicked shut and Hermione hurried to catch up with Draco. "Wait," she said. "Aren't we supposed to go the other way if we want to get back to the Ceremonial Chamber?"

"Who says I want to get back to the Ceremonial Chamber?" Draco said. His tone was brittle. He was still trailing his hand along the wall, leaning on it more heavily now.

"But Harry -"

"Is busy killing my father," Draco said. "Not that I blame him particularly, but that doesn't mean I want to watch."

"He won't kill him," Hermione said. They had turned another corner, and she was no longer sure exactly where they were. She looked around anxiously, but one stretch of gray stone corridor looked much like another. This one was very dim, the bracketed torches along the walls unlit. Hermione drew her wand out and lit the tip with a murmur. "He just wants answers about the antidote."

"There are no answers," Draco said. "There is no antidote. He's just chasing phantoms."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because I know my father," Draco said. "He doesn't do things halfway." There was a bitter pride in his voice. "*Neque enim lex est aequior ulla, Quam necis artifices arte perire sua.*"

"What?"

"It was what was engraved on my father's tombstone," Draco said. "*Nor is there any law more just, than he who has plotted death shall perish by his own plot.*" He stopped, then, and struck at the wall with his fist. When he drew his hand back, the knuckles were split and bleeding, raw and silver. "Justice," he said, "it seems, like love, is overrated."

"Or maybe just cruel," said Hermione.

"I never had a father," Draco said, looking at his bleeding hand with a clinical interest. "Just a taskmaster with a sword in one hand and a whip in the other. Still, he made me what I am. If I lose him, perhaps I might never find myself again."

"It was no failing of yours that he couldn't love you," Hermione said, reaching out her hand, but afraid to touch him. "At least you know that now, for certain."

"Yes," Draco said, "he loves me now - and will die, loving me, with my blade through his heart. I have been trying not to think about that, you know."

"If you tell Harry not to hurt Lucius, he won't," Hermione said, alarmed by the whiteness of Draco's face. "Come on - we'll tell him. There's still time."

"I can't do that," Draco said.

"You can - he'll listen to you, I know he will."

"All right," Draco said, but when she turned to walk away he didn't follow. She paused, looking back at him. He was leaning against the wall, looking down at his feet as if they belonged to somebody else.

"What's wrong, Draco?"

"Nothing," he said. "I think I just need a moment to rest."

He had never asked to rest before, not in all their time traveling together, not in all of today, not as he had grown more and more ill during the school term. Hermione turned in alarm, just in time to see him slide down the wall to the floor.

By the time Harry reached the small door where Ron waited, the weight of Terminus Est in his hand had come to feel familiar, even pleasant. He imagined holding it to Lucius' throat as Lucius begged for his life. "I will spare you if you tell me where an antidote can be found for the poison in Draco's blood," he would say, and Lucius would fall all over himself to provide a counter to the poison. Harry would rush to bring the antidote to Draco and Draco, the color flooding back into his face, would-

"Are you going to kill him?" Ron asked.

He was standing by the door with the sword of Gryffindor held awkwardly across his chest. Voldemort's blood had dried on the blade. As he shifted his grip on the hilt Harry could see the dark scars along the insides of his wrists.

"I don't know," Harry said.

"Would you like me to come in with you?" Ron said.

Harry hesitated, looking at Ron. Surely he could not want to come, but he was offering, and the offer was a sincere one. Harry felt a sudden, sharp rush of the old affection for Ron, that awkward but tenacious affection that had once been the strongest he'd ever known. Before Hermione, before Sirius. Before Draco. "Yes," he said.

They went in together, Ron closing the door behind him and leaning against it with the sword at his side. It was a small room, the only light trickling from a high, blue-glassed window that illuminated the room with an eerie glow. Lucius sat on the floor, his back against the wall, hands clasped in front of him. He got to his feet as Harry approached him, a look of sneering rage on his haggard face. "Where is my son?" he demanded. "Where is Draco?"

"The antidote," Harry said harshly. "That first. Then I'll tell you about Draco. Maybe even let you see him - if he wants to see you."

Lucius barked a harsh laugh. "You are just like your father, Harry Potter," he said. "A reveler in small and petty power. How delighted you must be to be able to hold this over me -"

"It's not my fault he hates you," Harry said. "Why wouldn't he? You *poisoned* him."

Lucius' jaw clenched. "I would have thought - I thought - with all the powers of Hogwarts and Albus Dumbledore at your disposal - you would have been able to cure him without my assistance."

"Snape tried to create an antidote," Harry said, each word sharp and distinct like the flick of a knife. "He did the best he could, but it wasn't enough. One ingredient was missing, one thing he couldn't identify. *What is it?*"

Lucius was shaking his head, a mad, darting light in his eyes. "I told you - told you both, that night on the tower - that was all the antidote there was. There *isn't any more*. And Draco had to break the vial, didn't he? That sort of act, brave and foolish, ought to be saved for Gryffindors. My son ought to know better -"

"That's enough." Harry grip tightened on the hilt of Terminus Est. He swung the sword up so that the point of it rested in the hollow of Lucius'

throat. "Tell me what the missing ingredient is in the antidote Snape created," he said. "Tell me, or I'll cut your throat slowly."

Lucius held his hands up, but less to ward Harry off, it seemed, than to beseech his understanding. "I'll tell you," he said huskily. "You don't need to threaten me. I'll tell you. It's dragon's blood."

Harry laughed scornfully. "Dragon's blood? You think Snape wouldn't have identified that? I might not like him much, but the man isn't stupid."

"It's not ordinary dragon's blood," Lucius said. "It's the blood of argent dragons -"

Harry pressed the point of the sword in deeper. "I've never heard of argent dragons."

"No," Lucius said. "You wouldn't have. They've been extinct for over a thousand years."

"Enervate."

Tom awoke with his back against cold marble. His jaw throbbed where Draco had punched him, and there was a deep bitterness in his heart. With the cold slowness of a snake, he raised his eyes to see Ginny leaning over him, her poppy-red hair showering down over them both. She was biting her lip, an expression of terrified submission in her dark eyes that was balm to his wounded soul.

"Tom," she said. "You're awake."

He caught a handful of her hair, and tugged on it hard. She winced, tears springing to her eyes, but didn't move. "What is this, Virginia? Why are you here? Did they leave you here to guard me, thinking that I wouldn't harm you? I'll tell you right now, they were wrong. I'll break your neck myself and die with you rather than give myself over to their righteous ministrations."

"Would you?" she said, her mouth trembling. "Would you really, Tom?" She put her hand to his face, her thin fingers hot against his marble-cold cheek. "I told them you wouldn't harm me, but only so they'd leave me alone with you. I want to escape with you, Tom. I want to be with you."

He barked a sharp laugh, pulling harder at her hair. She only inclined her head, her eyes darting, frightened. He strained to feel that connection between them, the blood-bond that had allowed him to feel her emotions, sense the hatred, disgust and despair in her that had fed him like a banquet. But it had gone with the severance of his magic, spilling like blood from an amputated limb. "Little liar," he said. "Why should I believe that?"

"Because you were right, Tom," she whispered. "You and me - we're the same. The others will never understand me, not like you do. And they'll never really want me - not like you do. They'd be happier if I just disappeared."

He chuckled. "I could have told you that," he said. "But I always thought you were too stupid to see it. And what of your boy - the one who wears your ribbon on his wrist?"

She shook her head. "He'll never love me," she said, and when he dragged his fingers cruelly through her hair, added quickly, "And he's dying - he won't live much longer. And when he's dead, the rest of them won't want me around at all."

This was something Tom could understand. "They don't understand the evil in you," he said. "The darkness that runs like black ink through your Gryffindor blood."

She was shaking her head. "No," she said, "not like you do, Tom." She leaned forward, close enough for him to see the gold flecks in her brown eyes. "Thee to me," she said, and she bent to kiss him, with the trembling shyness of a girl who'd never been kissed before.

Her fear, the desire that forced her past her shuddering reluctance, was salve to his gutted pride. He lifted his aching head from the marble, meeting her lips with his own.

It was like no kiss he had shared with her before. Their previous embraces had been like rape, with him taking from her what she did not want to give. This was an exchange of fire. Her mouth burned on his, her small hot hands cupping the back of his neck, her sharp teeth tracing his lower lip. His body responded fiercely, instantly, his mouth opening, tasting the inside of her mouth, his hands winding in her hair, tugging her against him. He had tasted potions before that tasted like this kiss did: fiery, bitter, necessary as breathing. His bones melted and ran, his blood seethed in his veins. His tortured lungs strained for air, but he could no more have pulled away from her than he could have opened his chest and ripped out his own heart.

Black diamonds swam in front of his eyes. Numb, his hands slipped from holding her, his fingers spasming. Against his mouth, he felt her begin to laugh.

Hermione dropped to her knees. Draco was lying motionless on the ground, where the wall curved to meet the floor. She turned him over. His eyes were closed, a pulse beating hard in his throat. "Draco," she said. She could feel the hammering of her own blood in her ears, the adrenaline of terror pumping through her veins. "Draco -"

He sucked in a breath, and began coughing. Relief flowed through her - he was still alive. He shuddered a breath, and opened his eyes. "Sorry about that," he said, "I didn't realize -" He paused then, blinking. "It's darker than I thought," he said, and groped towards her with his hand. "Hermione -?"

"I dropped my wand," she said. "Wait." She scrambled to retrieve it, and raised it in her hand. "Lumos," she said, and light filled the corridor again, casting stark shadows against the bare stone walls.

Draco, who had pulled himself into a sitting position, blinked again and looked towards her, his expression troubled. "Can you make it brighter?" he asked.

The wand trembled in her hand. "*Lumos fulmens*," she said, and light like the sun leaped now from the tip of her wand, and the corridor was bright as day. She could see the cuts on Draco's face, the shadows cast by his

lashes against the tops of his cheekbones, the blank, unseeing look in his eyes. She lowered the wand slowly. "I think my wand must have broken when I dropped it," she said, hearing the sound of her own voice as if from very far away. "I can't - it isn't working."

"Ah." He sounded relieved. Her heart felt like it might crack inside her chest. She crawled towards him, and he jumped when she took hold of his shoulders and pulled him back against her. They leaned against the wall, her arms around him. She could feel the sharpness of his bones, the labored haste of his breathing. "We should wait here," she said. "When Harry comes, he'll bring light."

"I know," Draco said.

"Is it over?" Ginny asked.

Rhysenn lifted her mouth from Tom's and looked sideways at Ginny, reminding the redheaded girl of nothing so much as a cat surprised in the middle of toying with a mouse. Her gray eyes seemed to glow, her thick, black hair, more lustrous than Ginny had ever seen it, fountaining down around her like black water. Her pale skin was absolutely radiant. Ginny half-expected to see blood around her mouth, as if she were a vampire, but her lips were only a little swollen from kissing. They curved into a smile. "Sorry," she said. "I got a bit carried away."

"I could tell," Ginny muttered. She knelt down, and touched Tom's face. He was breathing, soft and slow, and his skin was cool to the touch. "Is he all right? Did you..take it?"

"He is missing a soul now," Rhysenn said. "Another man would be dead. But he has a second soul, and should recover."

A horrible thought occurred to Ginny and she turned to Rhysenn, her heart pounding. "Are you sure you got the right soul?"

Rhysenn looked at her blankly. "The *right* soul?"

Ginny almost screamed. "Tom's soul! Not Seamus's!"

Rhysenn shrugged. "Souls do not have names. They are merely souls."

"Oh, God." Ginny pressed her hand to her forehead. "What if you took Seamus's soul? Then we've murdered him. And we'd better kill Tom before he wakes up, because if he does..."

"I do wish you'd decide whether you want him alive or not," Rhysenn said plaintively. "It's very confusing." Ginny didn't reply. Seeming to take a sort of pity on her, Rhysenn added, "It was an unusual soul, if that helps."

"Unusual? Unusual how?"

"It tasted of paper and ink," said Rhysenn.

Ginny expelled a long, shaky breath. "All right. I think you got the right one." She laid the back of her hand against Tom's - no, she told herself, no longer Tom, he's only Seamus now - face, stroking the soft, peach-fuzz curve of cheek into jaw. "I guess you're free."

Rhysenn gasped, so loudly that Ginny looked up. Her gray eyes were wide and full of wonder and amazement. "Free? I am truly free?"

"Yes," Ginny said.

"I need never answer to another Malfoy?"

"You need never answer to anyone," Ginny said. "You're free to go prance around half-naked wherever you like. Preferably far away from here."

"Free," Rhysenn breathed, and then she was up on her feet, and racing towards the window. She threw it open, and leaned out into the starry night. "Free!" she screamed, and turned to look at Ginny. The cold air spilling through the open window whipped her black hair across her pale, unpretty face. "Thank you," she said.

"Don't thank me. Thank Draco. He's the one who freed you," Ginny pointed out.

"That is true," Rhysenn said, pausing like a bird hovering mid-flight. "He can still be saved, you know," she said.

Ginny's eyes flew open. "He can? How? Do you know the antidote? Do you-"
"

"Only you can do it," Rhysenn said firmly. "Only you," and with that, she leaped lightly up onto the sill of the window, and vanished into the ice-spangled night.

Only me? What does that mean? Ginny wondered, her heart pounding, and then she heard a groan and glanced down to see Seamus stir, his eyes opening, fastening on her face. And they were blue, as they had always been, clear sky-blue, untainted by any darkness. "Ginny?" he whispered. "Is that you?"

Taking his hand in hers, she held it to her chest, winding her fingers with his. *And now my penance begins.* "Welcome back, Seamus," she said. "Welcome back, my dear."

"You're lying," Harry said. His hand trembled, the sharp point of the sword pricking the base of Lucius' throat.

"I wish that I were," Lucius said. There was bitterness in his voice, heavy as a black weight on Harry's soul. "If there was any one thing I could go back and change -"

"Stop it," Harry snapped, cutting him off. "Besides, it's ludicrous, that you'd expect me to believe any of this. Thousand-year-old dragon's blood? Why?"

"Both the poison and the antidote were the creation of Salazar Slytherin," Lucius said. "Handed down through the generations of Malfoys ever since - it is a perfect poison, traceless, tasteless, passed through the slightest wound or scratch into the blood. Instantly curable with the antidote, it also brings swift death."

"No, it doesn't," Harry said. "Draco's been dying for weeks."

"He is a Malfoy," Lucius said, "and great protections run in his blood. But even those protections must erode eventually, such is the poison's strength."

"So if I had a time-turner," Harry said, "I could go back into the past, and get some of that dragon's blood -"

"*Have you a Time-Turner?*" Lucius asked, almost dryly. "No Time-Turner can take you back to a time before the Time-Turner itself was created. Even if you could find a Time-Turner that ancient, even if you could survive two thousand-year time journeys, even then, the antidote takes a hundred years to prepare. Draco doesn't have a hundred years left in him. I doubt he has a hundred hours."

"*Shut up!*" Harry snarled, the sword jerking in his hands. A thin thread of blood ran down into Lucius' collar. "What matters is that there's a chance."

Lucius glanced down at the sword against his throat. Over his shoulder, Harry could see Ron, watching them both intently, a strange look in his eyes. "At least I know," Lucius said, "that whatever torments of guilt I myself may suffer over Draco's death, your suffering will be greater."

The urge to slam the sword through Lucius' throat throbbed at the back of Harry's temples. There was a dull roaring in his ears like the sound of the sea, but louder, more urgent. He wondered if it was the sound of his own rage. "Why is that?"

"Because you allow yourself to hope," Lucius said.

Harry shook his head slowly, the roaring behind his eyes, surging inside his head, growing louder and louder. Like a wall of black flood water, thundering towards him. "And you don't," he said, "because you are too cowardly to risk it."

Lucius gave a sharp little bark then, of anger and something else. "If you came here to cut my throat, then cut my throat," he said. "I've told you what you wanted to know. There is nothing else I would be willing to tell you. So get on with it."

Slowly, Harry lowered the sword. It rose higher, that blackness in the back of his mind, the surge and roar. Something was happening. He struggled to speak.

,

"No," he said, and briefly, the flood waters receded and Harry saw Ron's head jerk up as the redheaded boy stared at him. A faint light of surprise flickered in Lucius' eyes. "No," Harry said again. If he could have seen himself, he would have been startled by the look in his own eyes - a cold look, Draco's bitter humor. And his tone was Draco's, too, when he spoke again, as dry as winter air: "As much as I despise you," he said, "that is as much as is my regard for your son, who is no longer anything like you. I have had my parents taken from me and it has been a wound inside me that has never healed. I would not cause that same pain to anyone that I love. So live," he said, and flung the sword at Lucius' feet, where it clattered, and Lucius, looking startled, took an involuntary step back. "Live, and know that you do it by my sufferance - and with my pity."

Lucius' face changed - and for a moment Harry seemed to see through the polished villain he hated to the ragged and rotting shell underneath. A twisted snarl warped Lucius' mouth, he looked as if he were about to speak -

And the flood waters rose again in Harry's mind, black and choking, and this time he knew what the sound was: it was Draco, calling out for him so loudly that the cry had become one uninterrupted and nearly unintelligible howl of despair. It was not Draco's voice calling him, but something more primal than that.

Lucius was speaking, but he had vanished, ceased to matter. Blindly, Harry flung himself towards the door, fumbling for the knob - he heard Ron call his name, loudly and urgently; he turned and saw Ron behind him, holding his sword in one hand, and Draco's in the other.

"Take this," Ron said, his voice like a whisper against the screaming in Harry's head. He was holding the sword of Gryffindor out to Harry. "I can't hold two swords, and I don't want *him* getting hold of the other one."

Blindly, Harry grabbed the sword out of Ron's hand, leaving the other boy with Draco's blade. Something nagged at the back of Harry's mind, something strange about Ron's expression, something Harry wanted to ask him. But the panic in his head was too great; it crashed and roared around him like floodwaters. He had to get to Draco. Without another word to Ron, he spun on his heel and began to run.

Hermione did not know how long they sat there, the minutes ticking by, as she held Draco in the circle of her arms as if doing so could keep him tethered to the world of the living. Time seemed to stretch out; she could have believed that he breathed once an hour. She stroked his hair lightly with her fingers, drawing it away from his face, as if he were a child. "I can't reach Harry," he said, finally, opening his eyes. His gaze wandered unseeing across her face. "I don't think I'm strong enough."

"It's all right," she said. His hair felt fine as silk tassels threading through her fingers. "He won't hurt your father. He loves you too much for that."

"He'll do what he has to do," Draco said, his tone distant. "I gave him my permission - I can't ask him to forgive my father, not after what he's done."

"He'll make your father tell him what the missing ingredient in your antidote is - then we can cure you. That's what's important," Hermione said, with a wild stubbornness.

Draco laughed, bringing silver-red bubbles to his lips. He wiped the blood away with the back of his hand. "My Hermione," he said, "not everything can be solved with an infusion of new information."

"Shush," she said, "You need to sleep - and when you wake up, we'll have a cure for you I could charm you - ."

"- *And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well, and better than thy stroke,*" he said. "I'm quoting again - Ginny would be annoyed." He smiled faintly. "I kissed her earlier today, you know, because I thought I ought to kiss her before I died. Maybe that was thoughtless. Do you think she'll be angry?"

"No," Hermione said, "no, I don't think she will be." She wound a curl of his hair around her finger, soft as trammeled silk, fine as flax, and he moved restlessly under her caress. His skin burned almost too hot to touch. "Close your eyes," she said.

"If I do, I won't open them again," he said, "and I would like to wait for Harry, if I can." His tone was matter of fact. "You're a terrible liar, you know."

She stilled her caresses. "I am?"

"Yes," he said. "You just offered to charm me asleep with a broken wand."

She reached to cover her gasp, but was too late. "I had forgotten it was broken -"

"No, you hadn't." He closed his eyes, then opened them again. "I'm blind, aren't I? I ought to have known - even in the darkest night, you can see your own hand in front of your face."

"With the antidote, it could be reversed - possibly -" Hermione whispered.

"It doesn't matter," he said, and blind as he was, he caught her anxious, fluttering hand easily, and drew it towards him, and pressed a kiss to her palm. He folded her hand closed, trapping the kiss in the cage of her fingers. "I can see you anyway," he said, "in your white dress, standing on the steps, with your hair full of snow. I wonder if there are such beautiful things where I am going?"

Something hot splashed onto the hand he held; Hermione realized distantly that she was crying. "There should be only beautiful things," she said.

He laughed quietly. "I asked Harry once if he believed in Heaven," he said. "I must have known, even then. I think I knew since the arrow went into me. I didn't want to believe it was true, and then it was easier to believe than not to believe, and then Harry left and I hoped it was true. And now I am only tired, so tired - it hasn't been a wasted life, this life of mine, has it, Hermione? I've been in love and had my heart broken and broken other hearts, and I've been found and lost, and saved the world - that's not nothing, is it?"

"You won some Quidditch games, too, if I recall," Hermione said, pressing the palm of her hand to her face, as if to transfer the kiss to her cheek.

"But never the Cup," Draco said.

"No," Hermione said gently. "Never the Cup."

"That belonged to Harry," Draco said. "Though I've forgiven him for it."

"And he you. I hope you believe that now."

"I believe it," Draco said. "But it doesn't make me less afraid."

"Of dying?"

"I always thought I would die before he did," Draco said. His tone was soft, reflective. "It was what I wanted, and I was glad for it. But I also thought I knew where I would be going when I died. To the place where the restless shades are, those who walk the riverbank wailing and crying out for justice. But I will have justice. Harry will have given me that. And I will have rest, because he will have given me that also. So where will I wait for him? What if there are no shores to stand on, where I am going now? I would wait for a hundred years, if that were what was required, but what if he cannot find me?"

"He can always find you," Hermione said. "You can always find each other."

"Now, yes, but then? Or are you positing telepathy in the afterlife?" Draco said, a shaky undercurrent to the lightness of his tone. "Forever is a very long time to be alone, Hermione."

Lightly, she touched his cheek with the tips of her fingers. The heat scorched her skin. "We're all alone," she said.

Magic, Ron thought as he watched Lucius stare at the door that had shut behind Harry, could do many things: it could transform a cat into a teapot, a blade of grass into a sword. But there were other forces at work in the world, stranger than magic and more powerful. The forces that held a family together, that broke and mended hearts, and that had transformed Lucius, in a matter of hours, into an old man. He looked stooped as he turned to Ron, the gray in his pale hair markedly apparent, lines grooved deep around his mouth and eyes. "And now they leave me with you," he said. "They might as well set a monkey to guard me." He

squinted at Ron. "I have always wondered," he said, "if perhaps your ancestors intermarried with Muggles? There is something not quite right about the lot of you. Your muddy gazes and unfortunate hair - that whole business with your mother spawning two or three of you at a time -"

Ron looked placidly at the sword in his hand. The blade was clean, the ornate words carved into the side lovely to look at. "If you're trying to get me angry," he said, "it won't work."

Lucius didn't reply. He was staring at the blade and its design of roses. "This is my son's sword?" he asked. "It is unfamiliar to me."

"Sirius gave it to him," Ron said.

"But it was I who taught him to use it," Lucius said. "Years of training, from the time he was a boy."

"And it shows," Ron said calmly. "He's very skilled with a blade."

Lucius bared his teeth. "Are you mocking me, Diviner?"

"*Diviner.*" Ron slid a finger up the edge of the blade, felt his skin part against the sharpness, winced at the slight, satisfying pain. "Do you want me to tell you your future, Malfoy?"

Lucius laughed. "If you wish to predict my death -"

"Oh, no," Ron said. "Not *your* death. Not yours."

"Draco -" Lucius began.

"No," Ron said, "not his either, or at least, not his alone. He is not all that you care about, not all you lost when you allowed the Dark Lord to kill what made you human. There is your family. Your honor. The name of Malfoy. You cannot clear your conscience in a day, Lucius Malfoy, nor is there redemption to be found where there is no willingness to earn it. What the Dark Lord took from you may have been returned to you, but it came at the end of a lifetime of evils for which there will be retribution. Make no mistake; it will find you, Lucius. Black shadows are gathering around you. I can see them even now."

Lucius did not move, only his red-rimmed eyes flickered over Ron's face. "That hardly sounds like a prophecy."

"I'm not done," Ron said. "Listen. I will tell you the rest of it."

He told him, and watched the changing colors in Lucius' face as he spoke. With words, he painted a picture of the remainder of Lucius' life, and it was a long life and full of horrors, and they were not only horrors that were visited on Lucius and all that he loved, but the horrors Lucius would visit on others in his twisted desperation. He spoke of blood and death, and the Malfoy name blackened irreparably, and the Mansion brought to earth in a pile of rubble, and the treasures of a thousand years scattered and destroyed. He spoke of vengeance, and he spoke of humiliation and he spoke of shame. And as he spoke he saw that Lucius believed every word that he said, and Ron knew that the serpent in the tower had been right and that he possessed other powers than the power to see the future.

He stopped speaking only when he knew that he need speak no more, than he had done what he had set out to do. Lucius gazed at him like a man staring up out of a pit. He said, "Is there no escape from this?"

"There is one way out," Ron said. "But it is not for cowards."

"Anything," Lucius said.

Ron held Terminus Est out to Lucius, blade gleaming in the faint light, and as if in a dream, Lucius took it.

"My son's sword?"

"Yes," Ron said, "And if you only do one good thing in the whole of your miserable, evil, misspent life, let this be it."

He turned and walked out of the room without another glance at the old man who held his son's sword in trembling hands. Ron shut the door behind him, and leaned against the wall beside it, steeling himself. And yet no sound came from inside the room - no gasp or cry, not even the sound of the sword falling; but in a few moments' time, a thin trickle of blood ran out from under the door, and Ron knew that it was done.

Harry was not coming. Hermione had realized this, and the despair was like chalk dust in her throat.

He winced them, and his hand tightened painfully on hers. "I am not sure I agree with the poets about all that "Death, where is thy sting?" business," he said hoarsely. "It seems to me that it stings more than enough."

"Are you in pain?" Hermione asked, leaning closer, feeling the rhythm of the pulse in his wrist beat and fade. This is the last time, she thought wildly, the last time I'll watch his lashes flutter down like that when he talks, and the quirk at the side of his lips, the wry curve of his mouth, that turn of his head, that laugh just under his voice. I must remember these things that I can tell them to Harry, if he does not come in time. *Harry, she thought despairingly, Harry, please come, please come quickly!*

"Like being torn in half," Draco said. "Not a breach, but an expansion -" he broke off, and coughed more blood. "It tastes of poison," he said wonderingly, and looked up at Hermione almost as if he could see her. There was a light in his eyes, but it seemed reflected rather than as if it came from within. "One soul in two bodies," he said. "That's what she said."

"I don't understand," Hermione said softly. He coughed again, and put his hand to his mouth; when he took it away, it was silvery-red with blood. She caught at his fingers, the blood slippery against her skin. "Just rest," she began, then turned her head - was that a sound? - yes, it was - the rhythmic tattoo of *running footsteps*. She heard their echo increasing, drawing closer and closer. "It's Harry," she whispered. "It must be," and she squeezed Draco's hand, hard, her heart contracting in anticipation.

His fingers did not return the pressure. She looked down at him. His eyes were closed, the lashes lying still against his cheekbones, untroubled by expelled breath. She released her grip on his hand, and it slid silently out of her grip, falling to rest against his chest, fingertips to collarbone, as if he were asleep.

"Oh," Hermione said. There was nothing inside her chest now but a great emptiness. "Oh, Draco."

Harry was lost. The fortress was a maze of twisting corridors, like the guts of some giant snake. Each one looked the same, gray walls and gray floor. He ran, the sword of Gryffindor clutched in his hand, careening around corners, the pounding of his own heart as loud in his ears as the rhythmic strike of his boots against the floor, and as he ran the howling in his head grew louder and louder until it was painful.

As he ran he tried to tell himself that his panic was sourceless, that there was no cause for it, that he had last seen Draco only a few moments before in the Ceremonial Chamber, shocked but upright, as well as could be expected. He told himself that even as the breath hissed in and out of his chest and he ran until his sight was flecked with black motes, and he turned the hundredth corner, and there was Hermione, sitting on the ground, her back against the wall and her long brown hair shawling down over her shaking shoulders and covering her face.

Her wand was in one hand, and it blazed with light like a fallen star. Her other arm was curved around Draco, her hand on his chest, and the fierce glow of her wand lit them both as if they were players on a stage. Harry could see everything, very clearly, limned in pitiless illumination: Draco's head in Hermione's lap, the bright fringe of his lashes where his eyes had fallen shut, the silver hair stuck to his forehead in pewter strands, the thin hand open against his chest, the clawed scars stark against the skin. *He's fallen asleep*, Harry thought with a crazed lucidity, and as if she heard the thought, Hermione raised her head and saw him there, and her mouth began to tremble. He saw how her hair was stuck to her damp cheeks, and then she set her wand down and reached her hand out to him, and as she did so, she slowly shook her head, answering the question he had not, yet, asked aloud.

The sword slipped from Harry's hand. It struck the stones at his feet with a harsh clang that resounded down the corridor like the sound of a tolling bell.

Author notes:

And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well, and better than thy stroke:

"Death be Not Proud": John Donne

Not a breach, but an expansion:

Valediction Forbidding Mourning: John Donne

Draco Veritas Chapter Sixteen: The Whole of the Law

Well, I used to have the notion I could swim the length of the ocean

If I knew that you were waiting for me

I used to have the notion I could swim the length of the ocean

I'd plumb the depths of every sea for you

I'd escape from my chains, and I'd reach out for you

Maybe I'm in love with you

Maybe, maybe I'm in love with you

That's it, that's the law, that's the whole of the law

-yo la tengo

Freezing wind blew off the lake, stirring the dry, dead grass between the graves. There were patches of snow on the ground, still, and icicles hung like teardrops from the statues that decorated the rooflines of the mausoleums. The bare branches of trees were flung like openwork lace across the ice-blue sky.

The words of the funeral oration rolled across Ginny like dark water. She felt as if she were drowning in them.

For behold, I show you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

The dead raised up incorruptible. Ginny thought of Tom, and shivered again. Her companion turned to her and placed a thin, black-gloved hand on her shoulder. "Are you all right?"

"I'm all right." Ginny nodded at Blaise, who tucked a wayward lock of poppy-red hair behind her ear, and frowned. Blaise, Ginny thought distantly, looked perfect as always in her black velvet scarf and matching gloves. A black fur muff dangled from one dainty hand and diamonds burned frostily in her earlobes. By contrast, Ginny thought, she herself must look like a scarecrow: she'd hardly had the energy to brush her hair that morning, and she'd lost so much weight that her black dress hung on her like a sack. "I'm just a little cold."

For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.

Victory, Ginny thought bitterly. Oh, they'd had victory all right; the wizarding world was still rejoicing at the death of Voldemort, still holding parades and parties and drowning Hogwarts in thank-you letters and grateful gifts, all for The Boy Who Lived. Not that Harry cared, or had even noticed. He hadn't been able to bring himself to come with the rest of them to the funeral. He hadn't even looked up when Hermione asked him. He hadn't moved in days from the same splintery old chair in the same corner of the infirmary.

He was still splashed with blood. Not his own blood. Madam Pomfrey had declared him entirely unharmed. They had all been unharmed, a lucky miracle.

All but one.

O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?

On Ginny's other side, Hermione made a little noise, something between a whimper and a gasp. Ron put an arm around her, rubbing her shoulder awkwardly with his scarred right hand. The tops of his fingers were red with cold; he must have forgotten his gloves. Ginny wanted to reach over, touch his arm, seek comfort, but his gaze was flat and distant as he stared at the neat black coffin with its wreath of dark blue flowers. She wondered what he was thinking.

She looked around. Most of the funeral guests were strangers to her. Lupin was here, though not Sirius. Next to him was Snape, like a ragged old crow in his black robes, his narrow face white and severe.

Requiesat in pace. Descensus.

The coffin began to move slowly downward; a corner of the wreath caught on a protruding root; scattering leaves and dark pansy petals into the grave. Ginny's breath caught in her throat. Darkness seeped into the edges of her vision, like ink spilling into clear water. She imagined herself

fainting forward onto the coffin and took a stumbling step away from the yawning gap in the earth.

"Ginny," Blaise whispered, reaching a hand out to catch her sleeve.

"No," Ginny said. She hurried away from the grave and the neat knot of black-clad figures standing around it. The square heels of her boots crunched on the frost-mantled snow. Narrow paths of packed, icy earth ran between neat rows of mausoleums. She passed a grave whose headstone was carved into a heart. *Amor Vincit Omnia*.

"Bollocks," she said savagely, spinning away from the grave. She wanted to cry, but the icy cold had leached all moisture from the air, and the tears sat in her throat like a hard knot. She stalked along the path, rounded a corner, stopped at the ironwork fence that surrounded the graveyard. Leaning against it was a boy with fair hair.

She knew who he was, but it didn't matter. She wondered if there would ever be a time when the sight of a slim boy with fair hair, wearing dark clothes, wouldn't make her feel as if she'd been hit across the chest with a Beater's bat. He looked up, hearing the sound of her boots on the snow. "So soon," he said. "Is it already over?"

"No," she said, roughly. "I couldn't stay. I couldn't bear it."

He came towards her, limping. His left arm was bandaged, and both blue eyes were circled in bruises. Draco had nearly cracked his skull apart with that knife. "Seamus," Ginny said, taking his hands--they were bare, and she wrapped her woolen fingers around them--"You shouldn't have come. You're not well enough."

He was watching the crown of the hill with its sugaring of white gravestones. "I thought I could stand it, but I couldn't," he said. "So much death. I remember--" He broke off, looking past her. She turned to see Blaise on the path to the gate, tottering a little in her high heels, red hair snapping like a banner under her black fur hat. Seeing them, Blaise paused. Her eyes were fixed on Seamus with a look of horror.

Seamus pulled his hands out of Ginny's and turned away, walking towards the gate that led out to the road. It clanged shut behind him.

Blaise hurried towards Ginny. The cold air was whipping color into her cheeks, but she was still pale. "Are you all right? Did he--?"

"It's not like that, Blaise," Ginny said. "Seamus and I, we're friends. He's..."

"Not a psychotic killer? I know." Blaise shoved her hands deep into her fur-lined pockets and shivered. "But I can't help it. I look at him and I see him with Pansy's blood on his hands."

"Blaise--"

"He tried to kill me, too."

"It wasn't him," Ginny said, as strongly as she could, knowing it wasn't strongly enough. "Seamus and Tom are two totally different people."

Blaise sighed. "I hope you're right." She tilted her head to the side, the long, silky strands of her dark red hair mixing with the silvery fur-lined collar of her cloak. "Does Seamus....remember any of it?"

"He says he doesn't," Ginny said. "But sometimes he wakes up screaming."

"Screaming what?"

" 'No, no, no,' mostly," Ginny said bleakly. "People's names sometimes. He screams them to get away, to run. Sometimes he screams for me. Virginia, Virginia. He never used to call me that."

Blaise looked appalled. "God, that's terrible."

"I know." Ginny wrapped her arms around herself, and shivered.

Blaise narrowed her eyes, her look oblique. "Can I ask you something?"

"Go ahead."

"Why are you here? You didn't even like Pansy."

"Seamus wanted to come," Ginny said. "He feels...responsible."

"Well, technically--"

"He didn't do anything," Ginny said, more fiercely than she'd intended. Blaise flinched, her green eyes flashing.

"I should have known it was just Gryffindor self-flagellation," she said sarcastically. "Well, don't do us any favors. Hermione, especially: Pansy hated her. She didn't like any of you, except Ron. I was actually her friend."

"You didn't like her either," Ginny pointed out.

"What's that got to do with anything?" Blaise said, and then laughed. She had a surprisingly sweet laugh, considering, Ginny thought, though the bell-sound seemed out of place in the graveyard. Blaise turned and looked behind her, following Ginny's glance. The knot of people by Pansy's grave had begun to move down the hill, a marching column of black ants. "I guess it's over," she said. "This is, like, the sixth funeral I've been to this week."

"It won't be the last," Ginny said, pushing her hair back from her face. She could see Ron's bright red head against the white winter sky. Hermione walked beside him, her arms folded.

"How is Draco?" Blaise said softly.

Ginny glanced down at her feet. "He hasn't woken up. At all. Madam Pomfrey says he could wake up any time, but he could also...go any time. We've been taking turns sitting with him, except Harry--"

Blaise looked surprised. "Harry hasn't been sitting with him?"

"No, he has... I just mean he hasn't been taking it in turns--he's been there the whole time since Sirius and Professor Lupin brought us back from the castle. We've all been staying at school; Dumbledore thought he could be taken care of best there. Draco, I mean. Not Harry. Not that Harry doesn't need taking care of, too, but he won't even talk to anyone, he just ... sits there." The wind was kicking snow up in small sharp flurries; Ginny blinked flakes from her eyelashes. "I know Hermione's worried sick about him."

"Why did she come to the funeral?" Blaise wondered. "She must have despised Pansy."

"For Ron," Ginny said. "We all came for Ron. We thought it was important."

Blaise blinked. "Surely he can't have been that fond of Pansy, really..."

"No," Ginny said, "but sometimes you need to bury the past."

"So to speak," said Blaise, and turned; Hermione and Ron were nearly upon them. Ron was white-faced and tired-looking; one of the scattered petals had fallen on his shoe, and stuck there. Hermione's red-mitted hand was firm on his arm.

"Hello, Blaise," she said, inclining her head.

Blaise muttered a reply, looking acutely uncomfortable.

"I had meant to thank you." Hermione pushed her hood back so that her dark hair spilled out; something glittered among the curls. "For the loan of your barrettes. They turned out to be useful."

"Glad to hear it," Blaise said, and added, looking almost nervous, "Would it be all right if I came along?"

"Came where?" asked Hermione, pulling her hood back up. "To school?"

"I want to see Draco, if I can," Blaise said. "I don't know if he can have visitors, but..."

"Of course you can come," Ron said shortly, before anyone else had a chance to reply. "You can ride in the carriage with us."

Blaise turned to Ginny. "Is that where you'll be?"

"I'm riding separately, with Seamus. You can come with us instead, if you like..."

Blaise backed away hastily, shaking her head. "Er, no, that's all right...I'll just see you there, shall I?"

Ginny sighed.

Seamus was waiting for her by a black carriage with the Malfoy coat of arms etched in silver on the door. Narcissa had lent it to them for the journey, as neither Ron nor Seamus was considered strong enough to travel by Portkey.

Seamus was sketching something on a piece of paper, which he quickly stowed in a pocket as she approached. "Are we leaving?"

Ginny nodded and swung herself up into the carriage; Seamus followed, pulling the door shut behind him. For several long minutes they sat in silence in the dark blue plush interior, the creak and rock as the carriage navigated the snowy road the only sound. Finally, Seamus said, "I'm sorry."

Ginny looked at him. "What for?"

"Frightening Blaise." He watched the countryside lurch by the windows in a monochromatic patchwork of black, white and gray. "I don't think I've ever frightened anyone before."

"Get used to it," Ginny said wearily, and was immediately sorry, for Seamus winced as if she'd punched him. She leaned forward. "I'm sorry, too. Look, just remember that it wasn't you. It was someone else wearing your face. You didn't do anything wrong." *How many times have I said this over the past three days?* she thought. *And it never seems to make any difference.*

Seamus looked down at his hands. They were thin, flexible hands, tapering to square fingertips, freckled along the knuckles. "When the coffin was being lowered," he said, "I remembered her running through the house to get away from me. Falling down and getting up again. I remember laughing at her -"

"Seamus," Ginny pressed the backs of her hands against her eyes. "It wasn't you."

"But they're my memories," he said softly. She lowered her hands and looked at him; his eyes were dark in the dimness of the carriage, the color of forget-me-nots. "My dreams. How can I be sure he's left me entirely, Ginny? That there isn't some scrap of him left inside me, changing me, poisoning me?" His voice rose. "How can I be sure?"

"He may never leave you, entirely, Seamus," she said as gently as she could. "But I trust the goodness in you to overcome that. You should, too."

He took a long, shaky breath, then reached for her hand. He slipped her glove off, and wound their fingers together, her small fingers warming his cold ones. "I don't know what I'd do without you, Ginny," he said. "You're the only thing that still makes sense to me."

They drew up to the school just as the sun was setting: the early, light-blue sunset of deep winter. Ginny drew her yellow cloak tightly closed as she went up the front steps, Seamus beside her. The lamps were off in the turret that housed the Headmaster's office; Dumbledore had left the premises precipitously moments after their arrival, saying that he was going to fetch Narcissa to her dying son's bedside. She had appeared hours later, but Dumbledore had yet to return. In her more irrational moments Ginny wondered if he was avoiding her, knowing what she wanted to ask him.

Pleading exhaustion, Seamus kissed her goodbye in the entryway, and headed towards Gryffindor Tower. Ginny wasn't entirely sorry to see him go; being cheerful and optimistic for Seamus was something of a strain.

She found Blaise waiting at the foot of the steps that led to the infirmary. She looked so woebegone that Ginny's heart skipped a beat. "Is everything all right?" she asked, thinking, *Please let it not have happened while I was gone, when I wasn't here to sit with him, to tell him goodbye.*

"I feel so rude barging in." Blaise confessed. "I suppose I really hadn't thought about it, but his mum's there, and Harry, and Hermione, and what right have I got to be here? I wasn't anyone to him, really..."

Her voice trailed off. She sat, a disconsolate figure in her neat black outfit, her hair spilling cherry-red out from under her hat. Ginny had always thought of Blaise as tall and imposing; now she realized the other girl was her own height. "Please come see him," Ginny said. "He cared for you, I know he did. He always said you were just like him."

"Well, that's encouraging, since he loves himself more than anything else," Blaise said, looking as if she were only half joking.

"It meant a lot to him that you understood him," Ginny said quietly. "God knows, I never have."

Blaise looked up, startled. Her eyes were the same unnerving glass-green as Harry's, but fringed with long copper lashes, where his were black. Looking into them, Ginny thought, Draco must have felt he were staring into some strange combination of Harry's eyes and her own. "All right," Blaise said and, standing, took Ginny's wrist and held it tightly, which Ginny found startling though not unpleasant. They went up the stairs together and through the wide double doors into the infirmary.

A profound hush lay over the room, as if all sounds were muffled in the shadow of Death's wings. Madam Pomfrey moved silently in the low light, stopping occasionally to speak to Narcissa Malfoy, who had insisted upon being helpful in any way she could: bandaging Harry and Ron's wounds as well as Draco's, carrying bowls of antidote and plumping pillows. She sat now in a large armchair pulled up to the window by Draco's bed, her eyes half closed, chin in hand.

Hermione sat at the foot of the bed, a book open in her lap. Her hair was pulled up in a heavy silver clip, her still-damp blue winter cloak hung on a peg behind her. She had a shawl wrapped around her shoulders: Ginny recognized it as the one Draco had given her for Christmas. Hermione glanced up as the door shut behind Ginny and Blaise, and gestured them over with her quill, spilling a bit of ink on her sleeve.

Blaise hung back. Ginny had to half-drag her to the side of the bed. The last splashes of dying sunlight lent a faint color to Draco's white hands, folded across the snowy-white sheets and blankets drawn up to his chest. He had been bathed and put into his own pajamas; clean, he looked deceptively healthier than when Ginny had seen him in Romania, a stark scarecrow latticed with cuts and filthy with blood and mud, his ragged clothes hanging on his bony frame. His hair was fresh now, curling in silver-white tendrils at his temples, his hands were wrapped in bandages, and his thin chest rose and fell, rose and fell, so slightly that the blankets barely moved.

Blaise's eyes welled up with tears, which spilled down her cheeks, spoiling her eye makeup. "Bother," she said, dropping Ginny's wrist to scrub fiercely at her face. "Sorry," she said, addressing Draco, a soft catch to her voice. "I know how you hate it when I cry."

"It's all right," said Harry. "He won't notice. He doesn't notice anything."

Blaise jumped and turned, startled. Ginny followed her gaze to where Harry huddled in an armchair at the head of the bed, so still that he might have been invisible. Ginny wondered if she would have noticed him if she hadn't already known he'd be there. He'd been there for three days, and looked it: his green eyes smeared with lampblack stains of weariness, his hair hanging in matted tangles. Madam Pomfrey and Narcissa had done what they could to patch him up - he hadn't objected as long as he hadn't been asked to move from the chair - and swathes of clean white bandage showed beneath the ragged tears in his filthy black clothes. His sword, the hilt still stained with blood, leaned against the back of his chair; Ginny didn't know where Terminus Est was, and hadn't dared ask.

"You don't know that, Harry," said Hermione, looking up from her book. "They say people in a coma can hear when they're spoken to, sometimes, even if they don't show it."

"I know it," said Harry, with finality. His voice was gritty with exhaustion. He raised himself up a little, and looked around the infirmary. "Where's Ron?"

"He said he had to talk to Remus about something, remember? He's probably with him in his office."

"And Sirius?"

"He's down in the Potions office with Snape," Hermione said. "I told you that before."

"Have they had any luck finding anything?" Blaise asked. She had taken Draco's hand, lacing her fingers through his. Ginny felt a burst of resentment, which she tamped down fiercely. *Real love is generous*, she told herself, *it is not jealous, it is not destructive, it is not--*

Oh, bugger it, she thought, and turned away from the bed, from the sight of the redheaded girl who was not herself holding Draco's hand while his life inched away. She found herself staring down at Hermione, and at her open book. Across the top of the page was a woodcut drawing of a winged serpent; below it a symbol like a sharply rayed star, oddly familiar.

"I've seen that symbol before," Ginny said, trying to remember exactly where. "What does it mean?"

Hermione, who had been replying to Blaise, stopped and sighed. "It's the rune for silver dragons. I've been reading up on them as much as I can, hoping to find something..."

"It was on Harry's runic band," Ginny said, suddenly, glancing towards him, though he didn't seem to be listening. "I remember, because..."

Hermione slammed her book shut, drowning out the rest of Ginny's words. Her face was white. "Harry, do you mind if Ginny and I go talk in the corridor?"

Harry shook his head, barely looking at them. "Do what you like."

Ginny found herself hustled unceremoniously out of the infirmary, glancing back over her shoulder as she went to cast an apologetic look at Blaise. Out on the landing, Hermione checked to make sure that the door was firmly shut before she spoke. "Now finish what you were saying," she said, peremptorily. "The symbol was on Harry's runic band?"

"Well, I never looked that closely at the band when Harry had it," Ginny admitted. "But I saw it when Gareth was wearing it. I looked at it because I was surprised he had one just like Harry's."

Hermione looked as if she were about to clutch at her head. "Gareth? You mean back-in-the-past Gareth?"

"Yes, but he wasn't in the past, he was in my bedroom." Seeing Hermione's expression, Ginny hastened to reassure the other girl that she hadn't been seeking illicit time-traveling booty. "With Ben. They came forward in time to give me something. You see..."

Hermione was blessedly quiet during Ginny's explanation, only nodding on occasion. When Ginny was done, she said, "I've never heard of anything called a *flora fortis*, myself."

"Well, maybe you don't know everything," Ginny said, vexed.

"It's been suggested." Hermione's tone was acerbic; Ginny sometimes forgot just how dry and almost emotionless Hermione got when she was very, very upset. "Anyway, it sounds as if they didn't have much to say to you that was all that helpful. Just a lot of muttering and a bouquet of dubious usefulness. But you saw the silver dragon rune? You're sure?"

Ginny nodded.

Hermione bit her lip. "I don't want you saying anything to Harry. Do you understand?"

"Why not?"

"Because," Hermione said slowly, "if he finds out that he's been wearing the means to save Draco all these months, and now he's destroyed it, then..." She shook her head. "No. He can never, ever know."

"He'll have to know eventually, Hermione," Ginny said.

"Not if I have anything to do with it," Hermione said, her dark eyes flashing, and Ginny remembered something that Draco had said once, that Hermione had taught him what it meant to be utterly ruthless in love. "It's a moot point, anyway. That bracelet's gone. It no longer exists."

"Yes, it does."

"No," said Hermione with conscious patience. "Harry destroyed it. You know that."

"It exists. It exists in the past."

"GINNY." Hermione dropped her book seized the other girl's wrists. "You can't change the past, do you understand that? Look what happened last time you messed around with time travel."

Ginny tried to draw back, but Hermione's grip was like iron. "You don't think I've thought about that? But this is different, Hermione. This could work. This could save him."

"No," Hermione said again, but Ginny saw the flicker in her eyes. "It's destined, Ginny. I talked to Ron about the visions he had, back at the

fortress, how he saw the Dark Mark and the Ministry on fire, and how all of them came true. You know what else he saw? He saw Draco lying dead in a bed, and Harry crying over him. That's the future, Ginny. That's what's going to happen. We can't change it."

"I don't believe it," Ginny said stubbornly. "The future isn't made until it happens. Do you want to let him die and know you didn't do everything you possibly could to save him?"

"Do you want to bring another Tom-sized disaster down on all of us? How many people have to die before you stop being so reckless?"

This time Ginny pulled her wrist back. "When I freed Rhysenn," she said, her voice tight with the effort not to cry, "she told me I was the only one who could save him. The only one. And I thought about it - I wondered what I could do that no one else could. I thought maybe that she meant because I love him so much - but I'm not the only one who loves him, I don't even know if I love him more than anyone else does. What I can do that no one else can do is go back a thousand years into the past. That's all I've got."

"But you don't even have the Time-Turner," Hermione said. "Dumbledore took it away from you."

"And I'm going to get it back," Ginny pivoted and marched off down the hallway.

"Ginny!" Hermione called. "Ginny, wait!"

"She won't, you know," said a voice behind her. "She never does when she's like that."

Blaise had come noiselessly out of the infirmary and was looking at Hermione with open curiosity, as if she were a peculiar bug. Her eyes were red, but her expression dared Hermione to remark on the fact.

Hermione had no intention of remarking on it. Blaise could cry buckets over Draco for all she cared; she had more important things to worry about. "We've got to stop her," she said.

"I don't see why," Blaise retorted. "Stop her doing what?"

With a sharp hiss of exasperation, Hermione whirled on her heel and stalked after Ginny, who was already out of sight. Not that Hermione didn't know her way to the Headmaster's office. "She's got some harebrained idea about going back in time again, trying to find the antidote there."

"There? 'In the past' there?"

They had reached the stairs. Hermione nodded grimly.

"Well, could she?"

Hermione paused with her foot hovering over the first step. "That is not the point!"

"Seems like the point to me," said Blaise reasonably.

Hermione set her foot down on the step with a thump, and glared at Blaise. "After what happened the last time she decided to mess around with time magic?"

"Granted, that went poorly," Blaise acknowledged. "Although I do believe everything happens for a reason." She touched the barrette that held back a lock of her hair. "But the time before that, didn't she use her time magic to bring forward an army that defeated Slytherin and saved all your lives?"

Hermione gaped. "How did you know that?"

"From Draco," said Blaise. "He told me about it. Many times. About how she flew that dragon and saved him, too. I used to think he was just making it up to annoy me, or worse, that it was some perverse sexual fantasy of his. He could be very strange. Did you know -"

"No," Hermione interrupted hastily, "and I don't want to, either. It is true. I mean, of course it is. It was very brave and clever of her, and if anyone could do this..."

Her voice trailed off.

Blaise looked at her expectantly. "Draco used to say," she said, "that there were the kind of people who would fight for you until all hope was gone. And then there were the kind of people who would fight for you even beyond that. I know he thought Ginny was one of that kind."

Hermione burst into tears and sat down on the stairs with a thump.

Blaise looked horrified. She glanced down at herself, but her sleek outfit didn't include any pockets, much less one big enough to hide a handkerchief in. At last she slipped a glove off her hand and held it out reluctantly to Hermione.

"What am I supposed to do with that?" Hermione demanded wetly, choking back sniffles.

"I don't know," Blaise admitted. "Look, I didn't mean to set you off crying. Whatever I said, I take it back."

Hermione snatched the glove out of Blaise's hand and wiped her face with it, though she stopped short of blowing her nose. The suede absorbed her tears nicely. Blaise tried not to look distressed about the glove, which was good of her, Hermione thought. "It's not you," Hermione said. "I just realized something, is all."

Blaise lifted an eyebrow. "What?"

"That he deserves better than me giving up on him," Hermione said in a squashed voice. "All the time I was holding him, when I thought he was dying - when he *was* dying - I kept telling him to hold on and to fight and not to give up. And then when he shut his eyes and stopped...stopped breathing..." She blew her nose into the glove. "I'm sorry. I'll buy you another pair."

"I doubt you could afford them," said Blaise.

Hermione ignored this. She was on a roll, choking out words through her tears. "Then Harry showed up, and then Sirius and Remus--and Remus got him to breathe again-- but I think I knew in that moment that he was dead anyway, that I'd lost him. But he isn't ...that is, maybe there is hope...and I'm just afraid, I'm so afraid to let myself hope in case it all goes wrong. I can't lose him twice. I just can't."

Blaise narrowed her eyes. "I didn't think you were in love with him."

Hermione went red. "I -"

"What are you two doing?"

They both jumped and looked up. Ginny stood at the top of the stairs. She came down a step or two, holding something that caught the light, glinting. Hermione gasped.

"The Time-Turner! Dumbledore gave it to you?"

Ginny hesitated just the barest fraction of a second. "Yes," she said. "And I know what you're going to say -"

"No," Hermione interrupted, scrambling to her feet. "You don't. Ginny, listen -"

"Stop!" Ginny flung out a hand, as if to ward the older girl off. "I can't listen to you, Hermione, I just can't. I know you're right, and if I listen to you, you'll just wind up convincing me, because you are...so always...*right*." She looped the chain of the Time-Turner over her head, dropping the small hourglass into the neck of her robes. "And I'm all wrong, I know it, I always have known it. I think that's why Tom wanted me, because he knew it, too."

"Ginny," Hermione said, appalled, but Ginny went on speaking, white-faced but steady. "I want your blessing for this, Hermione, but if I don't get it, I'm going to do it anyway. I know you'll remind me of what happened last time I did something like this-and I know you think reasons aren't important, only actions are, but I think reasons mean something, I think they matter. And when I went back in time to get the Diary, I did it for all the wrong reasons. I did it because I wanted to be respected, I wanted all your approval, I wanted Draco to-to admire me, thank me, even. But this is different."

"Of course it's different-"

"Dumbledore let you go back in the past, in third year," Ginny said urgently, "to save a life, and that's what this is for-to save a life. If he were already dead, it would be different, but he's still alive, and he's dying

because of all of us, you know that? He told Harry to choose the world or choose him and Harry chose him, but Draco wouldn't let him. He made him choose the world, and now it's time for someone to choose him, to choose to save him. I don't care if he ever knows it was me, I don't want anything for it, I just want him alive. And you and Harry have kept him alive so far, and now it's my turn, this is the one thing I can do, the one thing I can give that no one else can give. And I'm telling you this because I want you to know it, but not because I want your permission. I'll do it anyway, whether you like it or not, and there's nothing you can do to stop me."

"All right," Hermione said.

"I knew you-" Ginny stopped, almost falling down a stair. "What?"

"I said all right," Hermione said, eager in her turn. "I wasn't going to forbid you in the first place. I was only going to tell you to go to the library first. It might help you to aim for some specific dates--the children of the Founders weren't always in the castle, right? So you might want to find a time when you know they'll be here. I suggest the updated *Lives of the Founders*; it has an appendix that follows the activities of their immediate heirs. If not that, then *A History of the House of Gryffindor* might help, but skip right to volume three; volumes one and two cover the period before your Time-Turner was even created."

"The library would be a good point of departure, too," Blaise added thoughtfully. "It's one of the oldest parts of the castle, and hasn't been changed or added to over the years."

Hermione looked at her in surprise, while Ginny, her knees suddenly weak, sat down quickly on the stairs. "Don't tell me you've read *Hogwarts: A History*."

"Of course," Blaise said mildly. "Who hasn't?"

It had begun to snow outside the castle, a thick blanket of white settling like a sinking curtain over the fields. Seamus, sitting in the window embrasure of the Gryffindor boys' dormitory, pressed the back of his

hand to the cold glass. He liked the touch of cold things now; they soothed him, quieted the burning in his blood.

His parents had wanted him to come home, but he'd insisted that he was fine, and wasn't dating Dean Thomas either. (He wondered vaguely where they'd come up with that one.) It wasn't that he didn't want to see them, though he had found it hard at first to conjure up an exact memory of their faces and in the end had had to refer to a book of photographs. He wanted to be around Ginny.

In a world of flickering haze and unexpected, sudden mists, where familiar faces seemed strange and ordinary English phrases dropped suddenly into gibberish, Ginny was the only constant, the only element that remained unchanged from his life before. She did not flinch from the sometimes bleak expression in his eyes, which he could not yet hide; she did not turn away in disgust when he told her his dreams of washing and washing his hands, unable to remove the sticky film of blood. She understood. Tom had been inside her, too, had made her a part of him; she knew what it was like. What it was like to be forced to commit unspeakable acts you could never have imagined, much less imagined yourself performing. What it was like to feel that hate always inside you, hate for the world, burning away at your heart like an acid. What it was like to feel that pride, that unstinting arrogance. The lightness that came with loss of conscience.

That clean sense of superiority.

He remembered the prostitute who had looked like Ginny, with her long red hair in braids, the short mock-schoolgirl outfit, the same brown eyes. When he had kissed her, at first she had kissed him back, more expertly than Ginny and with a simulated passion that—no, he thought, she hadn't kissed him, she had kissed Tom, and she'd been paid to do it, or thought she would be paid before Tom broke her neck the way a small child might snap a stick of rock candy in half. He remembered how Tom had stroked his fingers through the long red hair as she died. Ginny, he'd said. Ginny.

The roll of parchment on Seamus' lap fluttered to the floor as he put his hands up to cover his face. He wanted her here; she would steady him, make him whole again the way he'd been before. Together, they would heal. Without her, he would always be broken. His fingers pressed

painfully into his eyes, trying to erase the memory of the dead girl with Ginny's face, the sound of Tom's voice, reverent and desolate.

Ginny. Ginny. Ginny.

The sound of the door opening brought him out of his reverie. He looked up, half-guiltily, though he had done nothing wrong. It was only Ron, wearing a dark red cloak over his robes that clashed with his hair. "Oh, sorry," he said, seeing Seamus. "I didn't mean--"

"It's all right." Seamus hopped down off the windowsill. "It's your room, too."

"That's true." Ron didn't move, and for a long moment the boys just stared at each other, both equally uncomfortable though for different reasons. Seamus wondered drearily if anyone would ever treat him normally again.

"I was just going anyway," he said, finally. "I thought I'd see if I could find Ginny before dinner--"

"Actually," Ron said, stepping to block Seamus' path to the door, "if you wouldn't mind, there's something rather important that I needed to talk to you about..."

Sirius and Narcissa were standing together outside the infirmary doors. Sirius, like the rest of them, looked hollow-eyed with tiredness, but he managed to smile at Hermione. Narcissa couldn't quite manage it - the strain of the past few weeks had left her looking terribly frail, her skin like parchment. Hermione could see the veins at her temples.

She thought how differently they all reacted to their grief: Sirius, short-tempered, strangely ineffective, Narcissa gone frail as a flower, Remus sharp, determined and distant, Ginny wound tight as a coiled spring, and Harry, vanished beyond recollecting.

Stifling a sigh, she greeted them with a wave and made to go around them, but Sirius stopped her. "Wait."

A sharp pang of fear assailed her. "Has something--?"

"Nothing has happened," Narcissa hastened to assure her. "We wanted to talk to you. Well - Sirius did. I..."

Her voice trailed off. Hermione wanted to say something to her, reassuring or kind, but she'd had a surfeit of grief already, her own and other people's. "What is it?"

"It's Harry," Sirius said. "If you could..."

"If I could what?"

"It's getting close to the time," Sirius said. "If you could get him out of the infirmary, persuade him there's something needs doing elsewhere, persuade him he needs a bath, anything -"

"He does need a bath," said Hermione, bleakly. "But he's needed one all week and that hasn't budged him. I don't know what you think I can do that you can't."

"He shouldn't be here when Draco dies," said Sirius flatly, and Narcissa looked away. "They're tied together and I'm afraid that when Draco fails at last, his death will pull Harry down after him."

Hermione stared for a moment. A clear picture rose up in her head: a huge ship going down in the limitless emptiness of the ocean and the splashing survivors, fallen from its rails, sucked under the surface in its wake, cold green seawater closing over their heads. She looked at Sirius with something like hate, and pushed past him through the doors of the infirmary.

Harry was where she had left him, in the chair by the bed. His head rested on one hand and he looked so tired, so tired and so young, that even as she approached him her impotent anger faded to sorrow and she longed to put her arms around him and comfort him. But he had shunned her touch since Romania - had shunned all human contact. He flinched away from Sirius's outstretched hands and even Ron's awkward shoulder pats, as if their touch burned him.

So she sat down in the chair next to his and only said quietly, "Harry?"

He turned his head. Black curls framed a face that was all angles and blue hollows, and the traced shadow of stubble along his chin and jaw which should have made him look older, but didn't. His lips were cracked; a thin line of blood ran along his lower lip where he had bitten it. "Yes?"

She lowered her half-raised hand. Something about him, the way he was now-- not a new quality in him, but an old quality, lacking-- held her back. "Sirius wanted me to see how you were," she said, hating the lie. "If you need anything - anything to eat, maybe? Or if you wanted to go and take - take a bath or something, I can sit with Draco."

"No." His voice was perfectly polite and perfectly dead. "No, thank you, Hermione."

It was, she thought, like trying to climb a glass wall in greased slippers. There was nothing there, within those lightless, bottle-green eyes: no life, no Harry. She looked past him to Draco. The rosy afternoon light had moved away, and he lay white as a wax figure, hands crossed over his chest, the way he always slept. She remembered his hand slipping out of hers in the corridor, the limp curl of his fingers. Some people, Blaise had said, would fight till all hope was gone. And some would fight even past that.

"Have you tried, Harry?" she said, the words escaping before she could hold them back.

He only blinked. "Tried what?"

"Talking to him," she said, glancing from Harry to the boy on the bed. "Talking to Draco."

"I believe you were there," Harry said, his voice as dry as winter air, "when Madam Pomfrey told me he was past hearing anything."

Hermione flinched. Harry had talked to Draco, of course. In that corridor in Romania he had said quite a lot of things, talking and talking, and sometimes hunching silently at Draco's side, until Sirius and Remus arrived and pulled him away. And she had watched, and Harry had watched, as Remus bent over Draco, then took hold of him and nearly threw him down on the corridor floor, Harry shouting out in anger and Hermione pulling him back, and the way Remus had pushed down on

Draco's chest with a savage force, muttering spells under his breath, till Draco had coughed up silvery-black blood all over his robes and started breathing again.

But he hadn't opened his eyes again, then or since.

Madam Pomfrey's later comment that Draco was past hearing anything hadn't been directed at Harry, but Harry had reacted as if it had been, and clammed up almost entirely.

"I know what she said." Her tone was careful. "But she didn't mean you. You can talk to Draco without him having to hear you, not properly. Mind to mind."

Harry said listlessly, "He's gone. There's nothing there for me to talk to. It would be like - talking to a wall."

"If you really think that," Hermione said, sharp as glass, "why are you here?"

The corner of Harry's eye twitched, but he said nothing. He was still looking down at his hands. The curl of the scar across his right palm was as darkly visible as if he had drawn it in ink.

"You could try," she said.

Harry said something so quietly that she had to lean close, and even then she wasn't sure she'd heard. Still, she knew what he had said. What if I try, and it doesn't work?

She looked at Draco, still as a knight carved on a tomb, those closed unsleeping eyes fringed with silver-wire lashes. She wondered if he dreamed, and if so, what he saw. Or was it only darkness? *I can see you, in your white dress with snow in your hair.*

"It will work," she said, putting all the confidence she didn't have into those three short words, bartering honesty for love. "I'm sure of it." *What does it matter now? What's one more well-meant lie?*

He raised his eyes to hers, and the trust she saw in them broke her heart. "All right," he said, "I'll try."

Blaise looked up from the book, her nose wrinkled. "Well, I've checked in three places now. I think we have it right."

"Do we?" Ginny said tiredly. "I've never looked up dates before. I've always just...felt it." She put her hand to the tiny gold hourglass at her throat, feeling the power that pulsed through it. "Can I go now?"

Blaise pushed the book away. The torches along the library wall were dimmed, the shadows gathered thickly among the stacks of books. "However much time you spend in the past," she said, "it doesn't matter, right? You could spend a lifetime there and come right back to this exact moment."

"I could," Ginny admitted, "but every moment we lose now, in present time, is lost forever. And it's this time that matters--to Draco, I mean."

"I know what you mean." Blaise stood up. Her eyes were very green; she was beautiful in the way that Ginny associated with Draco: that special beauty that was a kind of armor against the world. Nothing could pierce it or extinguish it, but it held its possessor remote from the world. Ginny had always envied that detachment. She had never been able to protect herself like that.

"Ginny," Blaise said, "how can you be sure?"

Ginny blinked. "So sure of what?"

"That if you do this, if you save him, he'll love you."

Ginny stood. The Time-Turner beat in her hand like a heart. "That's not why I'm doing this," she said.

Blaise said something else, but it was lost in Ginny's memory of other words, words she had been trying to forget--*if you are to do this, you must understand, you have one chance and one alone--to travel such vast distances through time requires a great expenditure of energy, and should you make more than one trip, I cannot speak to your safety, or your survival*--and she turned the Time-Turner over, hastily, as the world and all its words rushed away like a tide going out.

Draco's hand was icy. Harry let his own rest beside it, his fingers looking oddly brown and healthy next to Draco's pallid ones. He knew he ought to touch his hand to Draco's, but the idea filled him with revulsion. It would be like touching a doll or a wax mannequin, not a person at all.

His hands tightened on the bedsheet, the heavy material crumpling under his fingers. Narcissa had brought Draco's own 600-thread-count percale sheets from the Mansion and they felt slippery. He closed his eyes, his thoughts thick and confused, as if he were fumbling his way through fog. *Malfoy?*

No answer, only an echoing blankness, as if he had shouted down into an empty cavern. He tried again, and the echo was painfully sharp; he put his hands up to cover his eyes and felt Hermione tentatively touch his shoulder. He had heard despair in her voice and knew, with a pang, how she felt: how she simultaneously envied him his gift, this chance, and dreaded it.

He let his mind relax, let himself remember what it was like to talk to Draco without speaking: like walking into a crowded room full of strangers and seeing, at last, a familiar face. He reached now for that familiarity, sensing that he had been searching too far away, that what he was looking for was as close as his own thoughts and his own mind.

The weight of Hermione's hand on his arm slipped away, the seat of the chair, the chill of the air inching under the window, all vanished. He was in a place like the garden maze of the Triwizard Tournament, but the narrow, confining walls seemed to be a hard, dark, shiny stuff, and he could see lights flickering inside them. He heard a laugh and turned, half-running, to follow the sound: the path curved up and up, and now under his hastening feet were polished stone stairs. Dark wood paneling rose on either side of him, lit at intervals by glass lamps blown in the shapes of poisonous flowers: lilies, belladonna, nightshade, poppies, sweet pea, foxglove.

He recognized them and knew where he was before he reached the top and saw the familiar hallway stretching before him, gleaming with the labor of a dozen house-elves. There were the torches in their serpent-shaped brackets. He knew he wasn't here, not really, that this was a dream

he had wandered into, and not even his own dream, but someone else's. That Draco, dying, would dream of home was perhaps not surprising: certainly the place felt familiar to Harry, as recognizable as a memory. He knew the place and knew that it was waiting, as Draco was waiting, for him.

He stood before the library door. He could not remember if this was where the door had always been, but it didn't matter: he pushed it open and stepped inside. There was a fire burning in the grate, sending great, heatless licks of golden flame hurtling up the chimney. The thick velvet curtains were roped back from the high stained-glass windows bordered in gold and blue and green. The big mahogany desk had been pushed back against one wall and Draco was sitting cross-legged on top of it, a pile of books at his elbow and another book open on his lap. He looked up when Harry came in and smiled the smile of someone who has entered a crowded room full of strangers and at last sees a familiar face.

"Potter, you've made it!" he said, sounding pleased. "And about time, too-- in a few more hours I think I'd have had to leave without you."

Part Two: Love is the Law

The first journey backward was cold. Ginny felt a moment of icy grayness and saw jagged, far-off lightning, as if she were passing through a storm cloud. Her stomach wrenched painfully. Then the clouds were gone and she was standing exactly where she had stood before, only Blaise was gone.

She turned around slowly. The library was the same shape, still, as it had been, but there were no stacks of books. There were long, rough wood tables, stacked with illuminated manuscripts, parchment and quills. There was a longer piece of parchment on which someone had been scrawling what looked like rough sketches. Thick tallow candles burned in silver holders on the walls and in a larger candelabra on the table. The room smelled of tallow, smoke and damp ink.

She approached the table slowly and examined the sketches. She recognized the outline of Hogwarts, though it looked slightly different than she remembered, as if it were missing a wing-- she leaned closer, taking hold of the page--

The door of the library burst open. It was Ben, just as she'd seen him the last time she'd journeyed into the past, though he wasn't shirtless this time. He was wearing a long night robe, and his black hair was wildly tangled, his dark eyes brilliant. He looked at her and gave a little whoop of surprise, the lit wand in his right hand dipping as he lowered it.

"Ginny?"

"Oh--yes, it's me," she said, feeling awkward. "Sorry, did I catch you at a bad time?"

"I was sleeping," he said, with a shrug.

"How'd you know I was here, anyway?"

He pointed towards the desk. "You touched my private papers. They're warded."

"Oh," she said. There was a short silence, then she smiled at him. "Well, it's a good thing, anyway, because I was looking for you. Gareth, too, actually."

"Gareth?" Ben perched himself on the edge of the desk. "I'm sure he'll be along. He takes longer to wake up than I do."

Ginny leaned against one of the long tables. "When are you, Benjamin?"

"Fine, thanks." He paused and blinked at her. "Did you say *when* am I? I'm in my own time, Ginny, surely you must have set your Time-Turner to a year?"

"I did," she mused, "but...I mean, you know me, so clearly we've already met and you've probably already been to the future and brought your army there and-- what happened to them, anyway?"

He waved a hand. "All in good time. Why are you here now?"

She squinted at him. "Have you already come forward in time to my house to see me? About five days after the new year, in 1996?"

He looked startled. "No. Why would I do that?"

"No reason."

"It sounds like a bit of a lark, going forward again," he said, raking a hand through the unruly hair so like Harry's. Then he smiled. "I hear Gareth."

Ginny, who hadn't heard anything, looked up in surprise. A moment later the door opened and the Heir of Slytherin came in, wrapped in a shockingly purple robe, his hair every which way. He took a look at her and groaned. "You again?"

Ginny frowned. "I don't suppose it would make any difference if I told you that in the future, you're very fond of me?"

"I wouldn't believe you." He sat down on the desk next to Ben and glared. "What do you need now? You can't have any more soldiers, we sent the ones you used off to--"

"Who says I need anything? Maybe I just stopped by to chat," said Ginny in an injured tone.

Gareth raised an eyebrow. "Did you?"

"No," she admitted. "I need your bracelet."

"You need my what?"

"The red band you wear around your wrist," she said. "At least--I've seen you wear it...do you have it on now?"

Gareth glanced at Ben, who shrugged. With a sigh, he rolled up the left sleeve of his purple robe. There on his wrist was the runic band, a red glasslike band that seemed to glow from within with a dull fire. "I always wear it," he said. "Every day since I was a child."

Ginny bit her lip. "I ah, need to borrow it."

Ben choked back a laugh. "You need to *borrow* it? Ginny, it's an object of awesome protective power, forged by Slytherin himself, made to protect his son. I don't think Gareth's going to let you borrow it."

"It's important," said Ginny in a thin, determined voice. "It might save Draco's life."

Gareth frowned. "Who?"

"The Heir of Slytherin in her time," said Ben. "I'm afraid, Ginny, that you're going to have to explain a little better than that."

So Ginny explained. She told them about the runic band, its first appearance amid dire warnings, the gifting of it to Harry, and the later poisoning and decline of Draco. She told them how Harry had used the band to save himself, how Draco lay near death, how his father had told them that only the blood of silver dragons could save him. She began to tell them about the rune on the band that matched the rune for silver dragons, but Gareth cut her off.

"I see where this is going," he said, slight discomfort in his voice. "I can't give you the band, Ginny."

Why *not*? she wanted to demand, but she bit it back. "Then--then can you take me to a silver dragon? Lucius said they lived a thousand years ago--that's now, isn't it?"

Ben and Gareth exchanged a long and helpless look. "There are no silver dragons now," said Ben, at last. "Slytherin caused them all to be destroyed--after all, he made them. That was when I was a child. Helga's Time-Turner won't take you back that far. She made it after they were gone."

"Then I have to have the bracelet," Ginny said. "Please? I know it's important to you--that your father made it for you..."

She trailed off. She'd never felt so much like a stupid little girl, here begging these two powerful and ancient wizards (well, all right, they weren't that ancient at the moment) for a bracelet that might or might not save her boyfriend (not that he was actually her boyfriend, either.) They

must think she was so stupid. She imagined Blaise's disappointed face when she returned with nothing...

"I can't give it to you," said Gareth, "because the band comes off me only when I die. It's enchanted. I'm awfully sorry."

He did look sorry, too.

"Does it have the blood of silver dragons in it?" Ginny asked in a small voice, hating herself for asking.

"Yes," said Gareth. "And if the cataplasm is anything like what I think it is..."

"Cataplasm?" said Ginny.

"The poison," said Gareth. "It sounds like one of my father's, though those were notoriously antidote-resistant." He shook his head. "There's no point talking about it. I'm sorry."

You said that already, Ginny thought. But, sunk in her own misery, she said nothing.

"I'm sorry, too, that you came all this way for no reward," said Ben, jumping down from the desk. "Should I get you a Strengthening Potion? You look very pale."

Ginny nodded blindly, not really seeing him as he shuffled out of the room, like a dark untidy shadow. She was seeing Draco in her head, lying on that bed in the infirmary, like a statue carved out of ivory and bones, no color in him at all as the life drained away...

"Ginny." It was Gareth, looking at her thoughtfully. He was very like Draco, which made it hard to look at him-- a grown-up Draco, which her Draco, now, would never be. "I have an idea. I have to tell it to you now-- Ben won't like it much."

She glanced up at him. "What is it?"

He leaned forward and spoke in a conspiratorial whisper. "You must have books in your time--histories of the past?"

She nodded.

"Are we--the Heirs of the Founders--mentioned in any of them?"

She blinked at him. Of all the times to indulge in an ego trip..."Yes," she said shortly. "You all are."

"With timelines? Of important dates and the like?"

She nodded.

"Then you must know when I die," he said.

"When you *die*?" She divined, then, what he meant, and gaped at him.

"Everyone dies," he said, serenely. "When I was your age, I didn't expect to make it through the next ten years, much less the next twenty or fifty...you do see what I'm driving at, don't you?"

"I think so," said Ginny. "You want me to come back to the moment you die and-- take the runic band?"

"As long as I don't die being hacked into pieces or set on fire," said Gareth. "Then it might be difficult for you to locate the band, you know, among the remains."

"Eurgh," said Ginny, and bit her lip. "Are you *sure*?"

"I'm sure," said Gareth. "It's as much a burden as it is anything else, the band. It was made with love, mind you, but my father's brand of love--the killing, clinging sort. I'd be glad not to have to leave it to an Heir of my own."

"Thank you, Gareth," said Ginny, and heard Gareth suck his breath in. She looked up, and saw Ben standing in the doorway, the wand in one hand and a stone mug of something in the other.

He looked stricken. "Gareth, *no*."

Gareth jumped lightly off the desk. "It won't make a difference, Benjamin," he said. "It won't make me die any sooner."

"I don't want to know when you are going to die," said Ben, looking distraught. He waved the lighted wand, so it made lacelike patterns of light on the opposite wall. "I don't want to be forewarned--about myself, either," he added, glaring at Ginny as if she were the Voice of Doom.

"You won't know," said Gareth, "not till the moment. Look, we can argue about it later."

Ben shook his head. "No. I don't like it. I won't go along with it."

Gareth looked at Ginny. "Is your Time-Turner set to take you back?"

She nodded. "Yes, but--"

He reached out as if he meant to pat her cheek, but seized the Time-Turner instead, and flipped it over. She heard him say, "Run along, then, there's a good girl," or something like it, just as the ground was yanked out from under her feet._

"Leave without me?" echoed Harry. "Leave and go where?"

Draco put the book he was reading aside--Harry couldn't see the cover, only that it had a broad spine stamped in gold leaf--and regarded Harry with his head tilted to the side, like a quizzical magpie's. "I'm not sure, exactly," he said. "I only know that I have to go, and soon. It's a sort of drawing pull that gets stronger and stronger." He pointed towards the door of the library.

"I've been out there," said Harry. "The only thing out there is the hallway."

Draco laughed. "I think I'm supposed to leave the Manor," he said. "Have you been out the front doors?"

"No," Harry was forced to admit. He glanced at the window behind Draco--he could not tell if the gray flatness beyond it was merely winter sky, or some more empty and permanent grayness. "You know we're not really here, don't you?"

Draco looked at him blankly.

"What do you think is outside the Manor?" Harry asked, trying again.

"I don't know," Draco said, with an uncharacteristically artless sort of smile. "But I'm going--and I don't think I'll be coming back. That's why I'm glad you're here. I wanted to say goodbye."

He leaned back. Harry was struck by how healthy and ordinary he looked--there was color in his face and he was no longer thin. He supposed everyone was healthy inside their own mind. Perhaps this was the way Draco saw himself.

"Goodbye?" Harry echoed, and when Draco said nothing, he asked, "How did you know I was coming?"

"I could hear you. Talking to me. Like a ghost at the window." He glanced towards the window, seeming not to see the emptiness outside.

"There are so many ghosts in this Manor," said Harry, remembering, *"but I never thought you would be one of them."*

"I'm not," said Draco, a little too quickly. "I heard Hermione and Ginny too, and Sirius. But your voice was the strongest."

"They've been taking turns sitting with you," said Harry. "In the infirmary."

Draco's light eyebrows raised. Harry thought of talking to that false Draco in the rain-soaked alley outside the Midnight Club, thought about how he had known then that there was something peculiar, something wrong about his friend, but not what it was. It was like that now, though he had no doubt that this was Draco. A Draco altered, changed in some microscopic, particulate way, but still Draco. "And you haven't? Not up for taking it in turns, Potter?"

The slight sarcastic accent on his last name comforted Harry with its familiarity. "I haven't left you," he said. "And I won't, until..."

"Until what?"

Harry expelled a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "Surely you must know," he said. "Where we are now, what's outside. There's death beyond that door, Malfoy. You'll die if you go outside."

Draco looked merely curious. "Will I?" he said, and, leaping from the desk, made his way towards the door with a determined stride.

The second journey, forward in time, seemed swifter than the first. She saw black clouds gather around her and heard a shrill, piercing sound, like the noise of nails on a chalkboard. Then the world came together again, and she was standing in the library, looking into Blaise's wide, frightened eyes.

"Crikey," said Blaise, recovering. "You just blipped right out and then back in again--you were only gone for a second! Does that mean you have to go back?"

Gasping a little, Ginny leaned on the table until her dizziness passed. "Yes," she said. "But first I need--"

"What? Water? Do you need to sit down?"

Ginny shook her head. "No. Books."

Blaise's eyebrows drew together. "Books?"

Ginny nodded.

Blaise shook her head. "You're more like Granger than I thought."

Still, despite her sharp tone, once Ginny had made it clear what she needed, Blaise went to search the historical section for further books about the Founders. "Anything that contains an exact death date for Gareth Slytherin," said Ginny. "And I need to know if he had any children, and which of them became the next Heir of Slytherin."

Once Blaise had gone, Ginny sank down in a chair. She had forgotten how draining time travel could be. She lowered her head into her hands,

letting her cold fingers cool her flushed face--then glanced up as the library door slammed.

It was Ron. He hurried over to her, blue eyes full of concern. "Are you all right?"

She nodded. "I'm fine. Ron, what are you doing here?"

"Seamus told me you were in danger."

"Seamus can be such a--"

Blaise reappeared from between the stacks with a book in her hands, chuckling. "I thought Gryffindors didn't know those kinds of words!"

"We're brave, not prudish," said Ron, shortly.

Blaise fluttered her eyelashes. "Whatever you say."

Ron narrowed his eyes at her. "Whatever's going on--did you put Ginny up to something?"

"I certainly did not," replied Blaise coldly.

"Oh, Ron," said Ginny wearily. "Stop being a tool, will you? This was my idea."

"*What* was your idea?" Ron demanded. He looked around, a muscle by his mouth twitching. "What are you doing in the library?"

The muscle by his mouth twitched more rapidly as Ginny explained. When she was done, he exploded, "Ginny, that's the stupidest--"

"It is not stupid!" Ginny flared. "And Hermione said it was all right."

"That's because she's in love with him too," said Ron, even more angrily.

Blaise's eyes flew open. "With Draco?" he said.

Ron shot her a blistering look. "Shut up, Blaise."

She smiled at him--one of Draco's bland, withering smiles. "You seem different these days," she remarked. "More like your brother."

Ron seemed momentarily nonplussed. "*Which* brother?"

"Charlie," said Blaise, airily.

"Oh, for goodness sake," said Ginny in frustration. "Ron, this is something I have to do. It's Draco's only chance. I know you don't like him, but he's a human being, he's got as much right to a chance at life as anyone else does. And think of Harry."

"I do think of Harry," said Ron, gratingly. "I think of him all the time." He knelt down then, and looked up at her. "Ginny," he said. "I went back in time with you once before. Bring me with you again. That way I can be with you if there's any danger."

Touched, Ginny squeezed his shoulder. "All right. But let me do the talking, all right?"

He nodded. Blaise cleared her throat. "Gareth Malfoy," she said, reading aloud from the book she held open in her arms. "Dead of a fever caused by wounds sustained in battle." She added the date, and Ginny frowned.

"But that's only about five years after the last time I was there!" she exclaimed.

"He died young," said Blaise. "It was a long time ago."

"Not for Ben," said Ginny, and looped the chain of the Time-Turner over Ron's neck.

Harry moved quickly to block Draco's way. "Oh, no you don't," he said.

Draco looked at him coolly. There was only a little emotion on the finely honed face, a sort of distant curiosity. "I don't think you understand," he said. "This is something I have to do."

"No, it isn't."

"Death comes for us all, Harry." Not Potter, not this time. *Harry*. "You can't battle it like you battled Voldemort."

"I know that." Harry thought of Cedric, dead between one instant and the next, and set his jaw stubbornly. "But it's not your time."

Draco laughed shortly. "Who are you to say when my time is? Who am I to say it? We don't get to choose, any of us. And what do you know of death anyway, Boy Who Lived?"

Harry looked away, fighting a despair that threatened to rip him out of this dream, return him to the grim reality of the infirmary, the smell of death and sickness and medicine, the white of ice and snow and sickbed linens, and everywhere hopelessness and pain. "Why are you angry at me?" he ground at last, between his teeth.

There was a silence, and then he felt a touch on his shoulder--looking, he saw Draco's hand laid there, thin and brown, scarred white along the palm and the curve of the thumb. "Maybe because it is easier to leave you angry," Draco said. "But--"

"Then don't leave."

"I have no choice," Draco said, tightening his grip on Harry's shoulder. "How do you think that is for me, to have no choice? I am a Malfoy--I cannot bear being *forced*. Even my father--"

"Took his own life out of guilt," said Harry harshly. "You don't bear that sort of guilt. Maybe once, but not now."

"I'm not killing myself, Harry. I am accepting the inevitable."

"Nothing is inevitable," Harry said.

"Not for you, perhaps." Draco sounded weary. Harry chanced a look at him. He could see the exhaustion in him, under the false glamor of wellness, the pallor that seemed to lurk under the brown skin, flushed with healthy blood along the cheekbones, the lips curved in a half-smile, no longer gray and bitten, the thin chest rising and falling rapidly with his breath... "I am not like you," Draco said. "And perhaps you think I am owed something for my redemption, but I never thought of it that way. I

have always done just as I wanted. I wanted to fight with you and for you, and if I changed myself it was so I might have that--everything I have done has been for selfish reasons. Don't mourn me, Harry. I haven't changed as much as all that."

"Now you're lying," Harry said, stung into anger--but it was the wrong thing to say. Draco's mouth set.

"I don't lie," he said, coldly, and before Harry could move to stop him, pushed past him and out the door of the library.

The third trip, thanks to Ron's presence, was less cold than the previous two. His hands were comfortingly warm in her own as the freezing blackness ebbed and flowed around them, an inky tide of nothingness.

When it receded, they were standing again in the library. It was much as it had been the previous time Ginny had been there, only it was dark now, all the candles unlit, the torches guttered, and there were no parchments on the bare wooden tables.

She let go of Ron's hands. He looked around wonderingly. "This is the school? A thousand years ago?"

She nodded. "Last time I was here they were fixing the place back up after it was damaged in the last battle of the Founders. There weren't any students there then. I don't know if there are now. It hasn't been that long."

"Yeah." He looked around and shivered. "It's cold."

"I know. I wonder..." She sighed. "My guess is there probably aren't students here now. They'd never let it get so freezing if there were."

Without answering, Ron went to the library door and swung it open. He peered into the hallway beyond. "There aren't any torches lit out here either," he called back.

"Shhhh." Ginny took her wand out, lit it with a quick *Lumos*, and joined Ron at the door. The corridor beyond the library stretched away into

darkness, all the torches unlit. "This can't be good. Oh, poor Ben. Poor Gareth."

"You said that already." Ron stepped out into the hall and gestured for her to follow. "Let's go this way."

"Why that way?"

"Just a feeling I have."

"Well, you are the Diviner." She shrugged, falling into step beside him. They were taking a route that, in their own time, would have led them to Dumbledore's office. The corridors of the castle looked much the same now as they would in the future. Perhaps the floors were less scuffed and worn, she thought, though it was difficult to tell in the dimness.

"There," Ron said quietly. He pointed. At the very end of the corridor, Ginny could make out a flickering light, delicate as a will-o-the-wisp. She squinted, then hurried forward, Ron trailing behind her.

As they moved along the corridor, she glanced down, for some reason, at the scar on her right hand, where Tom had burned it in the Gryffindor common room fire. It stood out still against her brown and freckled skin, a veiling of irregular white lines, as if she wore a lace glove.

Nearing the light, she saw that it was the tip of a lit wand, held by someone who was sitting on the floor, his legs drawn up, his face buried on his crossed arms. Black robes puddled around him like spilled ink. He looked up as Ginny came to stand beside him, and slowly knelt to touch his arm. "Ben?" she said.

He did not smile. He looked not much older than he had the last time she'd seen him, though there were hard lines on his face that had not been there before, lines of grief marked close to his mouth and eyes. He smelled of liquor, medicine and metal. "You," he said, "like the Angel of Death, you come just as promised, just on time..."

Harry stood frozen for a moment, then rushed out into the hallway after Draco.

He found him standing in the corridor, looking around with a bemused expression. "I thought you said there was death out here," he said. "All I see is some rather appalling Victorian-era wallpaper. Place needs brightening up a little, doesn't it?"

"It's a horrible old pile," Harry opined, slightly out of breath. "I've told you that before."

"Yes, but your taste is bad," Draco noted. "Mine, on the other hand..." He half-closed his eyes. "It's that tugging again," he added. "I have to get to the front door. There's something there--"

"No," Harry said sharply, and caught at Draco's sleeve, but the other boy was too quick for him. Eluding Harry's grasp, Draco strode, swiftly and purposefully, towards the stairs.

Harry darted after him. "Wait."

"I can't wait any longer." Draco was moving down the steps now, one hand on the banister, which had been polished to a dark glow. Torchlight flared at the bottom of the steps. Harry could see the immense double doors of the Manor, looming below them like enormous gates.

"Just let me talk to you."

Draco had reached the foot of the stairs. He threw his head back, looking up at Harry, and his eyes were narrow slits of gray. "There's nothing else to say."

"But there is." Harry was on the step above Draco now, looking down at him from a height of several extra inches. Past Draco, he could see the narrow windows flanking the huge doors, and beyond the windows more of the same swirling, cloudy greyness. "Let me see your wrists."

"My *wrists*?" Draco looked at Harry as if he'd gone mad, then slowly extended his hands, palms down. Harry reached to take them and turned them over, so he could see the lightning scar along Draco's left palm, nearly blotted out by the double-cross scar he'd sliced over it. Along his wrists were other scars, thick and white as narrow snakes sliding under the skin, puckered at the edges as if long-healed. Draco looked at them. "I gave all I had already," he said, thoughtfully. "I haven't got any more."

"Did you do that to yourself?"

Draco pulled his wrists out of Harry's grasp. "If you're asking if I tried to top myself, no. Hardly a need, really."

"You gave all you had of what? What is it you're missing?"

"If you have to ask..." Draco shook his head, backed down the steps and turned. *No!* Harry thought, and suddenly he was in front of Draco, blocking his path to the front door. Beyond the walls of the Manor, he could hear the howling of wind.

Draco made a clucking noise of annoyance. "Potter, this game of human chess becomes wearisome."

"I know." Harry held his hand up, as if reaching to catch something. His empty fingers clenched and found they were gripping something: the sword of Gryffindor, red stones winking along the hilt. "But if you want to get past me, you'll have to fight me."

Draco's lips curled at the corners like burning paper. "*Fight* you? You must be joking."

Harry shook his head. He could taste salt in his mouth, and copper. "I've never been more serious."

Draco shook his head as if in disbelief. "Fine," he said, and raised his own hand, and the black-and-silver glimmer of Terminus Est was there, bright in his grasp. "But do not expect me to be merciful," he added, lowering the blade as he lunged at Harry.

"Ben," Ginny said softly. "Are you all right?"

He didn't answer, rising slowly to his feet, one hand braced against the stone wall. She saw that the robes he was wearing were stained with blood, still wet in some places, gleaming almost black in the torchlight.

"Have you hurt yourself?" she asked.

Ben shook his head. "No," he said. "Unfortunately not."

"He's drunk," Ron whispered in her ear. Ginny frowned at him.

Ben narrowed his eyes. "Who's that with you?"

"My brother," said Ginny. "This is Ron."

"Ah, right." Ben said. "We've met before." His eyes glanced over Ron and returned to Ginny. "They're good things to have, brothers."

"I think so," she said, gently. "Ben, if you need--"

"There's nothing I need." There was venom in his tone. "Let's not play games. You're not here to see what I need, you're here for what you need. Aren't you?"

Stung, Ginny said nothing; it was Ron who answered. "The runic band," he said.

Ben raised an arm slowly and pointed at the doorway beside him. "In there," he said. Ginny had never heard two words spoken so bleakly before.

He stood back as she and Ron passed through the doorway and into a narrow room. The only light came from a slit window high overhead. It illuminated a small room with stone-bound walls, a low table covered in a spilled mess of potions, smashed glass from broken vials, and a sticky, thin, red substance still dripping from the corners onto the floor-- and a bed, made of carved wood and very old-fashioned, hung around with black draperies. In the bed, a man was lying. Fur coverlets were pulled up to his waist and he was naked above that, his face so ghastly pale that it took Ginny a moment to realize that it was Gareth.

"Is he dead?" asked Ron, his voice harsh in the sickroom stillness. A heavy scent lay on the air, like smoke and something else, something sweet and deathly.

Ginny couldn't reply. He lay so still, and in his stillness he reminded her more than he ever had before of Draco, lying in his own stillness in Madam Pomfrey's infirmary. There was the scar of a terrible wound across Gareth's chest, its edges raw and black-looking, and his fair hair lay in

sweat-straggled locks against his skin. Slowly, she reached out and touched his hand. It was icy cold. "I think so," she said, uncertainly.

This was not as she had imagined it; it was much worse. She had told herself she could endure Gareth's death because, of course, in her present he had already died, but she discovered that paradoxes of time were cold comfort in the face of real grief. She thought of Draco, painfully, and let out a small sigh, releasing Gareth's hand.

"Are you done yet?" It was Ben, tall and ragged in the doorway in his bloodstained black robes. "Have you gotten what you came for?"

Ginny drew back from the bed, hesitant. "Ben..."

Ron took her shoulder and pushed her back towards Gareth. "Ginny, take the band. *Take it,*" he hissed in her ear.

Uncertainly, she reached for Gareth's cold hand again, aware of Ben, dark and rageful as a thundercloud, hovering at her back. Holding Gareth's hand was like gripping a statue; swallowing back her instinctive revulsion, she closed her fingers around the cool glassy band, and drew it over his wrist. It came off effortlessly, springing into her hand almost as if it *wanted* to.

She heard Ben's breath hiss out between his teeth. He was staring at her, at the runic band she held. "It's true, then," he said, in a very different voice now. "He really is dead."

Ron, alarmed by something he saw in Ben's face, moved to put himself between the Heir and his sister--but Ben had lost all interest in them. Pushing past Ginny like a blind man, he went down on his knees next to Gareth's bed, put his head on the coverlet, and whispered something she couldn't hear. She thought he was crying--certainly his shoulders were shaking, and harsh noises were coming from him, like the sounds of someone being tortured.

"Ron." She took her brother's wrist. Something told her that this sort of grief was private; it should not be approached. She tried to tug her brother away, but he was staring, his mouth slightly open.

"This is what I saw," he whispered, suddenly. "In my vision--Draco on the bed, and Harry next to him--it wasn't them I saw at all, it was *this*--"

"*Ron!*" She shoved him, hard. He moved slowly, turning to stare over his shoulder even as she pulled him towards her and flung the gold chain of the Time Turner around his throat.

Harry ducked the blow and parried, steel clashing on steel. Draco had been telling the truth; he wasn't holding back. He slashed at Harry even as Harry turned, and the tip of his blade tore across Harry's sleeve, opening a gash in the material.

"Jesus, Malfoy," Harry exclaimed, involuntarily.

"Oh, it's *Malfoy* again, is it?" Draco cut under Harry's guard, dexterously. Harry blocked him, but only just. Sparks flew where their blades crossed. "I told you I would not be merciful."

"But why--I mean, why this?"

"Why not?" Draco cut at Harry again, high this time, and Harry ducked; the blade bit deep into the wood paneling above his head.

Straightening, Harry observed dryly, "You seem annoyed."

Draco paused to yank his sword out of the wall. "You would keep me from my death," he said. The blade flashed in his hand as he swung at Harry; Harry parried, keeping his feet planted, just as Draco had taught him. In fact, it seemed to him that Draco was using all the moves he'd used when training Harry in swordplay; surely if he really wanted to hurt Harry, he'd try something else, something Harry wasn't prepared for? Emboldened by this thought, he pressed forward, taking the offensive. Draco dropped back a step, his eyes narrowed to lazy silver crescents. "Nice move, Potter."

"It's not your time," Harry said, between gasps. He was sweating, salt stinging his eyes.

"You don't get to say when--"

"Neither do you!"

Draco sprang onto the lowest step of the stairs, striking at Harry's sword with enough force to bruise Harry's fingers where they gripped the hilt. "It is my life--my death."

"But why? Why not fight for it? Why not fight for every last minute, every second, every possibility of a chance that you might be cured? *Why not?*"

"Because I'm *tired!*" Draco shouted, with a sudden anger that struck at Harry more forcefully than the just-delivered blow. "Tired of fighting--and tired of struggling--and tired of this endless, arduous *nothing--*" His blade snapped up, level with Harry's eyes. "What's the reward, Potter?" he said, his voice half a whisper. "If I die now, then I die in glory, don't I? Fallen in the fight against Voldemort. *Dulce et decorum est.*"

"What? I don't know--"

"Never learned your Latin, did you? Not past the spells you needed to know, anyway." Draco's voice was too weary for the scorn his words implied. "If I live," he said, enunciating clearly, as if Harry were a particularly slow child, "then all that glory fades into ordinariness, doesn't it? You--you'll always be special. The boy who killed Voldemort. I only ever had a purpose when *you* were my purpose. What do you expect me to do now, now that you no longer need me any more?"

This time, the cold darkness seemed to go on forever. Ginny could hear the howl of wind in her ears, feel the blood freezing inside her veins, stiffening her fingers into claws made out of ice. Even the chattering of her teeth made no sound in the empty void between *then* and *now*.

At last she heard a noise--a sort of shattering, like breaking ice-- and she broke through the grayness into light and heat and noise. Her knees gave way and she fell to the floor, clutching the runic band tightly in her fingers.

Hands on her shoulders pulled her upright into a sitting position. It was Ron, very pale, his lower lip caught between his teeth. "Ginny?"

Blaise hurried towards them both across the library, her red hair like a stream of torchlight. "Ginny! Are you all right? You both appeared and then you just ... fell..."

"I'm all right," Ginny said, though she heard the strain in her voice and knew it wasn't true. She was glad of the pressure of Ron's hands, keeping her upright. She was still shivering so hard...

She glanced down at her hands. The bracelet was clasped between them. The edges of it were faintly frosted with ice.

"You got it!" Blaise exclaimed, dropping to her knees. Ron let go of Ginny's shoulders. Ginny's stomach lurched and a wave of blackness rose up inside her,

threatening to swamp her vision. She fought it back through sheer will, clawing it down until the darkness receded and she could breathe again.

"We got it," she said. She felt as if the ground were rocking up and down under her. Glancing at the bracelet, she saw that a faint glow still clung to it, despite its traumatic voyage through time. "But I don't know what to do now-- it's a bracelet, right, not an antidote. Maybe we grind it down to powder or ..."

"Or maybe we go to Snape," said Blaise firmly.

Ron stood up. "I'm heading to the infirmary," he said. "I need to tell Harry and Hermione what's going on."

Ginny squeezed his arm as she got to her feet. "Thanks, Ron. For coming with me."

"Of course." He still looked a little dazed.

Blaise, impatient, took hold of Ginny's sleeve and towed her out of the library and down the stairs to the dungeon. She kept a tight hold on Ginny's arm, and Ginny was grateful. She suspected that otherwise, she'd have fallen down the stairs and fetched up at Snape's feet, much to his astonishment.

He was, as always, in the Potions dungeon, standing at a long trestle table covered with jars and vials and philters spilling powders and sticky liquids and bits of dragon scale and newts' eyes and boggart toenails all over its surface. Snape hovered above a boiling cauldron, his greasy hair slicked with steam and sweat. His eyes were rimmed in bloody red. He looked up and scowled. "What the devil do you two want?"

Ginny opened her mouth, but could find no words. Exhaustion and dizziness had rendered her speechless. It was Blaise who plucked the bracelet out of her hand and held it out to the Potions professor.

"Ginny's found the missing part of the antidote, Professor Snape," she said imperiously.

Snape raised first one eyebrow, then another. "I see," he said. "Miss Weasley has had yet another fanciful notion regarding the antidote? Might I remind you, Miss Weasley, of the wholly useless flower that you sent me last week? I believe you thought that was the antidote, too."

Ginny felt herself flush. "It was a flora fortis," she said. "A willpower plant."

"It was a common sowthistle," said Snape crossly, and gestured towards the windowsill, where a small box contained dirt--and a sparse scattering of yellow flowers. "I planted it. It may eventually make a pleasant window box, but an antidote ingredient, it was not."

Blaise looked as if she were about to say something, but Ginny interrupted her. "This is different," she said. "It has the blood of silver dragons in it."

Snape looked up, his reddened eyes suddenly cold. "That's impossible."

Ginny reached for the gold chain around her throat and held up the Time-Turner that dangled at the end of it. Even in the muddy gloom of the basement, it still caught the light. "Dumbledore gave me..." she began.

But Snape had already snatched the bracelet out of Blaise's grasp and was gripping it in shaking hands. "I saw Potter wearing this," he said. "Do you mean to tell me...?"

Ginny shook her head. "It's not the same bracelet Harry had. That one didn't have the dragon blood in it. It'd been taken out."

Slowly, Snape turned the dark, glassy red circlet over and over in his hands. He ran a long white finger over the runes that etched its surface: the one that looked like a wing and the one that looked like a rayed sun and the one that Ginny had thought looked like a heart.

She heard his breath catch.

"A broken heart spills all its secrets," he said, and pressed with the pad of his thumb against the heart rune.

There was a sound like a snapped bone. The bracelet came apart in two perfect half circles, and from the broken ends of it poured a thin silver liquid. It splashed down into the cauldron on the table in front of Snape. The bubbling mixture inside the cauldron stopped bubbling, and turned a singing gold color.

Blaise gave a little gasp. "The antidote!" she said.

Blade clanged on blade. "I'll never not need you," said Harry, out of breath, his wrist aching.

"That's not true." Draco was making his way back down the stairs now, forcing Harry to retreat. "You needed me in the war, because I made you a better fighter. You needed me because you needed all the help you could get. But now's your chance to live a normal life, that's what you always wanted, isn't it? You want to tell me how a pureblooded, all-Slytherin, prone-to-assassination-attempts telepathically bonded stepbrother with a history of morally questionable behavior is going to help you do that?"

"It's really amazing," said Harry, "how much rot you can talk even when you're in the middle of doing something else."

"Thank you," said Draco, modestly, and forced Harry back another step.

"You're right," Harry said. "Maybe I don't need you the way I did before."

Draco took a breath, a curt intake as sharp as the sound of breaking frost. "At least you're honest."

"But I don't see where it matters," said Harry. "Needing people because they can help you out in a war, well, help is a benefit of friendship, I suppose, but it isn't the reason for it. Need isn't the basis of friendship, or love, or--"

"Love," said Draco, almost contemptuously, "you do like to talk about it, don't you?"

Not really, Harry thought. "No," he said, "I just don't spend my life avoiding the topic, unlike some people."

Draco's sword made a sweeping sideways gesture that neatly cut away one of the buttons holding Harry's sweater cuffs closed. It clicked to the marble and rolled away underfoot. Cool air touched Harry's bare wrist. "That's what girls do," Draco said, "talk on endlessly about love, as if they could pin it like a butterfly to a board. In the end, it doesn't matter, does it? It's not what you say, it's what you do."

"Then you do love," said Harry. "I've seen it over and over in everything you do. It's not that you can't love, it's that you're afraid to admit that you do."

Draco made an exasperated noise. "Potter--" he began, but his hand trembled, and the tip of his sword dropped, slicing a clean cut along Harry's chest.

Ginny felt her heart soar--then drop. She exchanged a long glance of mutual understanding and regret with Snape--a first for the both of them, certainly.

"It's not the antidote," she said to Blaise, as gently as she could, as if the other girl's heartache was the greatest at stake here. "The antidote has to brew for a thousand years."

If she'd expected Blaise to cry, it didn't happen. She just went very red, as if flushed with rage, and swallowed hard once. "Then all this was for nothing?"

"Not nothing," Ginny said. "It can brew for a thousand years...if I take it back into the past and leave it somewhere. Somewhere where it'll still be undisturbed a thousand years in the future."

"But you can't go back in the past again--" Blaise started, alarmed, but Ginny shot her such a furious look that she quailed.

"I just need to find somewhere I can leave the antidote where no one will find it--" Ginny began.

Blaise looked as if she were about to start in on Ginny again, but at that moment Snape exclaimed loudly. The runic band--the two shattered halves of it, anyway--was jerking in his hands. He set the pieces carefully down on the table. No sooner had he taken his hand back then they slid towards each other and joined, like two drops of water flowing into one.

"That's Harry's band," said Ginny, with some certainty, and picked it up. It thrummed once under her fingers, as if alive, then went quiet.

She slipped it onto her wrist. "I need a vial of the antidote," she said to Snape.

He looked at her out of hooded dark eyes, and she suspected he knew exactly what it was that Blaise would have said if Ginny had allowed her to speak. But all he said was, "Indeed."

With a wave of his wand, he lowered the flame under the cauldron and went to fetch an empty vial. Ginny stared down at the pale gold liquid inside the cauldron. It was almost exactly the color of the yellow cloak her mother had given her, that she'd worn that day Draco had almost kissed her by the lake. The backs of her eyes stung, and to her surprise, two tears slipped down her cheeks and spilled into the cauldron.

She jumped back, wiping hastily at her face. "Have I ruined it?" she demanded, staring at Snape in horror.

He merely looked at her, a peculiar expression on his face. "Not at all," he said, and handed her two vials. One was of red glass, stoppered with a yellowish stone, and the other was of clear glass, sealed with stones the color of wine. He measured the liquid out between them, sealed them, and handed them to Ginny with a brief set of instructions. She blinked and nodded, and then Blaise was tugging her arm again and they were back on the stairs, trudging upward and away from the dungeon with its steaming heat and smell of boiled leaves.

"I hate it down there," Blaise said. "It always reeks of cabbage. Where are we going, anyway?"

"Back to the library," said Ginny. "There's one last thing I want to look up."

Hermione looked up as the door of the infirmary swung open. It was Ron, looking more than a little dazed. He made his way across the room and sank heavily into the chair between her and Harry.

She set her book aside; it wasn't as if she'd been reading it, anyway. "Ron, are you all right?"

He glanced sideways at Harry before answering. "Is he asleep?"

Hermione hesitated, then nodded. "In a manner of speaking." Harry was curled silently in the chair, one smudged, pale cheek resting on his arm. His eyes were shut but his eyelashes, fluttering fitfully, showed the restless movement underneath. Hermione wanted to reach out and squeeze his hand but restrained herself; she didn't want to do anything to jeopardize the delicate half-dream he was trapped in.

"That's probably good." Ron rubbed the back of his hand across tired eyes, then hunched forward to speak to Hermione under his breath. "Ginny used Helga's Time-Turner."

"I know. She told me she was going to." Hermione fought to keep the hope out of her voice. "Did she...find anything?"

"She brought the runic band back with her. She's with Snape now, figuring it out."

The book slipped from Hermione's hands; Ron caught it deftly before it hit the floor and set it down at the foot of the bed. "Ron, do you think--is it possible--"

He caught her hand and held it. She wondered if he could feel the pulse banging in her wrist. "Hermione, I don't know. But what I do know is this--remember when I told you that I saw Draco dead and Harry crying over him?"

Hermione nodded.

"I was wrong. That wasn't what I saw at all. Hermione, I can't promise anything, but--"

Harry suddenly gasped, a sharp, stuttering gasp that cut Ron off in midsentence. They both looked over at him in astonishment, just in time to see a bright scarlet flower of blood bloom across his chest.

The fifth passage through time was even colder than she could have imagined. Ginny seemed to fall forever through Arctic space, her skin raked by icicles, her eyes, squeezed shut, burning and stinging against flung particles of glass-sharp ice.

The ground came up like an express train, slamming into her feet, and she swayed, falling forward with her arms curved protectively around the precious vials she carried. She lay still for a moment, weak as a kitten, too sick and dizzy even to open her eyes.

At last she sat up, gingerly, and opened her eyes. She was in the library, though the torches on the walls had burned out. It was nighttime, and the room was full of shadows. She got to her feet slowly, blinking to adjust her vision to the darkness. Her head felt as if someone were slicing at the inside of it with knives.

She heard a sound behind her and whirled. Light showed where the door of the library was swinging open. The tension went out of her shoulders. "Ben," she said.

He came closer to her and she stifled a sound of surprise. He was still Ben, still tall and with the same broad shoulders, but his hair was white now and his face lined. He said, "I knew it was you."

She smiled a little. "How?"

"After the last time I saw you, I put Time Distortion Wards up around the rooms in the castle. I thought it would alert me if you ever came back." His voice was different too, rougher, almost an old man's voice. "Did you succeed?"

"Yes," Ginny said, and held the two vials out to him. "These must rest undisturbed for a thousand years," she said. "You must take this one--" and she proffered the vial with the wine-colored stones-- "and give it to the heir of Slytherin, whoever has succeeded Gareth, and tell him it must be passed down through the generations of his family. And this one--" she held out the one with the golden stones--"has to be hidden in the walls of Hogwarts, somewhere where I can find it again in a thousand years."

Ben took the vials in gnarled hands, and set the golden one down on top of a library table. "You're sure about all this?"

Ginny nodded. "I'm sure."

"There's a stone Gareth and I used to hide notes behind-- let me see if it's still loose." He went over to the wall and began to work one of the stones free.

Ginny followed him. "Ben, can I ask you something?"

He nodded without looking up.

"All those years ago when you and Gareth came to see me at the Burrow," she said. "You gave me a yellow flower. A willpower flower. I was wondering..."

Ben was smiling. He stood up, and set the loose stone-- it was about the size of two fists, square and uneven at the edges-- on the sill of a window high in the wall. He said, "It was just a flower. It didn't make you strong, Ginny. That was all your own strength, all this time."

"Then why...?"

"Come back and see you at all? Let's just say a certain someone asked me to." He set the vial in the far recess of the hole in the wall, and picked the stone up again. The effort of bending and lifting was making him breathe heavily.

"Dumbledore?"

Ben chuckled, and stood back to admire his handiwork. The stone stuck a few inches out of the wall, so he tapped it with his right hand. The excess stone crumbled away into dust and it seemed to sit flush. "Five up from the floor, ten over from the wall," he said. "Can you remember that for the next thousand years?"

She nodded, and glanced around, steeling herself for the journey back to the present. "So there are students here now?"

He nodded. "I'm the Headmaster. It's good to be surrounded by people all the time. Less lonely."

"So you haven't..." she began, before she realized this was probably personal and none of her business, and shut her mouth.

He just looked at her-- not like a little boy, the way he'd been when she first met him, or a boy just a little older than her, but like a kindly uncle. "For some of us, there is only ever one person," he said, and touched her hair lightly with a gnarled hand. "I think you might be that way yourself."

"Er," said Ginny, who wasn't sure if she was, or if she wasn't.

"He is a lucky young man," said Ben, and took his hand back. "I won't see you again, will I?"

"I doubt it," Ginny said, thinking of the long cold journey between times that awaited her. "I wish I would-- I wish you could live another thousand years," she added, impulsively, and smiled at him.

He didn't smile back, just hunched his shoulders inside his robes as if he were cold. She knew he was thinking about Gareth. "But I do not," he said.

The sudden, startling pain made Harry stumble, and he half-fell down the last step to the marble floor of the Manor entryway. When he looked down, he saw the bright blossom of blood that colored his white shirt, spreading like a stain. He touched it, wonderingly, and the blood came off, slicking his fingertips with scarlet.

It was the first time he'd ever felt pain in a dream, and he realized, looking at his own blood, that this vision was more than a dream, and the consequences carried by his actions here were very real. He looked up from his bloody hand at Draco, who stood frozen on the steps, ashen-faced. His voice was thin with horror. "Harry--"

With his free hand, Harry pulled his shirt up and looked down at himself: he saw a shallow cut across the skin of his chest just above his heart, blood threading slowly from it. He let go of the shirt. "It's all right," he said. "You haven't killed me."

Draco put out a shaking hand and gripped the banister. The sword hung at his side, but he did not let go of it. His eyes were half-closed; Harry could see the shadow of his lashes cast down across his cheek like a fringe of silvery thread. There was color in his cheeks, a dark flush along the cheekbones: he looked like a marble statue that had been slapped with red paint.

"I could have," he said. "I could have--"

Harry! It was a voice they both recognized, high and thin now with panic, rattling the windows like a heavy blast of wind. *Harry, wake up!*

"Hermione," Harry said, spinning, though she was nowhere to be seen. "She's calling me back--"

"Then go back," said Draco, with a harshness that, Harry suspected, was not intentional.

"Not without you," said Harry. "No."

Draco shook his head, hard. "Don't you see you're torturing me?" he said, in the same harsh voice. "I can't go with you. I can't."

"Then I'll stay here until--"

"There is no *until*. I'm dying--the poison's burned me up, I'm just bones and char, can't you see that?"

"I just see you," said Harry, simply. The blood running down his stomach felt sticky and strangely cold. The voice came again:

Harry, wake up! Harry, it's Hermione, can you hear me?

"I kissed her," Draco said, so abruptly that Harry stared at him, taken off-guard.

"Kissed who?" he said.

"Hermione. I kissed her."

"Yes, well," said Harry, wondering where this was going, "if memory serves, you've kissed her multiple times in the past."

"This wasn't the past," said Draco, looking almost desperate. "This was last week, maybe a bit before, after you'd gone off and left us, right after I saw you in the Midnight Club. When you Portkeyed off. Remember that?"

Harry nodded, too bewildered to speak.

"Well, I went back to the hotel and we kissed--and more than that besides--"

"Did you sleep with her?" Harry was appalled.

"No--God, no," Draco said, even more ashen than before, though still with the same odd determination. "She was wearing that ring you gave her and I stopped when I saw it--we both did--but that doesn't matter, does it?" He

gave a short laugh, almost like a curse, and glanced away. "There," he said. "I told you I hadn't changed as much as all that. Are you still so sure you want to stay?"

The sixth journey was not cold, but hot. Ginny fell down and down through rings of fire, each hotter than the last, and the stench of smoke stung her eyes and nose with acrid pain. Falling and burning like an angel cast down out of Heaven, Ginny thought of Tom as she fell, the cool blue of his eyes and the ice of his touch.

The ground struck her, not her feet but her side. She lay curled up on the ground, coughing, her lungs seared with pain.

"Ginny!" There were hands on her, turning her over. She saw Blaise's frightened face looming overhead like a white balloon. She was speaking, but Ginny couldn't make the words out over the roaring in her ears.

Blackness danced at the edges of her vision. She wanted nothing more than to shut her eyes and sink down into it, lose herself in oblivion and a quick end to pain. There was something, though. Something important. Something she needed to tell Blaise, to remember...

"The wall," she said, dragging the words up out of a throat raw from searing heat. With the words came a quantity of blood that spilled down her chin; she wiped it away with the back of her hand.

Blaise looked horrified. "Don't talk--"

"The antidote," Ginny said. "It's in the wall." She raised her hand to point, and saw that it was covered in blood. She stared for a moment, uncomprehendingly. *Is that my blood?*

The darkness was reaching for her again, with long, curved claws, sinking its talons in, dragging her down. *There's something important I have to do*, she told it, pleadingly, but it came on with the inevitability of nightfall, drawing a curtain of blackness across her eyes.

"Harry!" Hermione had slipped to her knees and was gripping his hands; she looked ghastly, Ron thought, as if she were imagining that this was somehow all her fault. "Harry, that's enough, wake up, please wake up!"

Harry didn't move. Blood seeped slowly, evenly, across his chest. Sirius and Charlie were looking over now from across the room, as if noticing that something was wrong. On her cot, Narcissa stirred restlessly. "Hermione," Ron said softly. "Move aside."

She didn't move. She was still clutching Harry's hand, whispering rapidly under her breath as if he could hear her. Ron knelt down next to her. "It could be an old wound," he said, "something he got in Romania, opening up again--"

"It *isn't*," Hermione said, her voice breaking on a sob. "it's my fault-- I sent him into Draco's mind and now they're dying together, he's being dragged down into it--"

"Don't talk like that," Ron said sharply, wondering if she'd gone mad. With a quick movement, he pulled up the side of Harry's shirt. Blood seeped from the edges of a thin gash along his chest, but to Ron's relief, it looked neither deep nor serious. "Look, it's just a shallow cut, nothing to be--"

"What's going on?" It was Sirius, looming over them, Charlie beside him. In the corner of the room, Lupin and Madam Pomfrey were in whispered conference. "Is Draco all right?"

"It's Harry, actually," said Ron, and saw Sirius' eyes widen in surprise. "He--"

A shrill, horrific noise split the air. It sounded like the shrieking of damned souls in Hell. Narcissa sat up on her cot with a start, gasping, and Hermione's head flew up. Her face was wet with tears.

"The library--" she said. "Ginny--"

Ron sprang to his feet and dashed towards the door of the infirmary, Charlie hot on his heels.

Blaise looked up as the door to the library opened and Ron and Charlie Weasley burst in, both out of breath. She was standing amid an enormous pile of flung books-- she'd yanked down almost every volume in the Restricted Section, and they were howling and shrieking around her feet in a massive pile of indignant, enspelled pages. She reached for another one to throw, half-hysterical, even as Ron came towards her and grabbed her arm. He was shouting something, but she couldn't hear him over the din and only shook her head at him, her red hair flying wildly around her face.

He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. This time she could see the words his mouth was shaping: *Where is Ginny?* Before she could get her hands free to point, Charlie drew his wand from his sleeve and waved it, shouting a frantic spell.

The noise subsided. "Thank God I'm a professor here," said Charlie, sliding the wand back. "Blaise, what's going on?"

Her voice caught at she replied, wrenching herself out of Ron's grip to point. "Ginny. She's over there--"

Ron and Charlie turned. One of the long study tables nearly blocked their view of her, but the edge of an outstretched hand was just visible there on the floor, the flutter of a sleeve--

Charlie reached his sister's side first, Ron and Blaise just behind them. Ginny lay where she'd slumped, her hair straggling raggedly out of its braid, a pool of blood spreading across the floor beneath her head. More blood leaked from her ears, eyes and mouth.

The Time-Turner, resting against her chest, was pulsing feverishly, like a separate, living heart.

Charlie made a terrible gasping sound and went down on his knees to lift his sister up in his arms; her eyes were shut, blue veins visible through the etiolated lids. Her chest rose and fell with shallow breaths. "What happened?" Charlie asked tightly.

"She was using the Time-Turner," Blaise began, but Charlie cut her off.

"Tell me later. We have to get her to the infirmary." He turned to go, but Ginny had moved, reaching out her hand to catch at the front of Ron's shirt. Her fingers left bloody marks.

"Ron," she whispered, beckoning him, her eyes shut. Very pale, he leaned down over his sister, listening as she whispered in his ear. When he drew back, there was a scarlet mark on his cheeks where her lips had touched, like a macabre lipstick stain.

"Five up from the floor, ten over from the wall," said Ron, looking bewilderedly at Blaise. "What does that mean?"

Blaise sucked in a breath. "She pointed at that wall earlier," she said, indicating the west wall of the library. "I think she's trying to tell us where the antidote is."

Charlie's voice was terse. "You look for it. Meet us in the infirmary," he said, but as soon as he made as if to leave, Ginny began to struggle. The struggling brought on a fit of coughing; blood splashed up and onto Charlie's shirt, wetting it with scarlet. He blanched.

Blaise whirled and ran to the wall, scrabbling feverishly at the stones - *five up from the floor, ten over from the wall, five up from the floor, ten over from the wall*, she repeated to herself--until she seized on the correct one. Indeed, it felt as if it sat almost loosely in its mortared space. One of her fingernails broke off as she pried it out; another time she might have mourned, but not now. She dropped the stone, which might have crushed her foot if Ron, silently on hand, had not caught it, and felt around in the dark space it left behind.

The walls of the space were cool and rough. In a moment, her hand closed on something: something cylindrical and smooth. She drew it out, and recognized instantly the vial with its golden stopper that Snape had given to Ginny in the Potions dungeon. Suddenly terrified that she might mishandle it, she thrust it at Ron in a blind panic. "It's the antidote," she said, in a shaking voice. "To Draco's poison."

Ron backed away. "Great Wizards," he whispered. "No--don't hand it to me, are you mad? I might drop it."

"Ron!" barked Charlie. "Blaise!" He sounded as if his temper hung on a frayed thread; the antidote recovered, Ginny lay limp in his grasp, her face turned into his shoulder. "To the infirmary. NOW." He spun on his heel and stalked towards the door.

Blaise scuttled to obey, the precious vial cradled like a baby against her chest, her heart pounding in rhythm with her steps. After a moment, Ron followed them, pausing only to use the sleeve of his jumper to wipe his sister's blood from his cheek.

Harry found his voice. "Why are you telling me this now?"

"I wanted you to know." Draco's voice cracked slightly on the last word, like a delicate fissure in glass. "What you're fighting so hard for."

"Malfoy..." Harry took a step back. He was intensely conscious suddenly of everything around him: the gray of the Manor, translucent as a shell through which winter light shines; the gray of Draco's eyes, the color not of water but of the memory of water, not of tears, but of the sorrow that brings them forth. "God, Malfoy. What did you think I would say to that?"

Draco's hand, where it held the banister, was vibrating like the plucked string of a violin. "I thought--you being you--that you might forgive me."

Harry took a deep breath. "Well," he said. "I don't."

Gently, Sirius moved Hermione aside and bent to examine Harry. She drew a sobbing breath. "Sirius...it's...it's my fault..."

"No, it isn't," he said, absently. "He's just fallen asleep; passed out, more like. It's not as if he's slept in days." He brushed a stray lock of hair off Harry's forehead. "In fact, it's probably a good thing."

"But he won't wake up---I've shaken him, and he won't wake up--"

Sirius was about to reply when the loud shrieking noise that had been echoing through the castle stopped abruptly. "Thank God," he said,

looking up. "Now, what was that about Ginny? Is she in some sort of trouble?"

Hermione just stared at him, paralyzed. For the first time in her life, she thought, she felt actually stupid, as if her mind had been numbed by all the trauma she'd endured. Should she lie to Sirius, *could* she lie to Sirius? "She went," she said, finally, in a whisper, "to get the antidote..."

"Antidote?" Sirius stood up, his voice sharp. "What antidote? What are you talking about?"

"You mean the antidote for Draco?" It was Narcissa, wan and pale but with an eager lift to her voice, pushing past Sirius to stand between Harry's chair and Draco's bedside. She sank slowly down on the bed beside her son, her eyes wide. "Has Severus had a breakthrough? Finally?"

"There *was* a breakthrough," Hermione admitted, "but the ingredient that was needed--it wasn't easy to get. So Ginny went to Dumbledore and he--"

Narcissa, who had been listening, suddenly screamed once, piercingly, and bent over her son. Draco, white and waxen, did not move. "Poppy!" Narcissa shrieked. Madam Pomfrey whirled and stared. "Poppy! Come quickly! Draco isn't breathing!"

"I see." Draco's eyes shone, reflecting the dull light outside the windows, the swirling, uncolored light of nothingness. "I suppose it was foolish of me to--"

"I don't forgive you," said Harry, enunciating very clearly, "because *you do not require my forgiveness*. After what *I* did--to both of you--I'm the one that should be forgiven. What you did--I understand it."

Draco looked at him, a strange light dawning on his face. His eyes said, *You tore out our hearts, and we comforted each other*. His voice said, "If I said I never meant to hurt you with it, that would be a lie."

"Did you hate me?" Harry asked. "When you did it?"

Draco, who would not lie, said, "No."

"I won't say it doesn't hurt," Harry said, measuredly. "It does. Hurt. But you can hurt me, and I'll still stay. I've hurt you, after all."

"That's different," said Draco. "You're a hero. You have to choose the world, sometimes."

"Bollocks," said Harry. "Why are you so desperate to damn yourself, Malfoy? Why do you want me to despise you?"

Draco said nothing. His eyes were shining.

"Is it so I'll let you go? I'll tell you right now," Harry said, raising the sword in his hand again, "I never will. Do you see that now?"

Draco looked as if he were about to reply, but at that moment the huge double doors of the Manor blew open, and a tearing, icy wind ripped through the room.

Madam Pomfrey reached Draco's side at a run, wand in hand, and seized an open vial off the bedside table. She tipped the contents into Draco's mouth. He made a choking noise, breathed once, choked again-- and gasped for another breath, and then another, as if he were breathing through sand or tar. "He's going," said Madam Pomfrey, setting the vial down, her face crumpling. "It's moments now."

"Cissy--" Sirius turned to hold Narcissa, as if he were afraid she might collapse, but she sat very straight beside Draco, and took his hand, and held it tightly. She reminded Hermione of the statue of a Greek goddess: Niobe, perhaps, weeping over her lost children.

"My son, my son," she whispered. "Go, if you must. Go, with ease and grace and dignity, where your ancestors have gone before you. I never meant for you to pass to the land beyond the river before I did, but I know you will wait for me there."

Hermione, on her knees on the floor, felt the tears like a flood behind her eyes. She knew when they came, she would break all over, like a dam smashing before the force of pent-up waters. She reached blindly for

Harry, clasped one of his cold, unmoving hands in her own--she saw Remus clasp Sirius' shoulder; Sirius was bent over, his face in his hands--

The door of the infirmary burst open. Charlie erupted into the room, carrying Ginny in his arms and followed by Ron and a white-faced, starkly hysterical-looking Blaise, who clutched something to her chest as if it were the most precious cargo in the world.

Charlie bent to lay his sister on an empty bed, calling hoarsely for Madam Pomfrey. Madam Pomfrey looked up, her crumpled face smoothing with utter surprise--she had been prepared for Draco's sudden turn for the worse, but not for this. She took an uncertain step back--

And Draco stopped breathing. Hermione couldn't help herself; she gave a little cry, a sound like a wail, and Blaise, who had been staring uncertainly from the doorway, broke into a run, tearing across the room with her red hair flying like a banner. As she neared, Hermione saw that what she clutched in her hand was a vial of something that shone like melted Galleons.

Hermione bolted to her feet. "Is that the antidote?"

Blaise nodded, too out of breath to speak, and thrust the vial at Hermione. Hermione could see all the white faces in the room turned towards her, like pale sunflowers following an erratic solar progress, but they meant nothing to her; they might as well have been in a dream. In the same dream, she took the vial from Blaise and unstopped it: a strong scent, like herbs and copper and clean spring wind, rose from the vial. Still in the dream, she moved to the bed and leaned over Draco, and tipped the contents of the vial into his mouth through his slightly parted lips.

Draco looked at Harry. The icy hair lifted his hair and whipped it into his eyes; despite the wind's fierceness, it was strangely silent where they stood. Harry could hear muted voices crying out in the distance, the sounds of grief and agony, but they were muffled as if they traveled a great distance. "Potter..."

Harry took a step forward. "You're worried I won't need you after all this is over. Well, I say it doesn't matter. I don't have to need you, I just have

to want to be around you, and I already do. Need isn't friendship. You know that as well as I do. All your life, Malfoy, you've given all you had to other people because you hoped they'd need you. Your father. Then me. You can't live for me--you were right, what you said before. You've given all you have. You haven't got any more."

He took another step forward, and now he was standing just in front of Draco, tipping back his head a little to look up at him. "You have to live for yourself, Malfoy. Your life has to be about you now. Not about anyone else. Love where you want to and do what you want to, and live for your own life, and be a whole person and you still won't ever lose me. I promise you that."

Draco was silent, but he took his hand off the banister and stepped down, and now they were face to face, exactly eye level since they were the same height. And Draco said, "And it came to pass that the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. And Jonathan and David made a covenant, because he loved him as his own soul."

Harry looked at him, blinking. "You want to make a covenant?" he said.

Draco's mouth twitched, and then he laughed, a clear, unhurried, and honest laugh. "Potter," he said, "you're so astoundingly *literal*," and he knelt down, and laid Terminus Est down flat at Harry's feet. Harry did the same, laying down the sword of Gyffindor across the other sword so that they formed a makeshift X, and when he stood up Draco was smiling at him. He reached to put a hand on the other boy's shoulder just as the Manor collapsed all around them.

Hermione had expected something to happen suddenly, but nothing sudden did. The liquid from the vial trickled into Draco's mouth, and he seemed, reflexively, to swallow--which relieved her, as she had been afraid he would choke. She laid the vial down and took a step back, her breath held.

For a moment, and then another long and terrible moment, nothing happened at all. Then Draco's eyelids twitched, and he took a breath, long and slow and easy, and the color rushed back into his face in a flood. His

hands moved, restlessly and gently, on the coverlet, and then his eyes opened, bright and luminously silver.

Narcissa made a little sound in her throat and threw her arms around him, hugging him tightly.

Draco looked appalled. "MOTHER," he said. "STOP THAT AT ONCE."

Sniffing and laughing a little, Narcissa drew back; Draco sat up; he was pale, but moved with his old grace, and clearly without pain. He looked around at the faces crowded around his bed: Remus, Sirius, Narcissa, Blaise, Hermione, and his eyes lingered on each. Then he said, "Where's Harry?"

"I'm here." Harry stood up from the chair he'd been sitting in, grinning all over his face. "Right here."

"You look terrible," Draco observed.

"Well." Harry glanced down at himself. "You ruined my shirt."

"Then I did you a favor. It's a hideous shirt anyway. Why must you wear polos? They made your head look like a postbox." Draco drew himself up, looking around, bright-eyed. "So," he said. "I take it you found the antidote."

Harry looked quickly at Hermione, who nodded. "We did," she said.

Draco waved a breezy hand. "I always knew you would," he said. "No worries here."

Only Harry laughed, and Draco glanced around, his eyes suddenly narrowing. "Where's Ginny, then?" he asked.

A sudden and terrible silence fell. Only Harry looked honestly bewildered; seeing where everyone was staring, he slewed around and Hermione heard him suck in a breath. "What happened?" he said. "Is she hurt?"

Draco's eyes narrowed further. "What? What do you mean?"

In answer, Sirius and Narcissa moved aside so that Draco had a clear view across the room to where Ginny lay on her narrow white infirmary bed,

Madam Pomfrey bending over her. Ron and Charlie hovered beside her, and even from this distance, the blood on Charlie's shirt was clearly visible.

Draco sat up straight, all the light gone out of his face. "What happened?"

It was Blaise who answered. "Your antidote," she said. "It turned out it only existed in the past. So she went back to get it--and then forward again, and back again, and forward again, all in a short period of time, and I guess it was too much for her, too hard on her system. The last time she came back, she collapsed."

Draco stared at Blaise, his lips parted, then shoved his coverlet back and tried to stand, but he was too weak. Sirius moved to take his arm. "Sit back down, Draco. You're not well enough to walk--"

"I can walk," Draco said, in a flat, steely voice. "Let me go. I have to see her."

Harry stepped forward. "It's fine," he said, locking eyes with Sirius. "He can lean on us."

Sirius looked at Harry for a moment, then nodded, and together they helped Draco to his feet. Each with a hand under his arm, they moved slowly towards Ginny's bed. Blaise and Ginny followed them; Narcissa stayed behind, biting her lip as she watched her son make his slow progress across the room. Remus stood beside her, his arms folded and his face impassive.

Hermione had heard of time sickness before; she'd been warned about it by McGonagall third year, though the trips she'd taken through time had always been such short distances that it had never posed much of a risk. She knew that it got worse the greater the chronological distance you traveled, and even worse when you carried objects back and forth with you. But she was still unprepared for the sight of Ginny, deathly white except for the crusted, dried blood around her mouth and under her eyes, her breath rasping in and out of her throat. Her chest rose and fell rapidly, the Hufflepuff Time-Turner pulsing at her throat.

"My God." It was Sirius who spoke first, his voice tense with distress. "What's gone wrong? What's being done for her?"

Madam Pomfrey lifted a haggard face. "Everything's gone wrong," she said. "Time sickness is very difficult to treat--it can cause a total collapse of all the systems. Even as I repair one, another fails. Please stand back," she added, fixing Blaise, who had stepped forward, biting her fist, with a steely gaze. "She's very delicate right now."

"Could she die?" Harry, horrified, was looking at Ron, but Ron was staring at the floor, his hands in fists at his sides.

Madam Pomfrey looked as if she were weighing her words. Finally, she said, "It's quite possible, yes."

Blaise burst into tears. This was so unexpected that everyone stared at her for a moment, and she turned away, her hands over her face as if she were horribly embarrassed by her own reaction. Hermione wondered where her own tears were; they felt scalded away by horror. She kept seeing Ginny, a small, brave little figure in her braids and sweater, the Time-Turner gripped in her hand, begging for the chance to risk her own life to save Draco's. *And I let her*, Hermione thought, appalled. *Please*, she prayed, *please let her be all right, and I promise I'll never treat her like she's a little kid again. Let her be all right and I'll even be happy for her and Draco if that happens, I promise, if she'll just be all right.*

Charlie, swearing under his breath, turned away to stare at the wall. Hermione chanced a glance sideways at Draco: his healthy color had fled and his lips were a bloodless line. "Let me go," he said, his voice as colorless as his face, and shrugged off Sirius and Harry's grips on his arms.

He took a step forward, and Madam Pomfrey looked up sternly. But the warning died on her lips as Ron cut her off gruffly. "Let him," he said.

Draco moved slowly forward, not quite with his old grace yet, but not limping either, and leaned down over Ginny. Gently he touched her bloodied face, and bent to whisper in her ear; his hair fell forward, hiding them both, and Hermione did not hear what he said, though she might have guessed at it, if she'd been so inclined.

Draco drew back. Ginny's head moved a little on the pillow, but she didn't open her eyes. Her breathing was rougher now, and more blood leaked from the corner of her mouth. The hourglass at her throat pulsed and

pulsed like a heart. "I must tend to her," Madam Pomfrey asserted, gesturing firmly but kindly for Draco to move back. "Or she'll drown in her own blood."

Draco made a noise in the back of his throat, and moved back, almost stumbling into Harry, who caught at his shoulders to steady him. As Madam Pomfrey bent to tend to Ginny, her wand already out, the infirmary door opened again, and Seamus walked into the room.

Hermione stared at him, astonished. She had almost forgotten his existence. He was neatly dressed, in a black shirt and trousers, clothes she didn't remember him owning before. They showed up the pallor of his hair and the newly-dark blue of his eyes. He strode forward with such confidence that Ron stepped aside, and even Madam Pomfrey straightened up, staring, as he moved to stand next to Ginny. "She's dying," he said.

"Seamus Finnegan," said Madam Pomfrey, finding her voice, "I understand that you're upset about your girlfriend, but would you stand back immediately *please*--"

Seamus ignored her. Instead, he reached out, and closed his hand over the hourglass at Ginny's throat. Draco made a low growling noise and began to move forward; Harry held him back, staring, as Seamus, with a sudden, jerky movement tore the ancient Time-Turner of Hufflepuff from Ginny's throat. The chain sundered with an audible snap, and Seamus hurled the Time-Turner to the ground--still pulsing with its odd light--and trod on it. It held for a moment, then shattered.

Draco pulled away from Harry. "You *idiot*," he shouted at Seamus. "What have you *done*?"

Seamus regarded him calmly. "Look at her," he said, and pointed at Ginny.

They turned to stare; Hermione heard herself gasp. The color had returned to Ginny's face and she was breathing steadily and evenly. Madam Pomfrey snatched the wand from her pocket and touched it to Ginny's chest, whispering a word under her breath; when she removed it, the tip of the wand was glowing a healthy and reassuring pink. Madam

Pomfrey looked around helplessly. "She's all right," she said. "She's going to be fine."

Charlie let out what must have been the longest-held breath in the world; Ron stared in blank amazement, and Draco, still wordless, slumped against the wall. He was nearly expressionless, but Hermione saw that the hands at his sides were fists, and he was staring at Seamus across the room.

Seamus barely seemed to notice. "That's all right, then," he said, and walked out of the infirmary, letting the door swing shut behind him.

Madam Pomfrey looked after him distractedly. "What...an...odd...boy," she said, slowly. "I don't recall him being quite so odd."

"Oh, he's odd all right," said Draco.

Sirius looked at him. "You should be pleased," he said. "He saved Ginny's life." He took a step forward, put a hand under Draco's arm. "You look like you're going to drop where you stand," he said. "Let's get you back to bed."

Draco looked hesitant, but Blaise moved to take his other arm, and he let them lead him back to his cot. It seemed an oddly docile move for him, but Hermione saw his face as he passed, and there was no docility in it, only a sharp light behind his eyes as if he'd realized something not entirely pleasant.

Something touched Hermione's arm. It was Harry, looking at her with a somber gaze--but despite the seriousness in his eyes, she saw, he was Harry again, not the empty specter he'd been for these past few days, but her Harry, alive and warm and real.

She squeezed his hand and let it drop. She saw the flicker of uncertainty in his eyes as she knelt, and began to gather up the shattered bits of the Time-Turner. They lay like scattered diamonds among the grains of white hourglass sand and bent bits of gold chain. Hermione picked up the clasp, warped out of shape by the heel of Seamus' boot. It blurred as, finally, the tears came, slow and hot and delayed.

Harry knelt down beside her. "Hermione, what is it? What's wrong?"

"It's broken," she said, showing him the destroyed bits of the once-powerful Time-Turner, the Hufflepuff Founder's gift to her Heir. "It'll never work again."

"That's all right," Harry said gently, drawing her towards him. "We don't need it anymore, Hermione. We'll never need it again," he said, and she laid her head down on his shoulder and let the tears come.

Ginny woke slowly, released reluctantly by the soft darkness that held her. She opened her eyes on more darkness, pierced here and there by shafts of pallid light. Slowly she realized where she was--the smell of soap and medicine, the hard cot under her, the starched sheets. She was in the infirmary, and night had fallen. Her mouth felt dry as burnt toast. *Draco*, she thought, in a sudden panic. She remembered collapsing in the library, desperately trying to tell Blaise where the antidote was--had they found it?

Suddenly, something cool was against her dry mouth, and smooth, cold liquid trickled in between her cracked lips. Water. She swallowed gratefully. "Not too fast," said a familiar voice, "or you'll choke."

Ginny choked. The glass was withdrawn and she struggled to sit up. "Draco?" she demanded, or tried to--her voice came on as a rasping whisper.

"Shh," he said, unnecessarily. "You'll wake your brother, and I don't much fancy being pulled back from the brink of death just to be slaughtered by a Weasley for lurking at your bedside."

Ginny stared at him, though all she could see in the darkness was a vague shadow, and turned to look at where Charlie slept, looking worn-out, in an armchair pulled up to the bed. "The others?" she rasped. "Ron--"

"Everyone's fine," said Draco. "Including yours truly, in a remarkable change of pace." He moved to set the water glass on the window sill, and Ginny could see him clearly: the bright hair, the flushed cheeks, the black sweater pulled on over pajamas, the incongruously vulnerable bare feet. "The one we were all worried about was you."

"But I'm all right," Ginny said. "Aren't I?"

"Yes, you are." Draco looked at her, uncharacteristically somber. "If you ever," he said, "almost get yourself killed like that again on my behalf, I'll murder you. Do you understand?"

"Not really." Ginny put her hand up to her aching head and felt her hair matted with dried blood. "Did I very nearly die?"

"Very nearly," said Draco, and paused. "It was Finnigan who saved you."

"Seamus? Really?"

"Really," Draco said. He paused again. "Is he..."

"What?"

"Your boyfriend? Madam Pomfrey said..."

"I don't know," Ginny said, honestly. Was he? She supposed he was. Certainly they'd both been behaving as if he was. And she owed it to him, didn't she? "My head," she whispered. "It aches so."

Draco nodded. "I'll get Madam Pomfrey to give you something." He stood up. "It's amazing what a chap misses while he's in a brink-of-death coma," he added, half to himself.

"Draco," Ginny said. "Wait. There's one thing—"

He turned to look at her. "Yes?"

"Remember when I fell off my broom in that Quidditch match?" He nodded. "Later, when I was in the infirmary, someone came in and kissed me. Was that you?"

There was a long pause, during which Draco made some minute and unnecessary adjustments to his cuffs. Finally he said, "Yes, it was."

"*Why?*" Ginny said, with all the pent-up emotion she could muster, in her exhausted, filthy, worn-out state. "What were you doing?"

Draco left his cuffs alone. "I was confusing the issue," he said.

"Draco..." She wanted to say more, but her eyes were fluttering shut with exhaustion. Dizzy images passed before her eyelids--Ben kneeling down beside Gareth and weeping, the antidote sparking as her tears touched it, her own blood pooled on the library floor. "Will you really be all right?" she whispered.

The last thing she heard before sleep took her was his voice. "All right is relative," he said, "but I'll still be here in the morning, thanks to you." She felt his hand against her forehead then as he brushed her hair back with gentle fingers, light as a butterfly's touch. "In the meantime, close your eyes, Ginny Weasley. You've done enough and it's time to rest now. Close your eyes, pretty girl. Close your eyes..."

Draco Veritas: Epilogue

Part One: The Rag-and-Bone Shop of the Heart

I thought my dear must her own soul destroy -Yeats

Slowly, Ginny closed her copy of *Trousers, Arise!* and set it down on the windowsill beside her bed. It was the last of the three books in the *Trousers* series that Draco had given her for Christmas. She'd stretched out reading them as long as she could, but it was May now and she'd just turned the last page of the last book. *That's all there is*, she thought, bringing her knees up to her chest and hugging them with her arms. She felt indistinctly morose, unsettled even, as she often did when she'd finished a favorite novel. Even when the ending was happy, it was like a death or at least a going-away for a long time, this having to say goodbye to characters she'd come to know and love.

In fact, she wasn't sure if the happy ending didn't simply make her feel worse. It was the sort of happy ending that tied up everything neatly and never actually turned up in real life, where endings, if they happened at all, were messy, and love wasn't always rewarded or punished: sometimes it just faded away into the background, part of the great clamoring mass of unanswered questions that eventually you just had to learn to live with if you wanted to grow up.

Feeling sad and perhaps a trifle wise, Ginny leaned a little way out the window: it was a gorgeous early summer day, cool and breezy, the sky like a hollowed bowl of blue porcelain. Students were out on the lawns, lying on blankets spread out over the grass, savoring the first warm days of the year. She could see figures down by the lake, the black-clad silhouettes of strolling students, mostly boys and girls walking together, hand in hand. She hadn't been down to the lake herself since the winter; it brought up too many memories that were better avoided.

A knock on the door brought her out of her reverie, and she hopped off the sill, catching a brief glimpse of herself in the mirror hanging next to her bed. Her hair had grown since the winter - she hadn't had it cut at all - and now hung to her waist, curling red tendrils escaping from unruly plaits. "Yes?"

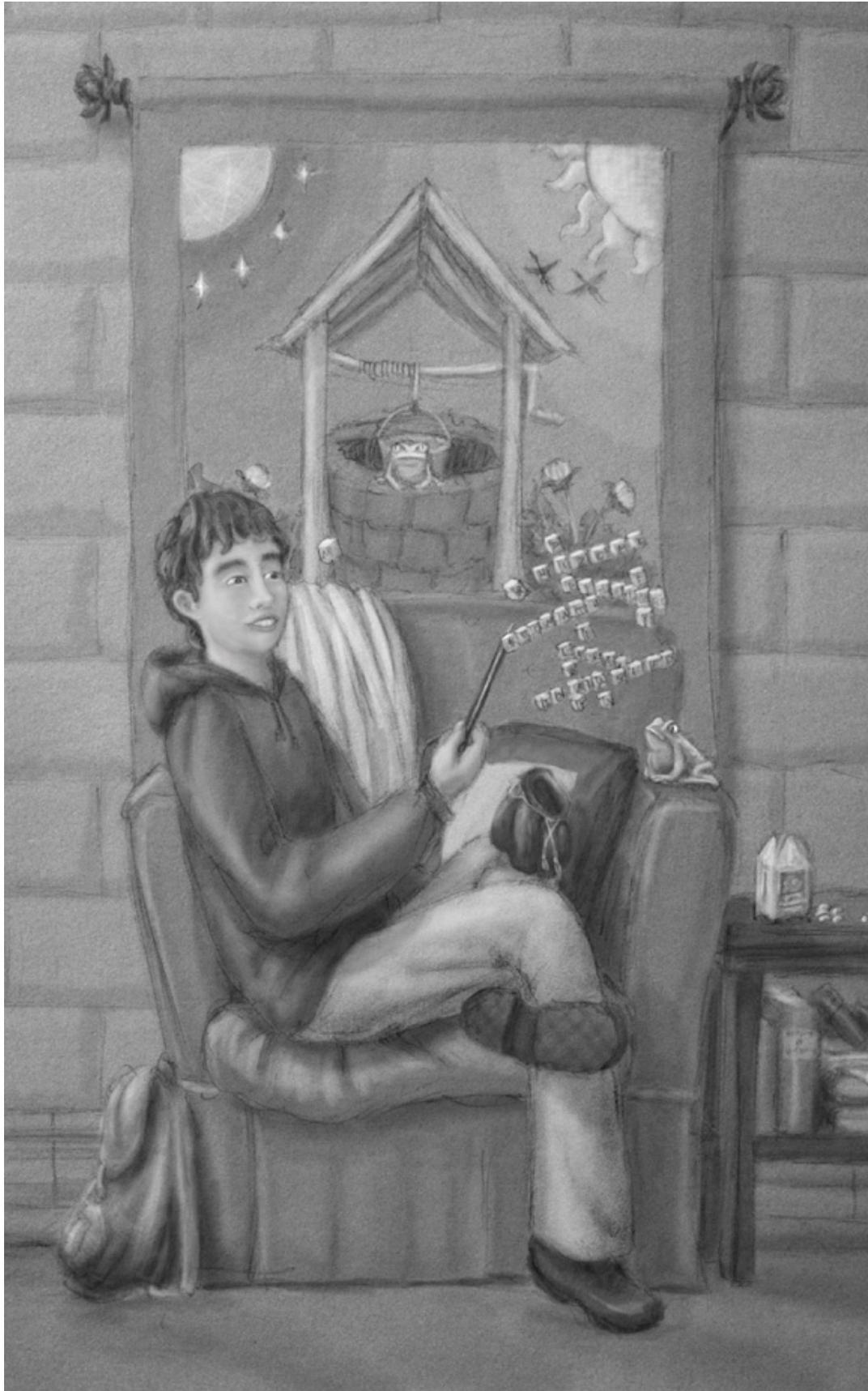
"You decent?" A head popped around the door; it was her roommate, Elizabeth. "Someone's waiting to see you down at the portrait hole."

"Oh? Who?"

Elizabeth grinned. "A certain Slytherin," she said.

"Must you grin like that?" Ginny pulled on a cardigan and buttoned it up. She'd gained back some of the weight she'd lost over the winter, she was pleased to note, and the cardigan strained a bit across the chest. "All right, I'm coming."

The windows of the common room were thrown open, and breezy May air spilled in, carrying with it the smells of new grass, upturned earth, and budding flowers. Neville Longbottom sat ensconced in one of the plush armchairs, engaged in a game of Floating Scrabble with his toad, Trevor the Second.



He waved as Ginny crossed the room and ducked out through the portrait, ignoring the Fat Lady's desultory mutterings about the shortness of her skirt and the tightness of her sweater. "Oh, hello," she said, straightening up as the portrait shut behind her with a bang. "I rather hoped it would be you."

"Of course you did," said Blaise. Ginny wondered if the Fat Lady had had a go at *her* - her pleated skirt was shorter than Snape's temper, and the V of her sweater showed the lace edgings on her bra cups. She'd cut off most of her hair at some point in April, and the soft waves of it cupped her chin and curled at her temples in fiery strands. "Look, do you want to walk down to the lake with me? I need to talk."

"Not the lake," Ginny said quickly.

Blaise raised an eyebrow. "The rose garden then?"

"No! Not that either." Seeing Blaise's surprised expression, Ginny cast about for an alternative. "The Quidditch pitch? I doubt anyone will be there now."

Blaise shrugged gracefully. "Wherever you like."

"I thought you said nobody was likely to be here now," Draco complained, rolling over in the grass and propping his chin on his hands. He squinted. "That looks like somebody to me."

"Ignore them." Harry, sitting cross-legged in the grass, was doing his best to follow his own advice where Draco was concerned, but it was difficult. Draco was not someone you could tell to shut up and be quiet because you were trying to think; Draco was someone who felt that his brilliant discourse could only serve to enhance your thinking process, no matter how badly you needed to concentrate on something else. "And shut up."

"You know," Draco said, "I don't really see why you brought me out here, if all you wanted me to do was sit here and look pretty. Not," he added, "that that isn't one of my particular talents, of course."

"It's not a talent, it's an annoying habit, and I brought you out here for silent moral support. How do you spell *everlasting*? One word or two?"

"One, and that doesn't sound very promising. Tell me you aren't going to natter on about everlasting love, I couldn't take it."

Harry threw his quill down. "It's a wedding. Aren't I supposed to natter on about everlasting love? What do you expect me to talk about in my toast, then?" He squinted. "Also, isn't that Ginny?"

"What? Why bring her up? She's not in your speech, is she?"

"No," said Harry, in a tone that indicated he felt Draco was being exceptionally slow today. "She's over there, by the stands."

Draco, taking on a hunted look, burrowed deeper into the grass. "What do you think she's doing here?"

"I expect she came here to kill you," Harry said, retrieving his quill.

Draco glared at him. "You have no sympathy, Potter. No compassion. That's your trouble."

"You know," Harry pointed out reasonably, "if you ever actually told me anything about what's gone on between you and Ginny this past year, maybe I would be sympathetic."

"As it is, lacking information, you fall back on mockery and slander."

"Yes," said Harry. "That's about the size of it."

Draco sat up, shaking grass out of his hair, and looked across the pitch at Ginny, a small bright-haired figure in the distance. Harry looked at him sidelong - sometimes, like a photograph in double exposure, he seemed to see another Draco, half-transparent, looking back at him - a Draco whose face had gone to bones and shadow, pale as etiolated lace, with lavender shadows under his eyes. A Draco so thin he looked like a gust of wind would blow him over, who seemed to stay upright only through sheer force of will.

And then he blinked, and like a ghost, that Draco vanished, and he was looking at a slim blond boy whose skin showed the first gold shadings of an early summer tan, whose eyes were clear and gray and unshadowed, who gave off a bright aura of health and strength and vitality that made Harry wonder if there hadn't been something perhaps a little *extra* in that antidote - something that hadn't just healed Draco but had brought him back stronger than ever?

"I think she's ignoring me," Draco observed, and bit down thoughtfully on a blade of grass.

"I think she hasn't noticed us at all yet," said Harry. "Who's that she's with?"

"Blaise," said Draco, gloomily.

"Oh, right. I keep forgetting she cut off all her hair. I rather liked it better before," Harry said, thoughtfully.

"Potter, you're practically a married man, you're not supposed to be noticing random girls' hair."

Harry rolled his eyes upward. "Malfoy..."

"I bet they're talking about me," Draco observed, sounding about as cheerful as a French aristocrat on the way to the guillotine.

"You know, Malfoy," said Harry, with some asperity, "not everyone, everywhere, is always talking about you."

"This is about Draco, isn't it?" Ginny said, turning to Blaise with her arms folded. The wind blowing across the Quidditch pitch was chilly; she hugged her arms around herself and shivered.

"Yes. Well." Blaise hesitated. "Oh, all right. It is. How did you know?"

"You had that look on your face," said Ginny with a grim certainty. "That only-Draco-Malfoy-could-annoy-me-this-much look."

"I'll take your word for it." Nervously, Blaise reached for a strand of hair to twist, didn't find one, seemed to remember she'd cut off her long locks, and dropped her hand. "All right, here it is. Draco's asked me if I'll go with him to the wedding on Saturday."

Ginny blinked; the wind suddenly felt very chill. "I - as his date?"

Blaise paused to think before she replied. "It wasn't stated explicitly either way," she said, finally. "But my guess is that he'd like a companion and there isn't anyone else he wants to ask, so I'll do. We get along still. I'd venture to say we understand one another."

Ginny shoved her hands into her pockets. "I suppose it isn't my business either way," she said. "I'm going with Seamus, of course."

"Of course." Blaise moved past this without addressing it. Nobody ever really did address the issue of her and Seamus, Ginny thought, rather as if they hoped that if they ignored it, it would go away. "But I didn't want to do anything that might upset you."

"That's thoughtful of you," Ginny said grudgingly. She thought of the wedding, which she had rather been looking forward to - one last celebration with all her friends before they scattered across the world, only one of them to return to Hogwarts in September. Herself. Now she thought of the shimmering ballroom at Malfoy Manor, and Blaise laughing in Draco's arms as they spun together under the floating chandeliers, and felt a sense of impending dread.

Blaise grinned. "It's not a question of thoughtful. I know what a temper you've got, I don't want you hurling a punchbowl at me in the middle of the vows."

"No, I wouldn't do that anyway," Ginny said. "Look, I've got a boyfriend. I'm not still carrying a torch for Draco Malfoy."

Blaise raised an eyebrow. "You went through hell to save his life," she remarked. "That's more than a torch, it's a bloody bonfire."

Ginny shrugged. "That was months ago. If anything was going to happen between us after, it would have happened already. But I'm with Seamus. I told you."

"Yes, but do you love him? Seamus, I mean."

Unbidden, Tom's words rose in Ginny's mind. *I am her love, I am her hatred. I am her joy and I am her loathing and her abhorrence. I am her unrequited passions. I am her guilt and her remembrance. I am her beautiful despair. I am the futility of all her wishes. Out of blood and tears and ink, she made me. And I will never leave her.*

But he had been wrong, she thought, it was she who could not leave.

"Sure, I love him."

Blaise's lip quirked up at the corner. "Hey, do you remember that time in the Great Hall when Seamus just went totally mad and Draco -"

"No," Ginny said firmly.

Blaise looked dubious. "If you say so."

Ginny was lying, of course, she did remember. Quite well.

Once she'd been sure, quite sure, that Draco was going to live, she set about ignoring him as completely as possible. One school started again, she avoided him in corridors and after Quidditch matches, tried not to be around Harry or Hermione if they were going to see him, ducked behind pillars in the courtyard if she caught a glimpse of silvery hair or heard the sound of familiar laughter.

At least it was nearly impossible to bump into him alone. Other Slytherins always surrounded him. While the Gryffindors had tiptoed around Harry since they'd all come back to school - as Ron pointed out, it's a little hard to brag about your winter trip to Ibiza with a bloke who spent his Christmas holidays locked in a fatal confrontation with Voldemort - the Slytherins were sucking up to Draco like they'd just invented the fine art of sycophancy.

"A lot of them," Blaise explained to Ginny one evening in the library, "feel like they made maybe the wrong choice, you know, siding with the Death Eaters and that lot. Not because they were evil, mind you, but because they lost, and Draco's practically the only one in our House who's in

really good books with the Ministry's current power players. Everyone thinks he just played it perfectly, you know, and no one wants to be on his bad side. He might sic Harry on them." She grinned.

"As if Harry could be bothered with them," said Ginny coldly, and meant it. Harry had reacclimated to normal life at school better than they'd all been worried he would, after what had happened, and the fallout of what had happened - Dumbledore had done a good job of keeping the Ministry away, forbidding them from holding a ceremony in which they bestowed the Order of Merlin on Harry until after school was over, canceling several tickertape parades through Hogsmeade, and forbidding all reporters from the Daily Prophet from setting foot on Hogwarts grounds on pain of being eaten by Fang. People still stared at Harry in the hallway, of course. But people had always stared at Harry in the hallway. That wasn't new.

What was new, perhaps, was the way he looked back -- neither defensive nor challenging nor resentful nor shy. I know who I am, that look said, and if you don't, you're welcome to look -- it doesn't matter to me either way. Ginny remembered the Harry of years ago, who ducked stares and bit his lip in furious pain at the appearance of POTTER STINKS badges. That Harry was gone. "He's grown up so," said Hermione, in the sort of sad-happy voice that only someone who'd known Harry since he was eleven might be permitted to reasonably use.

Oh, I don't know. He doesn't look any taller to me. It wasn't Draco saying it, but Draco's voice in Ginny's head: sometimes she heard him whispering to her even when he wasn't there, and though she knew it was only her own unruly imagination conjuring up what he *might* say, it still made her uncomfortable enough to flee Hermione's presence without answering.

That night, in the Great Hall over supper, Dumbledore announced that there was to be a memorial service for Pansy Parkinson and for the other victims of what had come to be known as the Christmas Killings. Ginny knew that Dumbledore was perfectly aware of Pansy's role in Ron's abduction and the rest of the whole sorry business, but she also knew he would never say anything about it publicly, and let those who had known Pansy come to terms with her death as they saw fit. All the blame for the killings had been laid at Voldemort's door, of course, which in a way was true, but still left Ginny with a sick, guilty feeling inside.

She was sitting next to Seamus as Dumbledore spoke, and she saw his shoulders tense as Dumbledore talked of the Christmas Killings. Dumbledore spoke of the need to come to terms with death, to understand it as a part of life, and yet he said also that he understood the urge to rage against it, especially when the victim was so young and the act of murder was so senseless. "As we did when Cedric Diggory was killed three years ago," he said, "we must face that which is the ugly result of bigotry taken to its farthest extreme, of the sort of intolerance even the best of us can sometimes harbor-"

A ringing in Ginny's ears blotted out his next words. "-of evil," Dumbledore went on, "the sort of evil the Ministry thought you should never know about, because you are children. But if we do not admit to the existence of evil, we cannot recognize it. And if we do not recognize it, how can we see it within ourselves?"

The chiming in Ginny's ears grew louder; she realized it was not actually intangible guilt but rather the sound of Seamus' fork hitting the edge of his plate as his hand shook. She reached out and took the fork away from him. "Seamus -"

He pulled back from her and staggered to his feet. Lurching a little, as if he were drunk or blind, he staggered from the Hall. A confused murmur of voices rose like the hum of bees in summertime, and Ginny saw Draco, all the way across the room at the Slytherin table, chin on hand, looking at her.

She got to her feet and raced after Seamus.

She found him in one of the corridors off the Hall, leaning against a wall, his head in his hands. He was murmuring into his fingers. She caught only a few words - "My hands - not *my* hands -" before she pulled his hands away from his face and held them tightly in hers, fighting the urge to shake him.

"Seamus," she said, "what's going on? What's wrong?"

He looked at her bleakly through a fall of light hair, from eyes a little too dark a blue. "*Take heed,*" he said, "*for I hold vengeance in my hand, to hurl upon their heads that break My law.*"

She took a step back. "What's that from?"

"I don't know," he said. "But I hear it when I close my eyes."

"Why did you leave the Hall?' she asked.

"Dumbledore was talking about me," he said. "I could feel everyone staring. Recognizing evil." He gave a short laugh.

"No one was looking at you," Ginny said, trying to hide the anger in her voice. "No one thinks of you that way."

"I do."

"Then stop. How long are you going to torture yourself like this, Seamus? How long are you going to torture *me*?"

She knew immediately it had been the wrong thing to say.

"You don't have to stay with me, Ginny." His voice was flat. "I would understand if you left me. Anyone would."

She half-closed her eyes. In the darkness she saw the *Liber-Damnatis*, the diary dripping its black ink blood across her fingers as she hauled it from the fire, the pages flying like startled birds as she ripped them from the binding. *I hate you, Tom. I hate you.* "But Seamus," she protested. "I want to help you get better. I *need* you to get better."

He looked at her. "Why?"

She floundered for a moment. "Because I love you."

His face softened. "Ginny..." He reached out a hand, drew her hair away from her face, stroking the line of her cheekbone. For a moment he was the freckled boy who had kissed her behind the Quidditch shed before Christmas, who had invited her to visit his house in Ireland and meet his family. He had never reissued the invitation; she didn't know if it was because he wasn't sure of her or if it was because he was avoiding his bewildered, loving parents, who seemed to know there was something very wrong with their son - but not what.

Of course no one knew what. Even Seamus didn't properly seem to know what; he only knew the nightmares, the strange voices that whispered to him at night, the bits and fragments of words and images that made his life a living hell. In all of it, there was only Ginny he drew comfort from; she was all that stood between him and the darkness.

She pressed her cheek into his hand. "Maybe you should get some rest. We could go up to the common room..."

"I was thinking of a walk," he said. "We could go to the rose garden."

"No!" she said, so sharply that he dropped his hand. *The garden full of stars like cold ice slivers, snow on the roses* - "It'll be cold," she finished, lamely. "I should get my cloak at least."

He stepped back, his eyes clouded. "That's all right. I should take some time on my own." He spun and stalked away, shoulders set rigidly. Ginny watched him go, her teeth sunk into her lower lip. *Run after him*, said her brain, *he wants you to follow him*. But a thick exhaustion kept her rooted to the spot. To have some time on her own - a chance to rest alone by the fireplace -

"I was thinking of a walk," he said. "We could go to the rose garden."

"No!" she said, so sharply that he dropped his hand. *The garden full of stars like cold ice slivers, snow on the roses* - "It'll be cold," she finished, lamely. "I should get my cloak at least."

He stepped back, his eyes clouded. "That's all right. I should take some time on my own." He spun and stalked away, shoulders set rigidly.

Collapsing against the wall, Ginny watched him go, her teeth sunk into her lower lip. *Run after him*, said her brain, *he wants you to follow him*. But a thick exhaustion kept her rooted to the spot. And she had to admit the idea of being alone appealed to her. Not to be watching someone constantly for signs of changes in their mood, not to be constantly alert for signs that she was needed -- just to be able to collapse on the couch in front of the Gryffindor fireplace and shut her eyes --

"You know," said a drawling voice behind her, "I find Dumbledore's speeches a bit dull myself, but normally I just sleep through them. This

business of charging out of the Great Hall in hysterics is eye-catching, but possibly not practical --"

"Don't drivel," said Ginny dully, turning her head to see Draco coming down the corridor towards him. It had been a long time since she'd really looked at him and the change in his appearance startled her. She remembered the thin boy who sat next to her bed the night she'd found the antidote for him and nearly died in the process. She remembered the hollows under his eyes, dark as if they'd been drawn there with ink. They were gone now, and so was the haunted thinness; nothing remained of his ordeal except the thick scarring on his left hand and a slightly intensified silver cast to his eyes.

"I'm not driveling," he protested. "You are," she said. "You know perfectly well why I ran out of the hall and it wasn't because the speech was boring."

He raised his eyebrows. "Honesty," he said. "How diverting."

"Seamus wasn't well," she explained. "I had to see if he was all right."

Draco spread his long-fingered hands wide. She could see the thick double-cross shaped scar that disfigured his left palm. "You do realize," he said, "you've become on of those sorts of girls."

"What sorts of girls?"

"I've heard you talking in the halls," he said blithely, "not that you ever talk to me any more, of course, but you have a carrying voice. Every other word you say is either "Seamus" or sometimes, for variation, "Shay" which I take to be some sort of repellent nickname for our potato-like Finnegan."

Ginny leaned her cheek against the cool stone of the wall. "Jealous?" she said, and immediately regretted it. She didn't want to provoke Draco, she wanted him to leave her alone. Just being as close to him as she was right now made her feel as if she were being turned inside out.

"Yes," he said, "I was so hoping I'd get a chance to apply for the position of permanent nursemaid and caretaker to a possibly dangerous lunatic,

but you beat me to it."

"Seamus isn't dangerous. Or a lunatic. He's --"

"Broken?" Draco suggested.

Ginny felt the ghost of a smile flit across her face. "I prefer to think of him as ... sprained."

Draco didn't laugh. "You like fixings things that are broken," he said. "I ought to know. Interesting, isn't it, that you haven't spoken to me since I was cured?"

"That's not --"

"The only conclusion I can come to is that you liked me better dying," he said. "But now you have Finnigan to put back together, you don't need me any more."

Ginny drew herself upright. She could feel her tiredness in her bones, her wrists and back: they burned. "That's not fair."

"I'm not interested in whether it's fair," he said. "I'm interested in whether it's true." He took a step towards her; the torchlight flared up, and threw a shower of gold sparks across his pale face and silver hair. The curl at the corner of his lip was so familiar she could have traced it in her sleep...

"Is it that hard a question?"

"It's not really a question. More an observation. As to whether it's true..." She looked up at him; she was close enough to see the little crescent scar under his eye, a shade lighter than the rest of his skin. "What do you care?"

"You're martyring yourself," he said. "Because you think what happened to him was your fault. You're developing a flatteringly saint like pallor, but that's hardly worth it. I liked you better freckled and flawed."

"I didn't think you liked anything flawed," she said with asperity, but she found herself leaning into him, like a vine twining a trellis.

"On the contrary, I'm a big fan of imperfection...Faultlessness is so dull." His hand was under her chin now, lifting her face so that she was forced to meet his gaze squarely. "He's not the blood you have to wash off your hands, not a stake to burn yourself at -- he's just a boy. How do you think he'd react if he knew he wasn't your love, but your penance?"

She jerked away from him. "Why? Are you planning on telling him?"

He laughed shortly. "Far be it from me to get between you and your martyrdom, Saint Virginia."

"You never let anyone get between you and yours," she snapped back. "You come here acting all wounded that I don't seem to need you any more -- what would you do if I said I did need you, if I told you I needed you, thought about you, loved you, *all the time*?"

Draco looked taken aback, and not pleasantly so. "I --"

"That's what I thought you'd say. You don't want anything you can have. Just what you can't." She pulled away from him. "Well, you can't have me. You had your chance, Draco Malfoy, and you lost it."

She'd thought it would hurt to say it, but it didn't; rather there was a sense of enormous satisfaction about it, the sort of satisfaction she'd felt when she was five years old and, having tired of Ron's teasing, had hit him over the head with a Widget's Cast-Iron Self-Cooking Fry Pan. Of course in this instance, there was slightly less blood.

Draco arched his eyebrows into decided peaks. "One of us has lost it," he murmured in a desultory fashion, "but I'm not sure it's me."

Ginny had expected any of several responses to her announcement, but for him to laugh at her was not one of them. Rage boiled up inside her. She reached up, sliding her hand into the neck of her sweater, and found

the thin gold chain that hung there. She pulled it up over and over her head and held it out to Draco.

Both Epicyclical Charms hung at the end of it, twisting and glinting in the torchlight. "Take it," she said.

He looked at her with unusually explicit surprise. "*What?*"

"I said take them," she replied icily. "You never asked me where they were -- you never asked any of us, did you? Who did you think was looking after them?"

He shook his head, very slightly. The surprise had faded from his face and she couldn't quite read his expression: Anger? Disgust? Bitterness? Amusement? He reached a hand out and took the coil of gold chain and glass-and-gold-and-bone charms from her, closing his fingers around them.

"That's twice," he said.

She was angry enough that she could feel the tremble in her fingers. "Twice what?"

"That you've given me back my life," he said. "Although only once that you've flung it in my face."

The backs of her eyes burned; she knew she was near to tears. Not wanting to cry in front of him, she spun and ran down the corridor as her eyes spilled over, turning the torches on the walls to shimmering circles of blurry golden light. Had she stopped at the turn in the corridor to look back, she would have seen Draco watching her, his hand still extended, a look of wry resignation on his face.

"No," Ginny said, again, now, "I don't remember that at all."

Blaise looked at Ginny curiously. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

Blaise leaned forward and pushed a strand of scarlet hair out of Ginny's eyes. "Are you *crying?*"

Ginny hugged her arms around herself, shivering. "It's the wind. I told you, I'm fine."

Blaise dropped her hand and muttered something - Ginny caught the words "Gryffindor" and "stubborn" and "bint."

"I should get back to the tower," Ginny said. "Seamus is there and I don't like to leave him alone for too long."

"Sure," said Blaise. "God knows what would happen if he was alone. He might raise up another Dark Lord to scourge the countryside or something."

Ginny bit her lip. "That's not funny!"

"Draco would have thought it was funny," said Blaise. *And a few months ago*, her eyes added, *so would you.*

Miserable, Ginny curled on her bed in Gryffindor Tower, the velvet hangings pulled so that she lay inside a square of darkness. Now that she didn't even have the *Trousers* books to stave off the bleak thoughts, they flocked around her like black birds. The drumming of blood in her ears sounded like the incessant beating of their wings.

So Blaise and Draco were going to the wedding together, so what? It was hardly her place to complain; since that night in the corridor outside the Great Hall, Ginny had spoken to Draco only once, and that out of forced politeness. She had no stake in any part of his life, and that included his love life. Of course, knowing that didn't stop her from feeling as hollowed out as a scooped Halloween pumpkin.

Her hand snaked up and felt the locket she still wore around her throat, shoved down into the neck of her blouse where no one could see it. *I love, and I hope.* She thought of Draco, saying, *I've only learned the difference between love and hate this past year... I'm a child and perhaps what you need is someone more grown-up. Finnegan, even.*

Finnegan, even. She thought of Seamus, his honest face, his blue eyes, his gentleness, his concern. Draco had said she'd be better off with him, and for a time, she had agreed. She wasn't sure if maybe she didn't still agree. What she really thought and what she wanted badly to think had become so tangled in her mind that she could no longer extricate herself from the knots.

Ginny did know, on some level, that she had, just as Draco had said, become one of *those girls* - the sort who talk about their boyfriends endlessly and without reprieve, boring their friends, annoying their acquaintances, and positively revolting their family members. She'd never had patience with those sorts of girls in the past; the kind who wouldn't shut up about how terrific their boyfriend was, the cute things he did, the funny thing he said just the other day; they were the same kinds of girls who flew into weepy fits if their boy so much as smiled at another girl, who demanded he rid himself of all his female friends - or all his friends entirely - and who hurled tantrums at you if you happened to mention that time the year before when their boyfriend had taken Orla Quirke to the Yule Ball, gotten pissed as a newt, and been sick all over her new silk robes - even if, at the time, said girl had been dating Ernie McMillan and had never given her current boyfriend the time of day. They demanded of their boyfriend that he be a blank slate, devoid of romantic history, devoted only to them. Ginny despised that sort of girl; why live in fantasyland when reality would only inevitably intrude and bring you crashing down to earth in a big ugly mess? Why found your relationship on lies?

Now she knew: sometimes the lies were all you could stand to believe. She saw Elizabeth's and Blaise's eyes glaze over when she talked about Seamus; saw Hermione's sideways looks of worry, and felt a new sympathy for *those girls*, who she now realized only talked about their relationships the way they did not because they thought they were perfect, but because they knew that they were anything but. Maybe love, she thought now, flat on her back staring up at the ceiling, is just a lie two people tell each other, and for it to work, they both have to believe it. And if she couldn't make herself believe it by sheer force of will, if guilt and desire were not enough, then maybe she would have to find another way.

Hermione sat in the window embrasure in the Gryffindor Tower common room and looked down the spring-green sweep of lawn, dotted with gray stones and trampled flat where students had trodden their own paths from castle to Quidditch pitch. She could see Harry and Draco - really just moving dots from here, but she recognized Draco's silver hair and Harry's red sweater - walking up one of the paths towards the castle, deep in conversation.

She linked her arms around her legs, drawing them up to her chest; her book *Onieromancy and the Study of Protective Magic* which had been perched precariously on her knees, slid down into her lap. It was getting darker outside, the sky streaked with the first markings of sunset. Soon Harry would come up the stairs and through the portrait hole, smelling of grass and boy and spring afternoon, and they would curl up together on the couch and read or talk until it was time for dinner.

The thought of Harry brought a helpless smile to her face. She wasn't sure when or how they had gotten back together; there hadn't been an event, just a sort of natural falling back into things: into walking to class holding hands, sitting folded together in the common room at night, the sort of near-telepathic interconnectedness she had missed so badly when they'd started having problems at the beginning of the school year. She was happier when Harry was around, and she knew from the way that he lit up when he saw her that he felt the same way. He was part of her and she of him: not in a possessive way, she thought, but in a way that brought to her mind those old words from the Song of Songs: *I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine.*

It made her nervous. Nothing could be this good, she thought, without it going terribly wrong. Sometimes she took her blue glass ring out of its box on her nightstand and looked at the crack that ran through it, straight down the middle, and then she would put it away and sit silently on her bed for a while, just thinking.

Out the window, she saw Harry stop walking and wave. Ron was coming down the front steps of the school red hair a bright dot at this distance, lanky frame instantly recognizable. He pointed behind himself, gesturing, Harry caught up to him, Draco just behind. An earnest conversation ensued.

Ron. Things were good with Ron, too, she thought. She'd been terribly worried that a great distance would have grown between herself, Ron and Harry after everything that had occurred, but that didn't happen. In some ways, the three of them were closer than ever - it was as if all the buried resentments and secret unhappiness that had plagued their relationship before had been burned away, and they'd been granted a chance to start over.

Of all of them, she thought, Ron had changed the most. Where once he'd been nearly as hotheaded and impetuous as his sister, he was more thoughtful now, slower to anger, often to be found lost in thought. When Hermione had questioned him about it once, he'd replied that in Romania, he'd learned that if he looked far enough into the future, he could see the end of the world. "Of everything," he said, chewing on the end of his quill, "stars, planets, galaxies - the end of magic. It gives you some perspective, knowing that."

Hermione supposed that it did. She didn't ask him if he'd looked that far ahead, either. She found she didn't want to know. Whatever Ron saw in the future, he kept it to himself, and for that, she was grateful.

Even if the urge to ask him did sometimes worry at her like a the pain of an old injury. One thing she had Harry had never discussed that did nag at her was what they planned to do when school ended. On their last day at Hogwarts, Malfoy carriages would arrive to take them to the Manor for the wedding; Hermione was riding with Harry and Ron, Draco with Blaise, and Ginny, of course, with Seamus. There would be a few days of festivities at the Manor, and after that - nothing. The future stretched ahead like a blank swath of unmapped terrain. Whatever Harry's plans were, she didn't know them, and didn't know how she'd feel about them.

And she didn't know how he'd feel about hers, either.

Down on the school's front steps, Harry and Draco parted from Ron, and then from each other, heading in opposite directions. Ron stood on the steps by himself -- pensive? Lonely? She couldn't tell. A moment later, someone else joined him there. A girl, also with red hair. Ginny? Hermione thought, and was about to lean forward when and the curtain she'd drawn across the embrasure was pulled aside. Hermione looked up, blinking.

Ginny stood in front of her, holding the curtain out stiffly and glaring. Hermione didn't take this personally - Ginny spent most of her time these days either glaring or looking as if she might cry - and she doubted it had anything much to do with her. "Hermione," Ginny said. "I need to talk to you."

So it hadn't been Ginny with Ron, Hermione thought, perplexed. She scooted back, making room for Ginny on the window seat. "What about?"

For a moment, Ginny hesitated. It was enough time for Hermione to notice that Ginny had buttoned her cardigan crookedly, that her normally neat and beautifully brushed hair was straggling out of its plaits, and that she had an odd, circular bruise on the back of her right hand. She felt a nearly painful wave of sympathy for her. She had been so brave back in January, so brave she'd nearly died, yet she seemed unable to find peace in the knowledge of her own courage. Instead, she seemed wrecked.

At last, she spoke. "I want you to make me a love potion," she said, avoiding Hermione's eyes.

Hermione's sympathy vanished in an wave of incredulous astonishment. "You want me to make you WHAT?"

Ginny scowled. "A love potion."

Hermione dropped her book and, seizing hold of Ginny's wrist, yanked her down onto the windowsill beside her. The curtain fell closed around them. "Surely you're joking," Hermione said. "Tell me you got into the wine we bought for the wedding and you're reelingly drunk. That would be a relief."

"I'm not drunk. I know exactly what I'm saying."

"Clearly you don't. Do you have any idea how immoral love potions are? How illegal?"

"Oh, like you care about legality," Ginny snapped. "I know all about the Polyjuice Potion -"

"That was in a good cause!"

"So is this!"

"Ginny," Hermione hissed, struggling to keep her voice down, "*you cannot give Draco Malfoy a love potion, do you understand me?*"

Ginny's mouth dropped open just as the curtain was pulled back and Harry stood in front of them, smiling pleasantly and smelling, as Hermione had predicted, rather strongly of lawn. "I was wondering where you'd got to," he said to Hermione. "You two plotting something?"

Hermione said a small prayer to the Relationship Gods that they would forgive her the lie she was about to tell. She could only imagine what would happen if Harry found out that Ginny wanted to give Draco a love potion. His head might actually fly off and bounce around the room like a Bludger. "We're talking about dresses," she said. "What to wear to the wedding."

"I was thinking of something simple and black myself," he said. "Maybe a nice pearl choker."

To Hermione's surprise, Ginny laughed, though her color was still high. "I think you could be a bit more adventurous than that," she said. "Stiletto heels are in right now."

Harry looked mildly interested. "I can never see how girls can walk in those -"

"Harry," Hermione said, smiling in a way that made her face feel stretched, "I think Ginny and I want to continue our conversation in private."

Harry's eyebrows went up. "Really?"

"Well," Hermione said, "I wouldn't want you to know what I'm wearing before the wedding."

"You know, Hermione," Harry pointed out, "it's not actually us getting married, so..."

"It's tradition," Hermione said firmly.

"Bollocks," Ginny muttered.

Harry looked at her curiously and seemed to notice her high color and agitated expression for the first time. "Heard Draco's going to the wedding with Blaise, have you?" he said, without malice and addressing both of them, though his words seemed meant for Ginny. Ginny's color darkened. Before she could say anything, Hermione got to her feet and grabbed Harry by the shoulders, pushing him out through the curtain and into the common room.

"Honestly, Harry," she said, "do have some sense, won't you? And leave me alone with Ginny, we need to talk."

"I'll say," he said, and dropped a kiss on the top of her head. "See you at dinner, then?"

Her anger melted. "Of course."

"And if you wind up wearing some horribly unflattering meringue-type thing to the wedding, don't look at me. I tried to advise you."

"At least it'll match your powder-blue tux," she said, and let go of his shoulders. He dashed away upstairs as Hermione took a deep breath and returned to the window embrasure.

Ginny was hunched into the corner of the window, worrying at something that hung around her throat. She dropped her hand when Hermione appeared and glared at the other girl defiantly, her cheeks scarlet.

"All right, I didn't tell him anything," said Hermione. "But that's on the condition that you forget this stupid idea immediately. I mean, using a love potion on someone, it's - it's a violation. It robs them of their volition, their will. It's like Imperius, but worse in a way, because they don't even know what's happening."

"It's not an Unforgivable," Ginny said, her voice tight. "And anyway, I happen to agree with you."

"You - what do you mean, you agree?" Hermione stared at her. "Do you hate Draco that much?"

Ginny was shaking her head slowly. Red curls of hair bounced against her cheek, startling against its whiteness. "You really think I'd do that," she said flatly. "That I'd use a love potion on - on him?" She bit her lip. "It's not for Draco."

Hermione looked at her in astonishment. "Not for Draco?" she echoed. "Then for who?"

"I should think that would be more than obvious," Ginny said. "It's for me, of course."

Harry had just reached the door of his room when he felt that tickling at the back of his mind -- like a hiss or a whisper, but more insistent -- that meant that Draco wanted to talk to him. He lowered his hand from the doorknob, letting his mind relax.

Potter?

Yes, I'm here.

You know how Weasley said Dumbledore needed to talk to us?

Yes. I know, I was just --

The other boy sounded oddly constricted. *Look, I think you'd better come here.*

Harry felt suddenly cold all over. *Are you all right?*

Just get here.

Forgetting about his muddy sweater, Harry clattered back down the stairs -- as he passed the closed window curtains in the common room, he wondered just what it was that Hermione and Ginny were actually up to, he hadn't believed for a moment that they'd been talking about clothes -- and ducked out through the portrait hole.

"*Fizzwhanging snozzlefritters,*" he muttered to the gargoyle that guarded Dumbledore's office, and it obligingly let him through. As he rode upward on the wooden staircase, he felt that chill again, now centered in his

stomach. He hadn't heard Draco sound like that since -- well, not since January.

January. Sometimes when he closed his eyes he saw the blasted landscape of Romania, the gray earth outside the towering stronghold, the long lines of mountains marching away in the distance like jagged black teeth. He felt the chill in his bones again, that seeping cold and exhaustion. He saw the castle corridors lit up like high noon, and Draco lying in Hermione's arms, silver blood trickling from the corner of his mouth.

Sometimes in dreams he remembered the ones he had killed: the guards, the men at Viktor's flat. He remembered the hot water he'd scalded his hands with afterward, but he could not remember their faces. He'd told Draco that once, a few days after he'd gotten the antidote but was still in the infirmary -- Snape had insisted, though Draco already looked like a completely different person. Draco had looked up at him, tousle-haired in pajamas. "Hell is murky," he said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Don't think about what you can't change, Potter."

"I *killed people*, Malfoy."

Draco's eyes were brilliant. "You're the savior of the wizarding world," he said. "Let someone else be its bloody conscience."

The stairs stopped rising; Harry was in front of Dumbledore's door. He pushed it open.

The moment he walked into the beautiful circular office, the chill in his stomach constricted into a hard lump of ice. Not just Dumbledore was there, but also Lupin and Snape, sitting in chairs on either side of the Headmaster's desk. Both looked somber. Draco sat opposite them, slouched into an armchair. He was expressionless, but the skin around his mouth looked pinched.

"Harry," said Dumbledore - the light from the window reflected off his glasses, making it impossible to read his eyes - "You'd better take a seat."

Harry didn't move. "What is it?" he said, rising panic sharpening his voice. "Is it Sirius? Has something happened to him?"

"No," Draco said, sitting forward, "it's nothing like that, Potter. Nobody's died. "

Harry looked at Snape. "It's not Malfoy's antidote, is it? It's not wearing off or something?"

"That would be impossible," said Snape dryly.

"Come on, Potter," said Draco. "It was an antidote, not a contaminated Ecstasy tablet. No one's dying, no one's dead, no one's even come down with a suspicious cough. Relax."

"That's true," said Lupin in his gentle voice. "I suggest you sit down, Harry, and listen to what the Headmaster has to tell you."

"For *you*?" Hermione echoed, staring. "Why would you want to take a love potion?"

Ginny raised her chin defiantly. "So I can fall in love with Seamus."

"Oh." Hermione could feel her righteous indignation trickling away. "Oh."

"So it's not like Imperius," Ginny went on, "because it's a spell I'd be casting on myself. And I would be aware of it, but it wouldn't matter, because it's not taking away my choice. This is my choice. I'm so close already - really, I'm almost in love with him, I just need a little *push*."

Hermione pushed her hair back out of her eyes, her mind working frantically. "Ginny," she said at last, as gently as she could, "what if you just aren't meant to be in love with Seamus? Love potions, they're *forever*. You won't be able to change your mind."

"I don't want to be able to change my mind."

"I'm sure he wouldn't want you to do this."

Ginny set her jaw. "Then don't tell him."

"I wasn't going to, but -- Ginny, you have to see that this idea is absolute madness. It'll illegal, it's immoral, it's dangerous --"

"You know why I came to you?" Ginny cut in, her voice shrill. "Do you?"

"Because I'm good at Potions?" asked Hermione, not without sharpness.

Ginny looked at her as if she'd said something unbelievably stupid. "No. I came to you because you're one of the few people that knows the truth. That knows about what happened to Seamus, and how it was my fault. That everything's my fault. How I left the *Liber-Damnatis* in the past, the way I brought Tom back -- Seamus wouldn't have been possessed by Tom if it wasn't for me."

"He wouldn't have been freed from Tom if it weren't for you, either," said Hermione. "You've done what you could to make it up to him. You saved him. You brought him back."

"Back to what?" Ginny said bitterly. "Nightmares, panic, torturing guilt -- he didn't kill those people but he feels like he did. It was more my fault than it was his but I'm not the one who remembers them dying, bleeding their lives out --"

"They were evil people, Ginny."

"That doesn't make it not murder," said Ginny, and Hermione did not reply because she could think of nothing to say. Ginny leaned forward, and the sunset light from the window cast a rosy glow over her pale skin and picked out the strands of gold in her coppery hair. "Only I know what Seamus has been through," she said. "Only I can help him, and I owe him that much. It's true that he wouldn't want me to martyr myself. But if I took a love potion, I wouldn't be. I'd be with him willingly, even happily."

Hermione leaned her head against the window; the glass felt cool against her hot cheek. "I have to ask you," she said, "Ginny, do you really want a potion to make you fall in love with Seamus, or just something to make you fall out of love with Draco Malfoy?"

Ginny looked for a moment as if Hermione had slapped her, but also as if she'd been expecting the slap. "I thought about that," she said finally. "But

as far as I know, for one thing, there's no magic to make you fall out of love with someone --"

"True," Hermione said, thinking of her own experience, how the love potion had worked on her like a medieval torture instrument, pulling her in half. However much it had made her love Draco, it hadn't made her love Harry any less. "It's like weight-loss or increased-intelligence spells. No one's figured out how to make them work."

"And even if they had, I wouldn't do it. Loving Draco, that's a part of me I wouldn't want to lose even if I could. I figure it'll fade over time, but at least I'll be able to remember it."

Hermione opened her mouth, then closed it again. Ginny, she thought, lived in a world that was ruled by her own internal logic. It made it hard to argue with her.

"Never mind," Ginny said abruptly. "I can tell you're not going to help me. I guess I didn't really think you would."

"It's a ridiculous plan. Surely you must see that."

"That's what you said at first about me going into the past to get the antidote for Draco -- and that worked."

Hermione was taken aback for a moment. *That was a desperate situation*, she wanted to say. But she could see that for Ginny, so was this. Draco would have died if Ginny hadn't gone back in time for him, but looking at Ginny's miserable face, at the violet shadows under her eyes, she couldn't bring herself to make light of her pain. "I'll think about it," she said.

"No you won't," said Ginny, "but I suppose it's nice of you to say so." She paused. "If I get the potion somewhere else, at least say you won't interfere."

"Ginny--"

"Never mind!" Ginny hopped down off the window sill, her small hands clenched. "Just forget I asked."

Hermione passed a hand over her eyes. "You do realize," she said, "if you succeeded in your crazy plan, it would be the end of you and Draco -- forever."

Ginny looked at her, eyes smoldering. "You ought to know better than anyone, Hermione," she said, "you can't lose something you never had."

And she ducked out through the curtain. Hermione heard her give a little gasp, as if she'd stubbed her toe on something, and then the pattering sound of her footsteps on the stairs overhead. Hermione covered her face with her hands, swimming in the cool darkness behind her closed eyelids. *I wasn't asking you for your sake, she thought, I was asking for Draco's. Forever is a long time, even for a Malfoy.*

When she emerged at last from behind the curtain, carrying her heavy book, she saw what had made Ginny gasp. Harry was standing in the middle of the common room, entirely silent and totally still, like a tree that had grown up suddenly out of the floor. Hermione bit back her own noise of surprise. "Harry? I thought you were ... "

Her voice trailed off as he turned to look at her. His face was blank, his eyes a much darker green than usual.

"Harry," she said, again, this time with real concern, and moved towards him. "Are you all right?"

He looked up. His eyes didn't seem to focus on her. "I was just in Dumbledore's office. He..."

"Yes? What did he say? Is everything all right? Is Sirius?"

He laughed shortly. "That was the first thing I asked him, too. But no, it's nothing like that. Everyone's fine." He raked his hair back from his forehead. "I shouldn't be making a big deal out of it. It's nothing."

"What's nothing?"

"I'll tell you later. I have to send a message to Sirius. Confirm what time we're supposed to be picked up tomorrow morning. He's sending the

carriages." He reached out a hand, caressed her cheek briefly. "I need some time to think, okay?"

"Okay." Hermione didn't want to push. She watched him duck out through the portrait hole with a flutter of nervousness in her stomach. Harry was much better about keeping things to himself than he had been once, but he still tended to disappear when he was unhappy, like an injured cat huddling under a porch.

It wouldn't hurt for me to do a bit of thinking myself, she realized. She'd been meaning to take a last walk down to the lake and it would probably be deserted now. She'd left the shawl Draco had given her for Christmas lying across the back of one of the armchairs. Setting down her book, she wrapped it around herself before following Harry out the portrait hole and down the tower stairs.

Sunset light turned the lake to a ruby mirror, streaking the sky with seashell pink and bloody scarlet. Grass whispered under Hermione's feet as she found the narrow path that wound around the lake. The air was chilly - as high up as Hogwarts was, spring came late and winter lingered, stretching its cold fingers into May and even the beginning of June.

Hermione remembered when the lake has been a frozen sheet of glass, the trees, stripped to bare branches, a skeleton orchard. She remembered standing on the front steps of the school, sugared with snow, waiting with Ginny for the boys to come back from Hogsmeade. And Draco walking up the hill, carrying Harry, who'd passed out from drinking too much, trying to forget how miserable he was. They'd all been miserable back then, for different reasons, everyone isolated in their little bubble of unhappiness. But things were better now.

Weren't they?

She tried to duck under a low-hanging tree branch, but knocked it with her shoulder, sending a shower of pink, apple-smelling petals down on her head. She raked them out of her hair impatiently.

"You needn't do that," said a slow voice from behind her. A voice that, if it hadn't been so cultivated and careful, she would have said sounded

almost slurred. She whirled around. Draco was lying on the verge of grass just at the edge of the lake, his boots nearly in the water, his silvery head pillowed on his right arm, bent under him. He was looking up at the sky meditatively, eyes half-slitted against the fading light. With his left hand, he described a lazy circle in the air. "It looks quite pretty, what with the petals being so pink and your hair being, all, you know..."

"Brown?" Hermione said with some asperity. "Are you drunk, Draco?"

He rolled over onto his stomach. Leaves were caught in his fine light hair. "Perhaps," he said, with great dignity. "Just a bit."

"Did you get into the Archenland wine? That was supposed to be a present for Sirius!"

"I may have had a mouthful," Draco admitted. "But I'm sure my future stepfather wouldn't begrudge me a bit of a tick off his bottle. He probably won't even notice."

Hermione put her hands on her hips. "You uncorked it, didn't you?"

Draco ruminated upon this before allowing that he must have done.

"Fine. You owe me ten Galleons - that was my share of the gift." She sank down on the grass near him and stared out at the lake. "Drinking before supper, that can't be a good sign."

"I prefer drinking during supper, but Dumbledore says it sets a bad example for the innocent first-years."

"Draco, this is ridiculous."

"Oh, I agree, those first years are far from innocent. The other day I came into the common room and Ermentrude Braddock and a bunch of the first-year boys had gotten into the Lifting Lemon Fizzes. We had to hook them all down with umbrellas and they still spent the next six hours high as kites, if you know what I mean."

"I'm not sure I do," said Hermione, digging into the cool grass with her fingertips. She found a blown dandelion and plucked it. "And that wasn't

what I meant when I said ridiculous. I meant this skulking around the lake business, moping and drinking. What on earth's the matter?"

"Nothing on earth," said Draco, looking up at her through his eyelashes, "specifically."

"Stop that," Hermione said crossly. "Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

"You know," Hermione said darkly. "Look, is this about Ginny?"

Draco sat up, raking grass out of his hair. His eyes were narrowed silver crescents. "No. It's not about Ginny."

"You know she's going to the wedding with Seamus -"

"Of course she is. I think she feels she has to keep a close eye on him in case he starts exhibiting signs of Evil."

Hermione giggled.

"What?"

"Oh, just thinking, all this work you've put in to reform yourself and Ginny goes and chucks you because you're not evil enough. Not as evil as Seamus, any road. Potentially evil, I should say," she corrected herself, with a flicker of conscience - Seamus was her friend too, after all, and what had happened to him was horrible.

"You're very amusing," Draco said darkly. "And she didn't chuck me. She was always with Captain Cardboard, really, if you think about it, except for that brief bit where he tried to kill everyone in England."

"He did not."

"Several of them, at least. Look, if she prefers a block-headed, mutton-footed cretinous vat of testosterone pudding to me, that is simply her bad taste."

"I think initially," mused Hermione, "she was looking for someone who was pretty much the opposite of you."

"Well, she succeeded. I'm clever, he's the mental equivalent of a mass of algae that's underperforming intellectually. I'm gorgeous, he's a hideous lump of --"

"That's hardly fair, Draco."

"Oh, I don't blame him for his looks. I blame his mother, the troll, and the bartender."

"I mean insulting him's hardly fair - it's not like he carried her off against her will. Anyway," she added, turning the dandelion over in her fingers, "I hear you're going to the wedding with Blaise."

He shrugged. "Why shouldn't I? Can you think of a reason? I like Blaise. She's a good friend."

She squinted at him. "So all this - business with Ginny and Blaise and whatnot - that's really not why you're drinking?"

"It's really not," he said firmly.

"All right. I'm sorry for jumping to conclusions." She held out the blown dandelion to him. "Make a wish?"



"I don't believe in wishes," he said, but he blew, and the airy white seed heads flew up into the air between them, ticking Hermione's nose.

"Your wish'll come true," she said, looking at the bare green stalk. She tossed it aside.

"I told you," he said, standing up, "I don't believe in wishes." He held out a hand to help her to her feet. "Shall we walk?"

"What's wrong with wishes?" She let him draw her to her feet and then slid her hands into her pockets; her fingers were cold. The narrow path that led between the trees and around the lake was darkening, still sequined here and there with fragments of light from the sinking sun. The

light lent a rosy cast to Draco's brown skin, caught the brighter threads of his silver hair and made them shine like metal.

"What do you wish?" he said, not looking at her, but through the trees, towards the lake.

I wish, she thought. I wish I knew what would happen to Harry and me after school ends. I wish I knew what would become of us. I wish I knew how to tell him what I know I have to say. I wish I didn't love him like I do. Sometimes I wish I had never met him at all. She said, "I wish I knew how to dance. I've been reading about how there are all this complicated fancy dances at a big wizarding wedding, and I've no idea what to do with my feet. I'll probably break Harry's toes."

He laughed. "That's easy enough." They had reached a small clearing; he turned and held his hands out. "I can help you with that."

Hermione didn't take her hands out of her pockets. "I thought you didn't like to dance?"

"I don't. But I know how."

"Are you good at it?" she asked teasingly. The cold wind off the lake was making her shiver.

"My father beat me until I perfected my skill, so yes."

Hermione gasped. "Draco, I'm -" she began, and saw that he was grinning. "You're such a bastard," she said.

"Come on." This time she let him take her hands. His were warm, counteracting her chill, though she still felt like shivering. "Put your feet there and there - like that - and watch what I do. Follow me."

He was a good dancer - which didn't surprise her, he wouldn't say he was good at something if he wasn't. It was easy to follow him, the grass whispering under their feet, the wind blowing her hair across her face, the trees rustling in their own secret tree-language all around them. She thought they sounded surprised. Disapproving, maybe. Still, it was good to have warm hands in her cold ones and she found that her cheeks were burning, the cold air a welcome icy kiss against them.

"This is the hard part," he said, and turned her gently so that her back was to him, his hands on her shoulders. She could feel the pressure of his fingers through the thin cotton of her sweater. The fingertips of his left hand rested lightly against her bare neck. "Reach one hand behind you -"

She spun around so that she was facing him. "Enough," she said. "Tell me why you were drinking. Or I'm done dancing with you."

Light sparked in the gray depths of his eyes. "Why do you want to know so badly?"

"Because I saw Harry before I came down here, and he was acting like someone had hit him with a tree trunk. Is the same thing bothering you that was bothering him?"

The light in his eyes darkened. "He was - but he seemed so calm in Dumbledore's office. I wouldn't have thought..."

"Can't you tell?" Her voice came out sharper than she'd meant it to. "How he's feeling, I mean."

He made a noise like a groan under his breath, and let go of her. He sank down onto a boulder and stared out at the lake blankly.

"Oh, not this again." She sat down beside him, looking up at him with a mixture of irritation and sympathy. "What is it? What did Dumbledore say to you?"

Draco looked at her sideways, a wry, knowing look that held more than a hint of self-depreciation. It was a look that said that he knew perfectly well that she'd never let up until he told her the truth, and that part of him was annoyed by this, while another part was grateful. He said, "You remember the Polyjuice Potion that Harry and I took, that turned us into each other?"

"I think I can cast my mind back that far," she said dryly.

"You remember how it lasted much longer than it was supposed to?"

"Right. I thought Dumbledore said that was because of your Magid powers?"

He didn't answer this directly. "And you remember how we've guessed that its ongoing effects led to - to our ability to speak to each other silently? The feeling of each other's feelings, that sort of thing."

"The telepathic bond."

"Yes. That." He shifted slightly, bending to pick up a twig, from which he began methodically stripping the leaves. "Well, as it turns out, Dumbledore wasn't quite truthful with us."

"Wasn't quite truthful - what do you mean? Did he *lie*?"

Draco chuckled softly. "Sometimes I wonder if the old bastard ever tells the truth." He stripped another few leaves from the twig; sap oozed like blood from the torn patches on the bark. "Well, apparently they - that's Dumbledore and Snape - didn't quite trust our Magid powers to do the job, so they added a little something extra to the mix, and *voilà*. An instant telepathically-bonded, Voldemort-fighting unbeatable team."

"But...why?" Hermione was bewildered. "Why you? Why did they want that?"

"Well, it had to be someone who was a Magid, would be my guess, so it couldn't have been you or the Weasel. I think they considered Fleur but dropped her as a candidate - too flighty. I'm the only other Magid in the school."

"I still don't understand."

"I think they wanted someone who'd follow Harry anywhere, who'd die for him, protect him to the end. He's the priceless resource, you know. Or he was. That prophecy. No one else could have killed Voldemort. And they knew his nature, of course. How likely he'd be to cut himself free to face the final battle by himself, not wanting to endanger his friends. So they created someone he couldn't cut himself free of."

"But you - you hated each other. Despised each other. You're the last person Harry would have -"

"It doesn't matter," Draco said, in an odd, dead sort of voice. "After what they did to us, we couldn't have hated each other. When they realized I

was the only available, acceptable Magid in the school, it must have presented something of a knotty problem for them. After all, my training - with weaponry, with the Dark Arts - must have seemed extremely useful, but at the same time, how could they be sure I'd stay loyal?" Draco tossed the twig, now thoroughly denuded, into the lake. It landed with a gentle splash. "They had to make sure that Harry's safety would be as important to me as my own. They had to tie us together. Indissolubly."

"So they made you one soul," said Hermione, remembering something, "in two bodies."

"Not for much longer," said Draco.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it was an experiment, and it worked wildly better than they'd hoped. But if it hadn't well, Snape would always have been standing by with the antidote, to put us back the way we were before."

"Back the way you were before? Well, but it did work. If what they wanted was to create an inseparable team - to keep Harry from going it alone - they did that. I mean, just because the bond between you was magically initiated, so to speak, doesn't mean it's any less real."

"Perhaps not," said Draco, "but it will be less real next week when Snape gives us the antidote."

Hermione stared at him. Her face felt stiff, and not just because of the cold. "The what?"

"There's an antidote. Some sort of second potion to counteract the effects of the first one. So that'll be it. No more funny mind-speak. Back to normal for both of us."

"But I - is that what you want?"

"I don't think it matters what I want. Dumbledore hinted that they'd hardly expected the original potion to have as intense an effect as it did. He seemed to feel that since the eventual effects couldn't be guessed at, the safest thing to do was go ahead with the antidote. He said they'd only

waited until now because they didn't want to disrupt the rest of our school year."

"What did Harry say?"

"He said, 'All right, fine, when do we do it?'"

Hermione found this hard to believe. "Wasn't he angry?"

Draco picked up another twig and ripped out a few leaves. "Maybe. I think he's used to having the needs of the wizarding world run his life for him. Hell, maybe I am, too."

"They can't make you do it, Draco. You could tell them --"

He turned his head and looked at her, his eyes coolly disdainful. "You really think," he said, "that I'd refuse the antidote if that wasn't what Harry wanted?"

"I'm sure it isn't what he wants."

"Are you?" said Draco meditatively.

Hermione didn't answer.

"I wouldn't blame him if it was. He must be tired of it by now."

"Tired of what?" she said.

Draco stood up. The sun had set completely now, but the lake seemed to have gathered the remains of the daylight into itself and shone like a polished mirror. "All of us."

Harry isn't tired of me, some small voice in the back of Hermione's head protested. But she said nothing. Draco, despite all his evasions and deflections, had an unerring instinct for the unpleasant truth at the heart of the matter, at least when it pertained to other people. She thought of the unanswered questions between herself and Harry, and shivered again.

"Do you know what he's doing when school ends?" she asked abruptly.

Draco turned to look at her, and she saw the faint surprised turn of his mouth, though his voice was even when he spoke. "No. I don't."

"Do you know what *you're* doing?"

"I think I'll travel," he said, easily -- too easily, she thought. That polished, casual voice sounded false to her. "Nearly dying made me think about all the things I haven't done. I think I'd like to see the world, maybe for a year or so."

"Oh." A pang shot through her. "Surely there are other things you haven't done that are a bit closer to home?"

The curl at the corner of his mouth turned wicked. "What exactly are you suggesting?"

"Oh, forget it," she said with a glare, wrapping her arms around herself for warmth.

Now he was all contrition. "You're shivering. Should we go back?"

Hermione half-closed her eyes. Through her narrowed lids she could see the crescent of silver metal that was the lake, the budding choirs of branches, wet black and dark green studded with the shards of new pink flowers, the saturated-cobalt of the sky overhead -- and she realized, with a jolt, that she would never again sit by this lake at twilight, never again see the sun set over the Forbidden Forest, setting the tops of the trees ablaze. She had thought she would pass this moment with Harry, but things didn't always turn out the way you had planned them. "We can't ever go back," she said, "not really."

Draco raised an eyebrow. The wind off the lake blew a veil of silver across his eyes. "What did you say?"

Hermione stood up, brushing leaves and damp petals from her skirt. "Oh," she said. "It was nothing."

Ginny's stomach growled. She had gone back to lying in bed with the hangings drawn, though, she thought, if she'd had some foresight she

would have brought a tin of biscuits or at least some crisps to gnaw on, since she had no intention of going down to supper. The last night before the end of the year in the Great Hall always had a festive atmosphere, and she wanted no part of it. Nor, tonight, did she care who won the Quidditch Cup or had the most house points.

She pressed her hands against her stomach and sighed. She always forgot to eat when she was unhappy, and if she wasn't careful she'd go back down to skin and bones the way she had been in January. Not that she wanted to be enormous, but she always looked better with a bit of a chest and all her ribs not sticking out like a xylophone.

Her mind wandered to the dress folded on top of the belongings in her trunk, waiting to be worn at the wedding. Blaise had helped her pick it out -- yard on yard of scarlet satin, glowing like the hot tip of a poker. Ginny had said that she'd always thought redheads weren't supposed to wear red themselves, and Blaise had told her not to believe everything you read in *Teen Witch Weekly*.

Blaise had meant to make her laugh, but *Teen Witch Weekly* just reminded her of Draco, of sitting on that rock with him near Charlie's dragon camp, Draco telling her about his dreams, but so wryly that she'd thought he was joking. She wondered if that was when it had happened, when thinking of him had become like a fire that burned away other thoughts. And she wondered why it had taken her so long to get tired of it, of being a question without an answer, a single, sounding note without a reply.

The hangings around her bed rustled. She sat up quickly, seizing one of her pillows and holding it across herself. "Who is it? Elizabeth?"

"No." A hand came through the hangings, yanked them apart. It was Hermione. There were leaves in her hair. She looked flushed. "It's me."

"Oh." Ginny hugged the pillow. "Come to lecture me a bit more about my terrible judgment and bad ideas?"

"No." Hermione thrust her other hand through the hangings; there was a stoppered silver flask in it, with a design of snakes around the top. "I came to give you this."

Ginny actually felt her eyes pop wide. "What is that?"

Hermione frowned. "There's only a sip in there, but that's all you need. Just remember, the effect lasts for half an hour and applies to the first person you see, so be damn sure it's Seamus. Only death can reverse the effects, and I seriously don't want to go through that again." She thrust the flask forward. "Take it."

Ginny didn't need to be told twice. She snatched it out of Hermione's hand. "This is really love potion?"

"It's really love potion," said Hermione.

"You made it so fast..."

Hermione's eyes sparked briefly. "I know where to get it. And I borrowed the flask, kind of without telling someone, so keep it hidden."

"I didn't think you were going to..."

"Yes, well, neither did I," Hermione said shortly. "Don't make me sorry I did."

She yanked the hangings closed, leaving Ginny sitting speechless and alone, in the dark.

Which was how Ginny came to be sitting on the plushly upholstered seat of a Malfoy carriage pulled up in front of the school, across from Seamus, with the silver flask of love potion held carefully on her lap. If she looked out the window, she could see the crowd of students spilling down the steps and across the lawn, Dumbledore and McGonagall and the other professors standing framed in the great doorway, waving and smiling.

Harry and Hermione and Ron and even Draco were in among the thick of the students, exchanging good-byes, and Ginny supposed she could have joined them, but she didn't feel much like it. After all, she was coming back next year. She didn't have to bid farewell the way they did.

Hermione and Ron and Harry had spent the morning ranging over the castle, saying good-bye to the places they'd known and loved, or in some

cases, such as the Potions dungeon, known and hated. Ginny supposed she could understand how they must feel, but mostly she felt a dull impatience with the whole business. She felt that it was worse to come back to school with all your important friends gone than not to be able to come back at all, but she wasn't sure she'd be able to convince them of that. They were deep in the grip of the sort of nostalgia only felt by people who hadn't actually started missing a place yet. If they sold Hogwarts souvenir tea-towels, Ginny suspected, they'd all be waving them like flags.

Seamus didn't seem to share their feelings. He was slouched against the bench seat opposite her, his face in shadow, his eyes half-closed as if he were exhausted. He looked up, as if feeling her gaze on him, and opened his eyes. In the darkness, they were a very dark blue, nearly violet.

"Are you feeling better?" he asked.

She'd nearly forgotten that the night before she'd sent him an owl saying she was too ill to come to supper. "Oh. Yes, much better today."

He smiled. When he smiled, he looked like himself again. He leaned forward a little. "Are you looking forward to the wedding?"

"Yes," Ginny said, almost surprised that this was true. "I think it'll be fun."

"And afterwards..."

"We're going to your parents' house in Ireland. I know." She tried not to sound impatient.

"I haven't seen them since -- since everything that happened." He took a deep breath. "I need you there."

"I'll be there," she said.

"Unless..." He reached out a hand, took her fingers and squeezed them. "Unless it'll make you unhappy. All I want is for you to be happy," he added. "That's all I ever wanted."

Ginny let her fingers lie in his, and with her free hand squeezed the neck of the silver flask tightly. "Don't worry," she said. "I will be."

DRACO VERITAS : EPILOGUE

PART TWO: LOVE NEVER ENDS

“So,” Draco said, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, “we have a three-hour ride’s worth of time to kill and really thick curtains on the windows. What do you say we —“

Blaise, who had been peering past one of the thick curtains at carriage beside them, which was carrying Harry, Hermione and Ron, dropped the curtain back in place and looked at him severely. “I am not going to get off with you, Draco. Oh, and I don’t care how pissed I get at the party, I’m not going to get off with you then, either. We’re going as friends.”

Draco smiled at her, a slight upward curving of his lips. “I don’t suppose I could play the ‘I nearly died’ card?”

“Only if I can play the ‘I don’t want to get nearly pregnant’ card.”

He leaned back, stretching his long legs out so that his feet rested on the seat beside her. “You weren’t always so prudish,” he lamented.

“Remember that time in the Quidditch shed after we beat Hufflepuff?”

“Which time after we beat Hufflepuff?” she muttered.

“All three, as I recall,” said Draco. “And do you remember —“

Blaise threw a hand up. “That’s enough! Really, Draco, if I’d known you were going to act like this, I wouldn’t have agreed to go to the wedding with you at all.”

“Yes, you would,” said Draco. “The only thing you like better than expensive parties is attending them with the best-looking guy in the room. I can provide you with both. And how’s the dress?”

She smiled as if she couldn’t help it. “Beautiful. I’ve never seen a red like that.” She peered at him more closely through the dimness in the carriage. If it hadn’t been for the length of her hair, in the shadow light, she could almost have been Ginny. He wondered if that was why she had cut it. “I can’t help wondering…”

“Wondering what?”

“If all this is about Ginny. Bringing me to the wedding, the dress…”

He raised his eyebrows at her.

“If you’re trying to make her jealous,” said Blaise, “it won’t work.”

“So the moment I’m not a bastard to you any more, you assume you’re a cog in the turning wheels of my grand and evil plans? Perhaps you should work on your self-esteem issues a bit, darling Blaise.”

She looked at him steadily. “You didn’t want me when you had me and you don’t want me now.”

“I —“

“You don’t *love* me now,” she said firmly.

“This new laser-like insight of yours is very annoying,” Draco said, taking his feet off the cushions. “So what do *you* suggest we do to while away the

hours? I'm sure there are a variety of wholesome options freely available to us."

"We could talk," she said. "We were always pretty good at talking. We could tell stories, jokes — "

"So how many Hufflepuffs does it take to screw in a light bulb?" Draco inquired, examining his flawless nails for possible defects.

"A what?"

"A light bulb. It's a Muggle illuminating device. You have to screw it in to make it work. Look, just say you don't know."

"I don't know."

"All of them," he said, "one to do it, and the rest to offer moral support. How many Gryffindors does it take to screw it a lightbulb?"

She pushed the curtain open again and stared out the window. "I have no idea."

"Three. Harry to do it, and Hermione and Ron to stand around telling him to be careful. Now, how many Slytherins does it take to screw in a lightbulb?"

"Oh, for God's sake. I don't know."

"None," he said, reaching past her and yanking the curtains closed. She felt his hard grip on her arm, then his fingers tracing the curve of her wrist. She could smell the spicy scent of his cologne. "We like it in the dark."

The sun was setting as they arrived at the Manor, and Ginny could see that Narcissa had decorated it for the wedding with thousands of hovering light charms. They lit the Manor like a fairytale castle, from the gardens bound in ropes of light to the high turreted towers. She shivered a little, looking up as she stepped out of the carriage, remembering how Lucius had trapped Draco and Harry on one of those very towers, on a bitter winter night with the snow sifting down like iced sugar.

Seamus, standing beside her on the steps, looked at her curiously. “What are you thinking?”

She was spared answering by the rattling crunch of gravel as the other carriages pulled up behind theirs. Harry, Hermione and Ron spilled from the first one, and Blaise and Draco — looking a little disheveled — emerged from the second. Draco offered Blaise his hand to help her down from the carriage, but she ignored it, and stalked past him to Ginny. Her cheeks were bright red. “It was really hot in our carriage,” she said, fanning herself with a ringed hand. “Was it really hot in your carriage?”

“Not really,” said Ginny.

Seamus just stared at Blaise. She frowned. “You know, that thousand-yard Stare of Evil of yours is getting really annoying,” she said. “I just thought you should know.”

“Could be that your cooling charms were broken,” Seamus offered, still staring.

“Oh, for goodness sakes,” said Blaise. “Now you’re just staring at me like that on purpose, aren’t you?”

“Maybe,” said Seamus.

The side of Ginny's mouth twitched, much to her delight. It was rare that Seamus made her smile involuntarily.

"You're here!" a delighted shout echoed from the top of the stairs. It was Narcissa, in chic fitted spring robes of a sort of frothy pink shade that made Ginny instantly jealous. She'd always wanted to be able to wear pink, but it just made her look sunburned. Sirius and Remus appeared behind Narcissa, both grinning their welcomes, and the next few minutes were a flurry of greetings and hugs, offers of refreshment, and luggage being floated up to the appropriate rooms.

Ginny found herself in a nicely appointed guest room, clearly decorated with some care by Narcissa in the time since Lucius had been gone. The yellow walls and pale green duvet made Ginny feel as if she were staying inside a flower, but they were very un-Malfoy. She slipped off her traveling robes and put on a light dress and sandals. She caught a glimpse of herself as she passed the mirror and turned her face away; she looked so *tired*. Sliding her hand into the pocket of her robes where they lay on the bed, she took out the flask of love potion and set it carefully on the bedside table. It glittered in the light that spilled from the window like a piece of jewelry, bright as all false promises.

Sirius had decided he wanted a small stag night this time, just a few close friends at the Cold Christmas Inn. He'd invited Remus and Harry and Draco of course, and Ron and the rest of the Weasley boys, though Ron was the only one who came as the rest of them hadn't planned to arrive at the Manor until the next day. He had also invited Seamus as a sort of gesture of pity for all he'd been through — Seamus, however, declined to come, much to Draco's relief.

They sat at a long wooden plank table and drank ale and elm wine, and Lupin told embarrassing stories about Sirius' past and the time he'd asked two different girls to meet him on the same night in the prefect's bathroom, forgetting he had the plans with the first one when he asked the second, and they'd been so disgusted with him that they'd tied him up

stark naked with Toothflossing Stringmints and left him there for the house-elves to find.

“I was not naked,” corrected Sirius, as the table erupted in laughter. “I was wearing socks.”

“*Three* socks, if I remember correctly,” Lupin said.

“I have no idea what you mean,” said Sirius. “None.”

“Those girls must have been very, very angry at you,” said Harry, impressed. He had a certain fear of very, very angry women himself; both Hermione and Ginny were terrifying when enraged.

“Hell hath no fury like a woman invited to an impromptu threesome in the prefect’s bathroom — not that this has ever happened to me,” said Draco. “I deplore sloppy scheduling.”

“I’m sensing a theme here,” said Ron.

“Is it ‘Enchantment under the Sea?’” Draco inquired.

Ron ignored this. “It’s women,” he said. “Women do us wrong.”

“Ah,” said Draco. “And now the much-anticipated misogynistic ranting part of the evening.” He motioned the waiter over and ordered several vodka shots in quick succession. When the waiter departed, he turned back to the table and gestured grandly towards Ron, who was glaring. “Pray continue.”

“Women,” said Ron again, with that slight tremble of the eyebrow that meant he was very drunk indeed. “They use you. They lie to you. They leave you twitching alone in the darkness, choking on your own blood after they’ve plunged a dagger into your chest —“

“Oh, dear,” said Lupin. “You know, honestly, the worst thing a woman ever did to me was nickname me ‘Fluffy’ after she found out I was a werewolf.”

“Women *are* trouble,” Sirius agreed sententiously, staring at the bottom of his empty tankard.

“Don’t say that!” said Harry. “You’re the one getting married tomorrow.”

“To my mother, I might add,” Draco pointed out, finishing his drink and reaching for another. He didn’t seem drunk yet, not to Harry at least, though there was a certain glitter to his eyes that indicated that he might be getting there.

“All except my fiancée, of course,” Sirius amended. “She is a jewel.”

“Just wait,” said Ron, jabbing a finger in Sirius’ general direction. “She’ll turn out to be a demon, or she’ll dump you for Professor Lupin —“

“Don’t drag me into this,” protested Remus.

“ — or you’ll find out she’s Polyjuiced herself into your ideal woman in an attempt to get you to commit evil acts on her behalf, or she’ll leave you for —”

“Good Lord,” said Sirius, staring at Ron, “you have had a bad time of it, haven’t you? At your age, the biggest trouble I had with girls was keeping their names straight.”

Ron didn’t say anything. He had put his head down on the table and begun snoring.

“One down,” said Harry, setting his empty butterbeer glass down on top of Ron’s head, where it balanced precariously.

“Very attractive,” said a deep voice above them. “It does add a certain *je ne sais quoi*.”

Harry looked up, and blinked in surprise. It was [Snape](#), looking as batlike as ever with his pale face and sweeping black robes. Greasy dark hair hung heavily to his shoulders.

“I would have said a *souçon de gentillesse*,” said Draco mildly. He was on his fifth martini. “But what do I know.”

“Greetings, Severus. Did you come to offer your congratulations to Padfoot?” asked Lupin politely.

“What Remus means to say,” said Sirius, knocking back another swallow of firewhiskey, “is what *are* you doing here, Snape? Other than lurking in a foreboding manner, of course. I hope you’re not going to pull one of those Wedding-Guest-who-stoppeth-one-of-three morbid acts tomorrow. Not that you’re precisely a wedding guest, since I don’t think I invited you.”

“That wasn’t quite what I meant,” said Lupin. “Actually.”

“My presence here is coincidental,” said Snape. “I secured lodging at the Cold Christmas Inn last night, with an eye towards being here the day after tomorrow, at Dumbledore’s request. In the interim period, I had intended to get in a bit of fishing.”

“At Dumbledore’s request?” said Draco, looking up from his drink.

“Yes,” said Snape, looking down his long nose at his favorite student. “He wanted me with him when he reversed the Polyjuice Potion’s effect on you and Potter.”

“Oh, right,” said Draco, with a marked lack of enthusiasm. “That.”

“Indeed, that.” Snape turned to Sirius. “In the meantime, I extend my congratulations to you on the eve of your happy event.”

Sirius choked on his drink. “Really?”

“Yes,” said Snape emotionlessly. “I have always liked Narcissa. If marrying you will make her happy, then my delight is boundless.”

Sirius squinted at him. “It sure looks boundless.”

“We all show happiness in our own way, Padfoot,” Lupin remonstrated.

“A good ninety percent of us show it by cracking a smile, at least,” said Sirius. “It’s not like I asked him to burst into song.”

“I could sing, if you like,” said Snape.

Sirius stared at him, perplexed. “What?”

“Are you implying that I can’t sing?” Snape asked.

“I’m not sure he’s implying it,” said Harry. “I think he’s just saying it.”

“I have been told I have a very nice voice,” said Snape, ruminatively.

“It’s true,” Draco said. “Especially with a quartet of house-elves for backup.”

Snape smiled thinly, then turned and walked away. Sirius watched him go with his eyebrows raised all the way up his forehead. “He’s mad,” he said, to no one in particular. “As a hatter.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Lupin. “I think he’s trying to bury the hatchet.”

“What’s so mad about hatters, anyway?” Draco asked, finally feeling the effects of five martinis and a bottle of wine. “I have a hatter in London. I quite like him. He’s never seemed particularly mad to me. I mean, no more than most grown-ups.”

Ron sat up, sending the mug that had been balanced on his head careening to the floor, where it smashed into pieces, splattering Harry’s shoes with remnants of butterbeer. Ron didn’t seem to notice. “Hatters used to use mercury compounds to finish the fur trim on hats. Hatters working in poorly ventilated workrooms would absorb the mercury into their blood. Over time, they would exhibit signs of mercury poisoning, including brain damage leading to psychosis. Thus the phrase, ‘mad as a hatter.’”

Everyone stared at him.

Ron shrugged. “I remember it from some Muggle history book of my dad’s,” he said. “So what?”

Harry slid a half-full mug of butterbeer across the table. “Drink more, Ron.”

Ron reached for the mug, but was arrested mid-motion by the sound of a familiar voice echoing through the room. He turned slowly, as they all did, to see Snape standing up at the small podium, surrounded by the group of musicians who not long ago had been playing “Greensleeves.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said Snape. He must have done some sort of Sonorus charm, Harry thought, because his voice was positively echoing off the roofbeams. “I would like to sing a song in honor of a friend of mine, who is getting married tomorrow. That man, right there—“ and he pointed at Sirius—“is not my friend. In fact, he is something of a tosser. But he is *marrying* someone I rather like, so in honor of the occasion, I’d like to sing the classic stag night ballad, ‘I May Be A Tiny Chimney Sweep, But I’ve Got An Enormous Broom.’”

“Crikey,” said Draco. “I didn’t think that song actually *existed*.”

“Oh,” said Lupin. “But it does.”

Sirius said nothing. He was busy staring with his mouth open at Snape, who opened his mouth just as the band started up and sang, in a robust baritone:

Oohhhhhh,

*The chimneys were dirty at Mrs. McFry's
And I'll grant they were worse down at Molly O'Clue's
But the chimney sweep said, with a gleam in his eye*

"I've got a great tool here for cleaning the fluuuuuuues..."

*"For I may be a tiny chimney sweep
With a tiny grimy face
But I'm carrying a broom that makes strong girls weep,
Won't you let me up, up, up your fireplace?"*

*A chimney sweep's job can be boring and dirty,
A chimney sweep ain't drawn the best lot in life
But who else could manage, without getting flirty,
To clean out the smokestack on the mayor's young wife?*

*Who else but the tiny chimney sweep
With his tiny grimy face?
For he's carrying a broom that makes strong girls weep
Won't you let him up, up, up your fireplace?*

*"My boy," said the mother, "You're smart as a whip,
But don't be a lawyer or doctor, my son;
Take the job of your father, that worthy young rip,
For the chimney sweep's job is a sight more fun!"*

*"For he might ha' been a tiny chimney sweep
With a tiny grimy face
But he carried a broom that near made me weep
So I let him up, up, up me fireplace!"*

*I met a young lady in Lower-South-Waine
And I asked why the roofs there were covered in grime
"Is your chimneysweep ill?" but she laughed and explained
"He never cleans chimneys, but his service? Sublime!"*

*"For he may be a tiny chimney sweep
With a tiny grimy face
But he's carrying a broom that makes the whole town weep
So we let him up, up, up the fireplace!"*

*Said the young maiden fair to the chimney sweep bold,
"The clogged chimney's making it warm in the room!"
But the chimney sweep grinned, showing teeth made of gold,*

And said "That ain't the clogging, dear, that's just me broom!"

*"For I may be a tiny chimney sweep
With a tiny grimy face
But I'm carrying a broom that makes strong girls weep,
Won't you let me up, up, up your fireplace?"*

*Our sweep tied the knot on a fair April day,
His wedding, 'tis true, was the best of our lives--
A child nearly drowned when they tossed the bouquet--
There were sixty-nine priests there, and seventy wives!*

*For he might ha' been a tiny chimney sweep
With a tiny grimy face
But he carried a broom that made all the girls weep,
So they let him up, up, up the fireplace!*

*"I've grown old," sighed the sweep, "and my wits have got loose,
I can scarce tell me da from me poor younger brother.
But at least for the wife I've got one great excuse,
For at my age, I can't tell one bed from another!"*

*"For I may be a tiny chimney sweep
With a tiny grimy face
But I'm carrying a broom that makes strong girls weep,
Won't you let me up, up, up your fireplace?"*

*'Twas a tragical day, when our sweep passed away
(He fell down a chimney and busted his head)
And the ladies of our town all wept with dismay
Until walking to the coffin, a young urchin said:*

*"Since I was a lad, this man trained me to sweep
A good man, a kind man, as you'll all agree
But I'm telling you now, my dear friends, please don't weep,
For his trade will be continued, girls--he left his broom to me!"*

*"For I may be a tiny chimney sweep
With a tiny grimy face*

*But I'm carrying a broom that makes strong girls weep,
Won't you let me up, up, up your fireplace?"*

*So raise up your glasses, yes, raise high your drinks,
I'll buy you a round and we'll drink it down deep
Let's have us a toast 'fore we catch forty winks,
May we all be as lucky as our little chimney sweep!*

When Snape was finished singing, he bowed coldly and departed the stage. Sirius watched him go, his mouth hanging open.

“When you said he wanted to bury the hatchet,” he said finally, “I didn’t realize you meant *in my eardrums.*”

“I didn’t think he was all that bad,” said Harry.

Sirius was still shaking his head. “I... I just never...”

Lupin chortled into his beer. “Now you have.”

It always amazed Harry that even in summer, the rooms in Malfoy Manor were chilly to the point of arctic. He'd curled himself up under the heavy duvet in his bedroom (the original duvet had been black, patterned with silver snakes, but he'd kept having nightmares that the snakes had come to life and were slithering on him. Eventually Hermione had given him a spare duvet of hers. It was yellow and sprigged with blue flowers. Harry supposed that in the end, he just wasn't a snaky kind of bloke) when there was a series of sharp knocks on the door. Swearing, Harry slid out of bed.

His swearing increased in volume as his bare feet hit the cold stone floor. Half-hopping and swearing as he went, he made his way across the enormous room and threw open the door. Whoever was on the other side, he determined, would get a piece of his mind.

It was Draco, wearing a pair of black jeans and black pullover, looking a bit like Tom Cruise in *Mission: Impossible*, if Tom Cruise had had white-blond hair and a surprised look on his face. "Potter," Draco said, "was that you swearing a blue streak just now? Where'd you learn that language? I didn't even know you could do that with a pair of —"

"It's two in the morning, Malfoy," Harry interrupted, "what the hell do you want?"

"—although the six feet of surgical tubing was a nice touch, I thought. I must be rubbing off on you." He peered past Harry into the bedroom and shuddered. "Or not. Where'd you find that duvet? Hell's interior decorating supply shop?"

"Hermione," said Harry, shortly. "Speaking of which, if you came by here to whinge about our love lives some more, I am tired of talking about girls. It never gets me anywhere and afterward I just feel sorry for myself."

"Perhaps I should try to be more supportive," Draco ruminated.

"Considering that the last time we talked, you told me I was a whinging, pie-faced newt, and that girls don't like complainers—"

"Well, they don't."

"If you're such an expert, why's your love life such a complete balls-up then?" Harry asked, reasonably enough.

Draco ignored this. "Look, are you ready to go, or not?"

Harry banged his head gently against the doorframe. "No. I am not going anywhere with you, Malfoy. Tomorrow's the wedding and I need my sleep. I've got toasts to give, receiving lines to stand in, embarrassing formalwear to struggle into—"

Despite his best intentions, within ten minutes Harry found himself, dressed and with his glasses firmly planted on his nose, standing in the corridor with Draco — who, Harry now saw, had brought both their

broomsticks and propped them against the wall. Draco was also fidgeting, which was generally a sign that he had something personal to say and didn't want to say it. Harry squinted at him with dawning suspicion. "So," he said. "What's all this about, anyway?"

"It's —"

"And don't say your love life, or I'll kill you with a rock."

"—not my love life, you squinty-eyed pillock. It's my Epicyclical Charms."

This was so unexpected that Harry rocked back on his heels. "What?"

Draco pulled down the neck of his sweater just far enough so that Harry could see a double row of gold chains glinting against the light skin.

"These. It's a bloody nuisance, carrying them around like this, never being able to take them off—"

"I could carry one," Harry offered quietly.

"No," Draco said, without anger or indecision. "That's not what I want."

"Then—" Harry felt an absurd stab of something like jealousy, and fought it down. "You want to take it to someone else? You want me to come with you?"

"I want you to come with me," Draco said. He took one of the brooms and held it out to Harry.

"You can't give it to just anyone," Harry said, taking the broom. "It's got to be someone you really trust."

"I know," Draco said. He had picked up his own broom and was heading for the window at the end of the hall. It was open, curtains blowing gently in the soft spring air. He leaned out.

Harry leaned out next to him. "Someone who—"

"Loves me?" Draco looked at Harry with sideways amusement. "Don't be such a girl, Potter. Come on. I'll race you." He slid with agility onto the

window ledge, broom in hand, poised for flight.

Annoyed, Harry crawled onto the ledge beside him. "I could race you if —"

"Race me? A splendid idea."

"—I knew where we were going. Who are we taking these Charms to?"

Draco's look was secretive, amusement glinting under his fair lashes. "Someone I trust — endlessly," he said, and dropped from the windowsill, tumbling into the night air on his broomstick with the reckless speed of an angel eager to begin the long fall from heaven.

Following Draco on his broomstick through the tangled woods around Malfoy Manor would have been impossible for a flyer less brilliant than Harry, and was difficult even for him. Draco knew the woods intimately, knew every tree and branch, and he whipped between them like a flickering spark of silver in the dark.



Harry knew his friend wasn't trying to lose him among the jagged branches, it was just that Draco loved to fly, he always had, and now that he was well enough again to fly as he wanted to, he was determined to do it with style. He spun upside-down several times on his broom as they

shot out of the forest and onto the barren tract of land that bordered it to the east. To the west, the Manor glittered, bound with lights like a fairytale castle. To the east, a great blackness spread like a stain across the bare ground. It was only when Draco angled his broom down, and Harry followed, that Harry realized that the darkness was the Bottomless Pit.

“Malfoy —” Harry cried in alarm, seizing his friend’s arm and forcing it back down to his side. “What the hell are you doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?” Draco’s eyes were slitted against the wind and Harry couldn’t tell his mood at all: happiness, exultation, despair, resignation, boredom? He could have reached to touch Draco’s mind, but it seemed, in the face of their meeting with Dumbledore in two days, like more of a painful reminder than either of them needed. “I’m tossing my Charms into the Bottomless Pit.”

“But —”

“But what? It’s an ideal solution. They’ll fall forever, never hitting bottom, never breaking. No one will ever find them again.”

“I don’t understand,” Harry said. “Why are you doing this *now*?”

“I don’t want to carry them any more,” said Draco, the glitter of his narrowed eyes just visible through his lashes.

“I told you I would,” Harry said.

The wind had died down. Draco opened his eyes and his clear, searching look was free of sarcasm. "I would put my life in your hands without a second thought if it were only myself I cared about."

“I don’t mind the risk,” said Harry. “I don’t mind the responsibility.”

Draco looked away from him, towards the endless blackness of the Pit. "Harry," he said. "You've never minded risk or responsibility. You've never been allowed to mind them. They've always been your whole life. But what kind of friend would I be if now that you might finally be free of all that, I placed yet another burden on you?"

"Friendship isn't a burden," said Harry.

"Most friends don't hold each other's lives in their hands."

"We aren't most people," said Harry, but he could see from Draco's expression that the other boy's mind was made up. "All right," he said, releasing Draco's arm. "If that's what you really want."

"It's what I want," said Draco, and he went lightly to the edge of the Pit, and looked down into it. Harry joined him at the edge and for a moment they looked down together into the yawning emptiness. It was like the sea in a way, Harry thought, the moonlight penetrating only the first layers of its atmosphere, suffusing them with a milky glow. Below that glow was impenetrable darkness. He remembered falling into it himself, his hand slipping out of Hermione's, and the sensation of spinning away into nothingness.

Beside him, Draco took a deep breath and raised his hand, the Epicyclical Charms dangling from his fingers. They shimmered like tears in the moonlight. One, Harry thought, had been made in fear and bitterness, and the other had been made in fear and love, but either could be used to control Draco, to break him or kill him, and even though when he had held those charms in the palm of his hand, Harry had felt that he held Draco's life safe and protected, perhaps that was more selfish than it was true.

Draco drew his hand back and threw the Charms with all his strength. They hurtled out into the darkness, spinning, their bright chains tangling together. They seemed to hang for a moment over the Pit before they fell, soundless and shining, and were swallowed up by the blackness.

Draco stepped back from the edge. His bright hair shone in the moonlight and he was breathing as if he'd been running. "That's it, then," he said.

“That’s it,” agreed Harry.

Draco looked at him sideways. “Are you angry with me?”

“No,” Harry said, mildly surprised that it was true. “And in a way, I guess, it’s the best thing you could have done with them. It’s fitting.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because,” Harry said. “Now some part of you will always be flying.”

Ginny spent a bad night, her sleep fraught with peculiar dreams. In them, she was dancing, spinning out of control in the center of a huge ballroom while whispering voices mocked her from the shadows. She woke up with the sun streaming through the paned windows, her eyes swollen and her head aching.

Today, she thought, staring up at the ceiling. Today she would take the potion, after the wedding ceremony itself but before the reception. She would dance in Seamus’ arms tonight and she would be happy about it. She thought of herself, dancing and smiling, happy and delighted, and her eyes filled slowly with tears.

The wedding itself went off without a hitch. It was small — much smaller than that evening’s reception would be — and took place in the rose garden which Narcissa had so carefully cultivated since Lucius had left the Manor. There were white roses everywhere: a trellis of them hung over the altar, Floating Charms kept bouquets of them spinning in midair, the rows of chairs facing the altar were girdled with them, and white petals lined the aisle where Narcissa walked to meet Sirius, who standing between Draco and Lupin and looking very pleased with himself. Narcissa

— who walked down the aisle on her own — was beaming and looked beautiful, but the scent of the flowers made Ginny feel vaguely nauseated.

“Isn’t it *lovely*,” Mrs. Weasley breathed. She was dressed in stiff pink robes with a spray of yellow flowers pinned to her pink hat. She was clutching a handkerchief in one hand and Mr. Weasley’s arm with the other. “I do so adore weddings. Don’t you?” she said to Seamus, who was seated on the other side of her and looked handsome and golden-haired in tailored dark blue.

Seamus, who had once charmingly complimented Mrs. Weasley on her sweaters and told her how lovely she looked, stared at her with blank eyes and said, “Not really.”

“Oh,” said Mrs. Weasley.

Mr. Weasley stifled a snort and Ginny turned her attention back to the proceedings. Narcissa had reached the altar and was standing beside Sirius. Remus was saying something to Draco, who was nodding in agreement. Draco’s silvery hair grew so quickly, she thought — just last week it had been short and now it was long enough to curl over his ears and fall in his eyes in that way that made Ginny want to push it back. If he had a proper girlfriend, she thought, and wasn’t carrying on this odd charade with Blaise, he’d have someone to see to his hair. Then she immediately felt guilty for thinking such things about Blaise, who was her friend, after all, and looked as pretty as an apple blossom today in a pink and white dress with a high neck. It was nothing like the garment Draco had gotten for Blaise, which Blaise planned to wear to that night’s reception: a low-cut red dress made of a material so slinky and expensive that it felt like snake scales slithering along your hand when you touched it. She had showed it to Ginny, who’d felt immediately envious. Still, you had to be a certain sort of girl to wear that color red and Ginny wasn’t at all sure she was that sort of girl. In fact, she was nearly sure she wasn’t.

The kindly-looking wizard who Narcissa had contracted to perform the marriage service had begun speaking. Ginny had gathered that he was some sort of distant uncle of Narcissa’s, but he rather resembled

Dumbledore's brother, the one with the unfortunate predilection for goats. At the moment, he seemed to be reciting some sort of poem. "Love," he began firmly, "drives all the world. For in the words of Paul:

*If I speak in the tongues of men and angels,
but have not love,
I have become a sounding brass or a tinkling symbol.*

*And if I have prophecy and know all mysteries and all knowledge,
and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains,
but have not love, I am nothing.*

*Love is patient,
love is kind,
it is not jealous;
love does not boast,
it is not arrogant.*

*It is not discourteous,
it seeks not its own,
it is not easily provoked,
it thinks no evil.
It does not rejoice in wrong, but rejoices in the truth.*

*Love bears all things,
Believes all things,
Hopes all things,
Endures all things.*

Love never ends —

There was a sharp clatter. Turning, Ginny saw to her dismay that Seamus had bolted to his feet, knocking his chair backward. He was breathing hard as if he'd been running and was quite white-faced, sweat plastering his blond hair to his forehead. He turned abruptly and began shoving his way out through the seated crowd, nearly knocking people down in his haste to get away. Ron yelped with pain as Seamus trod on his toe,

muttered a hastily apology, and bolted from the garden, heading towards the Manor as if Lucius' pack of slavering hellhounds were on his heels.

Even Sirius and Narcissa had turned around and were staring. Ginny rose as the whispers did, conscious of Draco looking at her across the crowd, his grey eyes narrowed and cynical. Ginny began to push her way down the aisle of chairs when a hand shot out and gripped her wrist.

It was Hermione. "Don't you dare go after him," she whispered.

Harry, seated beside her, blinked. "But, Hermione —"

"Someone has to," Ginny whispered back, acutely conscious of all the people around them staring. "He might hurt himself or something."

Hermione stood up. "I'll go," she said, and despite Harry's annoyed protests, pushed her way down the aisle and dashed up the path towards the Manor.

Her cheeks flaming, Ginny returned to her sit and slumped down next to her mother, wishing she could fold herself up so small that she'd disappear. Mrs. Weasley patted her hand sympathetically as the-wizard-who-wasn't-Aberforth-but-sort-of-looked-like-him cleared his throat and began speaking again. "Don't worry," she said soothingly. "It's just weddings. They make men all jumpy."

"Bah," said George loudly, from behind them. Fred and George had arrived seconds before the wedding started, by Portkey, from a months-long beach vacation in Belize. They were both covered in a million new freckles and George, and least, smelled strongly of coconut rum. Ignoring his mother's glare, George added: "He's peculiar, Finnigan is. Very peculiar."

"I don't remember him being all that peculiar before," said Fred. "He must have been playing it close to the chest."

“I think I liked it better when she was dating Malfoy,” said George.

Mrs. Weasley shook her head so hard that the flowers on her hat bent as if in a stiff breeze. “Oh, great Merlin,” she moaned. “Don’t say *that*.”

Ginny sat on the windowsill at the end of the Manor’s second floor hallway, a blank book open in her lap, a quill between her fingers. Through the window, she could see the house-elves cleaning up the detritus of the wedding ceremony in the garden below: folding up the chairs, carrying away the loops of strung-together roses. The sun was setting, all blood and fire, over the distant trees.

She looked down at the book in her lap. With Tom gone – finally and forever, really gone – she had thought it might be time to start another diary, something she’d been terrified to do since it had turned out so badly her first year at school. Surely there was nothing wrong with the principle of a diary, especially a safe, blank one purchased from a Muggle bookshop. Surely if she couldn’t share her thoughts with anyone else, she could share them with herself. So far, however, she’d written exactly one word:

Today

She tapped the feathered end of the quill against her forehead as if the gesture might shake loose a few more words, but her brain was buzzing too badly to think straight. She’d gone by Seamus’ room after the ceremony, had knocked, but no one had answered. Part of her hoped he was all right. Another, smaller part of her, a shame-filled part, almost hoped he wasn’t.

“You look like a painting,” came an amused voice, “of Genius, hard at work. What are you writing?”

She looked up and saw Draco, like a black and white Beardsley portrait in his formal robes, looking down at her with calculated nonchalance. She scowled.

“Nothing,” she said, and slammed the book shut.

“Ah,” he said, “drawing pornographic sketches of me, then, are you? Well, you can’t really be blamed for that.”

“There’s nothing in here about you, Draco.”

“I find that hard to believe,” said Draco, and made a lightning-fast grab for the book, yanking it out of Ginny’s hands before she could react. He blinked down at the pages. “Today?” he said. “How laconic. Is this a diary or a tone poem?”

“Idiot,” said Ginny, and reached to snatch it back from him. A brief tug of war ensued, which ended when Draco let go of the book just as Ginny drew her arm back, a gesture that sent the diary sailing out the window. There was the sound of a crash, and a high exclamation. Draco leaned out the window.

“Bugger,” he said, “you’ve smashed one of the glass centerpieces. Quick, get down.” He ducked out of the window frame and crouched under it, pulling her down beside him.

“Oh, dear,” Ginny said, overcome with guilt. “Will your mother be very upset? I hope it doesn’t wreck the reception—“

“Oh, don’t worry about it, we’ve got dozens of them and my mother won’t mind, it’s the house-elves you have to worry about. They take everything personally. I rather miss the days my father kept them all in line with a strict regimen of terror. What with my mother paying them a living wage and ensuring their job security, they’ve gotten awfully careless. One of

them even refused to polish my shoes with his tongue this morning, can you believe that?"

Ginny rolled her eyes upward. "I know you don't really think that way," she said. "I just wonder why you have to pretend like you do."

He grinned. "I find it very attractive when you analyze me like this," he said. They were on their knees facing each other, close enough so that she could see the little white half-moon scar on his cheek, the individual metallic eyelashes, like strokes of a silver pencil. She could lean forward and kiss him; it would be so easy. It would be a way to say goodbye.

She stood up, jerking her hands out of his grasp. "I don't care what you find attractive," she said frostily, and turned to stalk off down the corridor. She could feel him watching her walk away and it made her nervous enough that her hand shook slightly as she reached the door of her bedroom, grabbed for the knob and flung it open —

Only it wasn't her bedroom. In her haste, she'd opened the door of the room beside hers. It was Blaise's room: Ginny could tell this from the bright pink trunk overflowing with clothes, the dark red dress flung carelessly across the bedspread, and the fact that Blaise herself was lying on the floor of the bedroom, entangled in a passionate embrace with Ginny's brother, Ron.

Ginny's hand flew to her mouth. "Ron!" she gasped.

"Weasley?" came an equally stunned voice from behind her.

Blaise gave a little shriek and sat up. Her pretty dress was in disarray; so was her hair. Ron had turned a dark purple color, though not quite dark enough to hide the lipstick marks on his face.

Blaise was the first of them to find her voice. “Haven’t you ever heard that it’s polite to *knock?*” she demanded, leaping to her feet and smoothing down the front of her dress.

“Haven’t you ever heard that it’s polite not to lock lips with a half-witted troglodyte mere hours before you’re supposed to be going on a date with me?” Draco replied.

Blaise didn’t look at Ron, who was rising sheepishly to his feet behind her, while doing up the buttons on his shirt. “It was an accident,” she said.

“I see,” said Draco. “So you tripped and fell on his lips?”

Blaise threw up her hands. “What do you want me to say? It just happened.” She whirled around and glared at Ron. “Tell them. Tell them it just happened.”

Ron looked at her, then looked at Ginny, and lastly, he looked at Draco. It was a calm, measuring look, and held none of the hatred Ginny would have expected. It was as if he was looking at Draco and seeing him not as a rival or an enemy, but just as he was. “It didn’t just happen,” he said. “It’s been going on for months.”

Blaise looked as if she might cry. “RON. YOU PROMISED.”

“I know,” said Ron, “but I also made a promise to myself not to carry on relationships in secret any more. And whatever I might have thought of Malfoy, he doesn’t deserve to be lied to like that.”

Blaise put her hand to her mouth, but said nothing. Her eyes were wide. Draco looked at her coolly. “My, what an original sort of sin you’ve found for yourself, Blaise,” he said.

“Oh, stop it,” Ginny snapped at him, suddenly annoyed. “You’ve done worse. I just don’t understand *why* you kept it a secret,” she added, turning to Blaise. “Just because of Draco?”

“No!” Blaise took her hand away from her mouth. “Because of *you*.”

“Me!” Ginny was astounded.

“You’re my friend,” Blaise said. “But I didn’t want you to think I was just using you to try to get close to Ron.”

Draco snorted. “*Try* to get close to Ron? If you’d gotten any closer to him, you’d have—“

“Oh, shut *up*, Draco,” said Ginny and Blaise together, at the same time. “Blech,” Ginny added, for emphasis. “That’s my brother you’re talking about, Draco.”

Draco snorted again. He was leaning against the doorframe, looking bored and amused at the same time. “All that red hair,” he said to Blaise. “Aren’t you worried about clashing horribly?”

Blaise shot him a glare, then seemed to think better of it. “I’m sorry if I hurt you, Draco,” she said.

“You certainly did hurt me. That image of Weasley slobbering in your ear will be burned on my retinas for all time.”

“I meant *emotionally*,” said Blaise, with exaggerated patience.

“Ah,” Draco said. “I wouldn’t worry about *that*.” And he grinned.

Looking relieved, Blaise turned to Ginny. "And I'm especially sorry I didn't tell you," she said. "I really do...like you."

Ginny knew that for the reserved Slytherin girl, this was an enormous admission. "I like you, too," she said, and went across the room to throw her arms around Blaise; the other girl hugged her back, clearly relieved.

"And *now* we get to the interesting part," said Draco, sounding pleased.

Ron glared at him. "That's my sister you're leering at," he said. "AND my girlfriend."

"If only your mum would get in on the action too, I could really hit the trifecta of your disapproval," said Draco consideringly.

Ginny broke away from hugging Blaise. "My *mother*?" she began, then broke off as Harry and Hermione came into the room. Harry had his arm around Hermione, who was around in bewilderment.

"What's going on?" she said. "What's all the yelling? And were you saying something about having a girlfriend, Ron?"

"Ron has a girlfriend?" said Harry, looking surprised. "Nobody ever tells me anything. So who is it?" he inquired, turning to Ron, who looked wrung out, as if he'd just run a marathon.

"It's me," said Blaise, frostily.

Harry's eyebrows flew up. "But I thought you were dating Malfoy. You are dating Malfoy, aren't you? Or did you just dump him?"

"Harry!" Hermione hissed. "Have some tact!"

“Tact is just lying for grown-ups,” said Ginny, without thinking, and saw Draco glance at her sideways in surprise.

“Blaise and I were not dating,” said Draco. “We had planned to attend the reception together, as friends, but since she has found love – albeit somewhat farther down the food chain than I had hoped — I can hardly stand in her way.”

“Your forbearance is appreciated,” said Blaise, sounding very Slytherin for a moment. Then she grinned. “Of course, us going to the reception as friends didn’t stop you trying to get my knickers off in the carriage on the way over.”

“I was just testing whether you were still susceptible to my charms,” said Draco loftily. “I didn’t want you to get hurt.”

“I’m not sure I can say the same about you,” said Ron, eyeing Draco as if the idea of knocking him down a flight of stairs was distinctly appealing.

“I do love it when you’re all possessive like that,” said Blaise, slinking over to Ron and putting her arms around him. Ron looked pleased, if slightly embarrassed, by this public show of affection. Blaise glanced over her shoulder at the others, her lips curling into a smile. “There’s about to be a certain amount of snogging in this room,” she informed them. “If you don’t want to watch, I suggest you leave now.”

Harry, Hermione, Draco and Ginny exited the room so swiftly that there was a minor bottleneck at the door, resolved only when Harry put his hands on Draco’s back and pushed. They all emerged into the hallway at high speed, Harry reaching back to slam the door shut behind them.

“Honestly!” said Hermione, looking flabbergasted. “Blaise Zabini and Ron. Who would have thought? — I mean, *honestly*.”

“Why not Blaise?” said Ginny. “She’s really nice.”

“She’s a Slytherin,” said Harry, looking dubious; then, catching Draco’s look, added hastily, “Not that there’s anything wrong with that.” He grinned. “Some of my best friends are Slytherins.”

“Nice save, Potter,” said Draco. Then, glancing past Harry, added, “Isn’t that your door, Ginny?”

She followed his glance. “Yes — mine’s the room next to Blaise’s.”

“It looks like someone left you a note.” He pointed, and Ginny saw that he was right — there was a folded square of parchment wedged into the doorframe.

“That’s odd,” she said. She bent to retrieve the paper, conscious that the others were watching her curiously. There was nothing written on the outside of it, not even her name. She unfolded it. *Dear Ginny*, it began. “It’s from Seamus,” she said, surprised, and rose to her feet, still reading. When she was done, she read it again, just to be sure. Then she raised her eyes, slowly, and looked at the others. “It’s a goodbye note,” she said slowly. “He’s leaving.”

“I guess when he said ‘leaving’ he meant ‘already left’,” said Draco, dryly. The four of them stood in the doorway of the guest room that Seamus had been staying in, staring around them. The room was neat as a pin, the bed made and the towels folded neatly on a chair. All of Seamus’ belongings were gone.

“But why?” said Harry, sounding totally bewildered. “Why would he just leave like this?” He ran a hand through his mop of dark hair. “Should we ... owl him or something?”

“No,” said Ginny, so abruptly that it took her a moment to realize someone else had spoken at the same time she had. Hermione.

“No,” Hermione said again, this time quietly. “If he wants to go, let him go.”

Ginny stared at her for a moment. “You went after him at the wedding,” she said. “What did you *say* to him?”

“Nothing,” said Hermione, but she flushed a dark red when she spoke, and couldn’t seem to meet Ginny’s eyes.

“You’re a terrible liar, Hermione,” Ginny said coldly, then whirled and walked out of the room, clutching Seamus’ note – now a balled-up knot of paper – inside her tightly closed fist. She kicked open her bedroom door and stalked inside, turning to slam the door behind her.

It didn’t close. Someone was standing on the other side of it, holding it open. Ginny pulled her hand back with a scowl, and the door opened.

“Draco,” she said, wearily. “What do you want?”

He looked at her, then down at the note in her hand. “So,” he said, bluntly. “Is he gone for good?”

“I don’t see how that’s any of your business,” she snapped. There was a sharp, burning feeling in the back of her throat—she wasn’t sure if it was tears, or something else. She was very conscious of the room behind her, especially the flask of love potion sitting out on her bedside table in plain view.

“Let me guess,” said Draco. “He needs some time to think.”

“Not in so many words,” she said, grudgingly. She wanted to blame this on him, somehow, but the phrases in Seamus’ letter rose up behind her eyes, unbidden, *I love you, but I can’t do this. Something’s wrong and we*

both know it. I don't know how long I'm leaving for but I'll come back. It always comes back to that, she thought tiredly, doesn't it? Those four words. I love you, but.

“If he’s gone off to think, it could be quite some time,” said Draco, his light eyes glittering. “Finnegan’s brain always struck me as a bit like the Hogwarts Express — reliable, but slow.”

“Unlike yours,” said Ginny tightly, “which, if you’re going to stick with the metaphor, is more along the lines of a rural Welsh railway.”

He widened his eyes at her. “How’s that?”

“Narrow, one-track and dirty.” She felt herself smile at him, almost against her will. “Surely you’ve heard that one before.”

“I am not narrow-minded,” he said. “Though the other two...”

Ginny’s hand had begun to hurt. She was still crushing the note from Seamus with her fist; glancing down, she thought of Tom, Tom crushing her hand until tears of pain stood in her eyes... “What do you really want, Draco?” she said. “Just to gloat over Seamus’ departure?”

“It does seem to have presented us with an interesting conundrum,” he said. “I, now, have no date for the reception, and even someone of my ample and spectacular charms might have some difficulty finding a willing and attractive female to escort to the festivities in under three hours, not to mention the fact that really, we’re in the middle of nowhere.”

“I’m sure there are some single female house-elves who’d be happy to oblige you.”

“And get my knees bitten? No thanks.” He leaned forward a little, and said softly, “You do know what I’m asking you, don’t you?”

She raised her eyes to his. She could see herself reflected inside his pupils, surrounded by the stormy gray of his irises. “Spell it out,” she said.

“Go to the reception with me.”

She felt her mouth curl up at the corners. “Say ‘please’,” she said.

For a moment, he said nothing, and she wondered if he were honestly offended, or really too proud to ask — and then he reached out and touched her hair, very gently, with his scarred left hand, letting his knuckles brush her cheekbones, stroking his hand down the length of her hair to touch her throat, her shoulder, the curve of her collarbone. She felt the pulse jump in her throat, hoped he hadn’t felt it.

“Please,” he said.

It took all her self-control to pull away. “All right,” she said. “Now go away so I can get dressed.”

Ginny sat on the end of the bed, looking at herself in the mirror that hung on the opposite wall. Her stomach felt as if it were alive with fluttering butterflies — the same sort of butterflies that adorned her pale gray dress in a delicate pattern. She’d thought the material was so pretty when she picked it out in the shop, but now she could see that it was dull and washed her out, made her red hair look like dingy copper. Her freckles stood out like ink splotches across her nose.

There was a knock on the door. Steeling herself, Ginny rose to open it. She only hoped that Draco didn't notice how awful the dress looked. Then again, who was she kidding? Of course he would notice, and he'd probably say something about it too, something cutting and offhand. Maybe it had been stupid to agree to go to this reception with him anyway. He'd only asked her because there was literally no one else he could have asked. Maybe—

The door swung open. It was Blaise, chic and sophisticated in a tailored black dress and stiletto heels, her lips painted rose pink, her eyes encircled with kohl. She was carrying something in her arms, something blood-red and satiny and heavy, and ...

"Is that your dress?" Ginny asked, perplexed. "The one Draco bought you?"

Blaise held it out to her. "No," she said. "It's *your* dress."

Ginny blinked. "I don't know what you mean."

Blaise smiled crookedly. "Draco might have said this dress was for me," she said, "but it was always for you. It doesn't even fit me, Ginny. Entirely the wrong measurements. Even the wrong shade of red, really. It's meant to go with more coppery hair than mine. It's obvious that Draco was thinking of a particular girl when he bought it, and that girl wasn't me. It was you."

Ginny just stared. "I don't..."

"Yes, you do," said Blaise. "Take it." And she offered it to Ginny again, and the light struck the dress just so, making it glow gold and red like the heart of a ruby. Almost without volition, Ginny reached out and took the dress, feeling its weight, its smooth, cold softness. It felt almost alive in her hands. "And go put it on," Blaise added, flopping down on the bed. "I want to see if I was right."

Ginny made a face at her, then disappeared into the bathroom to change. She could feel just by touching the red dress, by sliding it over her head and letting it shimmy down to her feet, how expensively made it was, despite its simple cut. When she walked out into the bedroom, Blaise sat upright on the bed and whistled. “Look at you,” she said.

With a feeling half of dread, Ginny turned and looked at herself in the mirror. Looked — and then stared. The dress clung to her body, molded itself to her chest, made her legs look impossibly long and her waist impossibly slender. She had pinned up some of her hair with gold clips in the shapes of butterflies, and the curls that hung loose cascaded down her back. Far from clashing, the dress made them look a darker red-gold than they were. She bit her lip.

Blaise jumped up. “Malfoy won’t know what hit him,” she said cheerfully. “Unless you slap him silly for leering at you — then he will, obviously.” She cocked her head. “I hear someone banging on my door. Must be your brother.” She strode out into the hallway, leaving the door open behind her.

Ginny pulled her shoes out from under the bed. They were the same shoes she’d worn last year at the Manor, the ones that had started their lives as socks printed all over with a cheerful pattern of ducks. She [slipped them on](#) and went out into the corridor, where Ron was standing with Blaise, their heads very close. She cleared her throat before they started up with anything really disgusting, like kissing.

Ron broke away from Blaise and glanced over at her. “Oi there, Ginny—” he began, and broke off, looking thunderous. “*What* are you wearing?” he demanded. “Or rather, *not* wearing. If Mum sees you in that, she’ll do her nut!”

“Don’t be such a troll, Ron,” said Blaise. “She looks beautiful.”

Ron made a choking noise. “Beautiful? She looks—well, I’d say how she looks, but one doesn’t use those sorts of words around one’s little sister.”

“I think I look nice,” Ginny replied, smoothing down her skirt. “Really, Ron.”

“I’m just glad you’re not going with Malfoy,” Ron said. “At least I can trust Seamus not to paw all over you.”

Oh dear, Ginny thought, realizing no one had told him. “Actually...” she began.

“What she means to say,” said Draco, materializing in the corridor behind Ron, “is that she is going with me. Actually.”

Ron turned around and stared at Draco, who was busy doing up his cufflinks. He looked even handsomer than usual, though Ginny wasn’t sure why. He had on some sort of elegantly cut black suit with a white shirt underneath, very plain except for the emeralds that glittered in the cuffs on his wrists. He looked a little tired and his hair was falling over his eyes but he was beautiful. She wanted to tell him so, but perhaps it wasn’t done to say that sort of thing to boys.

“But — but—“ Ron stammered. “What happened to Seamus?”

“What indeed?” said Draco. “A mystery for the ages.”

“But he was supposed to be taking Ginny to the reception,” said Ron, looking rather like he had as a small boy when George or Fred had handed him a chocolate that turned out, when he bit into it, to be full of frothing soap. “Not you.”

“And I was supposed to be taking Blaise,” Draco pointed out. “Not you.”

“That’s different,” Ron protested. “It wouldn’t have been fair for Blaise to go with you when her true feelings were for me.”

Even Blaise rolled her eyes at this, but Draco only smiled. “And it wouldn’t be fair for Ginny to go with Seamus, when he’s done a bunk and no one knows where he is, would it?”

“But—“ Ron began.

“No buts,” said Draco shortly. “You have no moral high ground to stand on, Weasley. In fact, you have sunk so far down from the moral high ground that you are rapidly approaching THE MOLTEN CENTER OF THE EARTH.”

Blaise yawned. “Is this when you two start punching each other?” she inquired. “Because if that’s the case, Ginny and I will just head down to the reception and you can meet us down there once you’re done knocking the stuffing out of each other, or whatever other latently homoerotic form of violence you choose to engage in.”

“*What?*” said Ron, looking betrayed. “Who are you siding with here, Blaise?”

“Neither,” said Blaise. “You’re both being ridiculous. And I’m leaving.” And with that, she flounced off down the corridor, her skirt swishing around her legs as she went.

Ron hesitated a moment, then jabbed a finger at Draco. “Just keep your paws off my sister,” he said darkly. “I can see the future, Malfoy, and if you lay a hand on her, yours will be short and bloody unpleasant.”

“In the old days, I would have taken this opportunity to make a nasty remark about your mother,” Draco reflected. “But as times have changed, I’ll just say this: I don’t need to be a Diviner to tell you that if you leave

Blaise waiting for you at the end of the hallway like this, your future will contain no sex again, ever. Think about it.”

Ron made a spluttering noise, gritted his teeth, looked once at Ginny, and then stalked off down the corridor after Blaise.

“Ugh,” said Ginny. “I rather admire how you did that, but did you have to mention my brother and sex in the same sentence? Because I really don’t…”

She broke off, because he was looking at her, his eyes travelling up and down her body with an excruciatingly slow and exact appraisal. When his eyes met hers, he smiled. “That dress,” he said, “looks exactly like I imagined it would.”

Ginny’s heart banged against the inside of her ribcage. “Is that good?” she said.

“Very good,” said Draco, and took her hand, drawing her towards him – not close enough to kiss, but so they stood side by side. “And I like the duck socks,” he said, twining his fingers with hers. “They add a certain flair.”

Ginny glanced down at the sparkling shoes just visible under the dress’s hem. “You remember them?” she said.

She couldn’t see him smile, but somehow, she felt it.

“I remember everything,” he said.

“You’ve gotten better,” Hermione said with a laugh, as Harry steered her across the dance floor with a determination that was more stolid than graceful — but was nevertheless endearing.

Harry smiled, shaking dark hair out of his eyes, though his gaze never left their feet. “Better at dancing, or better in a more general, moral sense?”

“Better at dancing,” said Hermione. “I already knew you had moral fiber. I believe you once won a tournament because of it?”

At that he did look up, still smiling. A moment later he trod on her foot, but Hermione didn’t really mind. Despite her earlier nerves, she’d been able to relax into the ambiance of the party. It was a slightly more subdued affair than the raucous birthday party they’d thrown here for Draco and Harry last year; this party had more of Narcissa about it, especially in the lovely decorations: the black and white silk banners that hung from the ceiling, the glowing, floating candles everywhere — Hermione had flinched as one passed right in front of her, but it had given off no heat with its glow — and the overflowing pots of white and black roses everywhere. Every once in a while a rose would fall from one of them, turning to silk as it fell. People were picking them up and wearing them as party favors; Hermione had tucked a black silk rose into the blue satin band holding her hair back, and felt only a slight twinge when she did.

There was a huge table running along one wall, laden with silver tureens heaped with sweet ices, chocolate-covered strawberries and all sorts of other treats. There were musicians on the adjacent stage, a group so delicate and fey-looking Hermione couldn’t help wondering if they were faeries. Either way, she doubted that this year, Snape would be singing any karaoke. Near the stage, Sirius and Narcissa were dancing, seemingly lost in their own private world. It was nice, Hermione thought, looking at them wistfully, to see people get a second chance at happiness, especially two people who’d been so miserable for most of their lives.

She did worry a bit about Professor Lupin, though. She hoped that now that Sirius was married, he wouldn’t forget about his friend. Lupin seemed

so lonely sometimes, living in his little cottage off the Hogwarts grounds

“What are you thinking about?” Harry asked, breaking her out of her reverie. “Your face went all serious just then.”

“Oh,” she said vaguely, “just thinking about people missing chances to be happy in their lives — and then being lonely. I guess I was just ... wandering.”

He pulled her a little closer. “Hermione, I —“

She caught a flash of red just over his shoulder and pulled back. “Look,” she said. “It’s Blaise and Ron — and Draco and Ginny, behind them. I did wonder if they’d wind up coming to the reception together.”

Harry turned to look, though he didn’t seem as interested as she’d thought he would be. “Blaise and Ron,” he said. “That’s pretty weird.”

She laughed. “And Draco and Ginny isn’t?” They were coming down the steps as she spoke, Draco all white and black like the decorations, Ginny a lick of live flame in a red dress Hermione had never seen her wear before. She looked beautiful, and electric.

“That’s been brewing for a long time,” said Harry. “Not that I could tell you where it’s going to end up, of course.” He spun her around in a turn, and now she was facing the other end of the grand ballroom, the wall of latticed French doors, each one of which led out onto a private marble balcony. Fleur Delacour and Viktor Krum were dancing near them, Fleur speaking sharply to Viktor in French and Viktor nodding along patiently, though as far as Hermione knew, Viktor didn’t speak French. Perhaps he was better off that way.

“Well, of course,” said Hermione. “You never know what makes relationships work or not work. Not from the outside, anyway.” The

dancing crowd parted, and she saw Mr and Mrs Weasley dancing together, their arms around one another, looking perfectly content. “But it’s lovely when it does work out, isn’t it?”

“It is,” said Harry, “and that’s why—“

“Oh, goodness,” said Hermione interrupting him. “Snape’s here. I’m always surprised when I see him turn up for anything remotely festive.” She indicated with a jerk of her chin where Snape stood, a foaming mug in his hand, deep in conversation with Charlie Weasley and Lupin. She chuckled. “And some people are married to their work, of course—“

“Hermione,” Harry said, his tone exasperated. “I’ve been trying to say something to you for the past five minutes and you keep interrupting me. Will you just listen for a second?”

“Oh!” Hermione said, suddenly contrite. “Sorry, I was babbling. What is it?”

“It’s...” Harry began, and hesitated. Hermione looked up at him as if for the first time that evening and saw the hectic color in his cheeks, the sharp brightness of his eyes, the rapid pulse beating in his throat, and became truly alarmed.

“Harry! Is something wrong?”

“No,” he muttered. “Nothing’s *wrong*,” and with that, he took a firm hold of her wrists and steered her across the dance floor to a shadowy alcove, some distance from the other dancers. “It’s just private.”

“But you’re all right?” she said, scanning his face for clues. “Nothing’s happened?”

He let go of her wrists then and took her face in his hands, his fingertips on her cheeks as light as kisses. The feel of them was so familiar, as everything about Harry was familiar, and beloved as everything about him was beloved, as she might love the best and brightest part of her own self. His eyes were wide, looking down at hers, his breath coming rapidly, and her instinct told her to put her arms around him and hold him and comfort him, for surely only a terrible sort of pain could make him look at her with such an intensity as this.

“Hermione,” he said, before she could move. “Hermione, I’ve got something to ask you...”

“So ask me, Harry,” she said, bewildered. “Whatever it is, you know you can ask me. You can ask me anything.”

He slid his hands down to her shoulders and gripped them tightly, so tightly it hurt. “Hermione,” he said, levelly. “Hermione, will you marry me?”

She felt her eyes fly open, her heart stop, and she wondered if all of her might suddenly stop as she fainted dead away like Sleeping Beauty wounded by the needle. But no, she was just Hermione Granger, not a fairytale princess, and she couldn’t faint dead away on command — no matter how much she wished she could when she looked up at Harry’s face, Harry’s beautiful, beloved, so-familiar face, his green eyes so wide and hopeful, and said:

“No, Harry. No. I couldn’t possibly. I’m sorry, but no.”

“Don’t you think it’s time you introduced me to your parents?” Blaise inquired as they moved — fairly gracefully, Ron felt, considering his lack of serious dancing experience — across the polished marble floor of the Manor ballroom. “I mean now that we’re officially out, so to speak, to your friends.”

“I suppose,” said Ron reluctantly. He couldn’t help wondering how Blaise, beautiful and sophisticated as she was, would react to his down-to-earth, slightly shabby family situation. He tried to picture her casually pitching in to help his Mum with the washing up, and failed utterly.

“Ashamed of me, are you?” Blaise demanded, fixing him with a piercing green stare. “I’m all right for a bit on the side, but when it comes to introducing me to your parents —“

“I never thought of you as a bit on the side!” Ron protested, though he sensed that this, like most arguments with Blaise, was a battle he was going to lose. Mostly because she didn’t play fair. It was like dating Malfoy — if, he reminded himself quickly, Malfoy were a girl. A hot girl. Malfoy was neither of those things. In fact, it wasn’t like dating Malfoy at all. He wished that thought had never occurred to him.

“What on earth is wrong with you, Ron?” Blaise demanded, executing a complex turn and steering him along like a small barge as she did so. “You’ve turned a horrible green color. Surely the idea of introducing me to your family isn’t that nightmarish.”

“No,” said Ron, weakly. “It’s not that.”

Blaise smiled that smile that always made his knees go wobbly. “Well, you’re a Diviner. Surely you can look into the future and see how your parents take the news.”

“What if I told you that telling them would set off a chain reaction of apocalyptic events, covering all the world with a second darkness and flooding the Earth’s continents with boiling, red-hot magma?”

“I’d say you were shirking.”

“As I thought.” Ron sighed. “I suppose I was rather hoping Ginny would do it for me.”

Blaise chuckled. “She looks as if her mind is on other things at the moment.”

Ron followed the line of her gaze and saw his sister, in that terrifying red dress of hers, her arms wrapped around Draco Malfoy. They weren’t so much dancing as clinging to each other. “Why now?” Ron said plaintively. “I thought she was over her whole Malfoy fixation —“

He broke off and stared. Just beyond Draco and Ginny, moving among the dancers like a flickering shadow, was a familiar, dark-haired figure. He would have recognized her anywhere, as much from the way she moved as from the black hair that wrapped her like a shawl, or the slim pale face, like a thumbprint in white paint against the shadowy background of the suddenly darkened room...

Rhysenn.

She knew that he saw her – she raised a hand, slim and white-fingered, and beckoned him towards her. She was smiling as she turned and slipped away through the dancers, headed for a low door at the east side of the ballroom.

“What is it, Ron?” Blaise sounded actually alarmed now. “Are you —“

“I’ll be right back.” Ron drew away from his dancing partner and hurried after Rhysenn, leaving Blaise, perplexed, staring after him.

They were in a room full of people, and they were dancing. Distantly Ginny knew that the room was the ballroom at Malfoy Manor, and that it

had been beautifully decorated in clean shades of white and black: white and black silk draperies drifted in the air like restless ghosts, and rose petals spilled from the sky at intervals. There was even a glittering ice sculpture that changed shapes as it melted: now a flower, now a swan with outspread wings. She saw all this, and didn't see it; she was focused entirely on Draco.

They had been laughing together as they came down the stairs into the ballroom, but that had changed once they started dancing. Conversation had fallen away, swallowed up or vanished in the intensity of feeling that touching each other had brought with it — Ginny knew she wasn't alone in feeling it, either; she'd seen the pulse jump in Draco's throat when he took hold of her to pull her into the dance, and he'd had that look on his face too, that funny, half-taken aback and half-wry look that meant that his own emotional response had surprised him.

She could feel the roughness of his scarred hand against the bare skin of her back, the feather-light brush of his fingertips against her wrist. Her mouth was dry and her heart felt both impossibly light and impossibly saturated with feeling — and all these things she had never felt with Seamus, not even when he was kissing her, she felt from the light touch of Draco's hands.

She felt like a raw wound, cut open and terribly vulnerable to injury, and yet at the same time she felt more alive than she ever had. There was a word for this feeling, a word she had almost forgotten how to apply to her own life.

Hope.

I love and I hope. They were passing the long table where the ice sculpture sat; as they moved past it it morphed from the shape of a heart to the shape of a glittering star. "What did you say?" Draco asked, leaning in to hear her, his hair brushing her cheek.

Ginny hadn't realized she had spoken out loud. Flustered, she said, "I was just noticing the ice sculpture. It's awfully pretty."

"Yes. Mother does seem to have gone all out with the décor," said Draco, as if the topic interested him only mildly. "I suppose that's because Father never really let her have any say in it before."

"No, it didn't seem like her. All that dark wood and — what? Are you laughing at me?" she said, as a smile flitted across his face.

"Every time we dance past your brother and Blaise, he glares at me," he said. "He seems quite certain I intend to 'paw all over you'," as he said.

"And you don't?"

He laughed. "Sometimes I forget how direct you are. No, Ginny, I don't plan to put my hands on you — unless you ask me to."

She shook her head, making the gold butterfly clips rattle. "I don't think you need to worry about that."

"You've rather mastered the art of being scornful, haven't you, for a Weasley?" he said, with great amusement. "You know, it took me years to figure out who you were."

She blinked at him, nonplussed. "What?"

"I was twelve," Draco said. "I'd just come home for the summer and I went into the library looking for my father. He wasn't there, but someone else was. A most beautiful girl, taller than I was, with hair like the edge of a candleflame—"

"You knew that was me?" Ginny was astonished. "You *remembered*?"

“Oh, it took me a good deal of time to realize that it had been you. The real you was eleven back then, all knobbly knees and big eyes and an even bigger crush on Harry Potter. I never would have tied you in to the gorgeous girl in the library who said she was going to be my governess and then vanished between one instant and the next.”

Ginny laughed. “I think I told you you were tiny,” she said.

“You did. It was quite a blow to my masculine pride.”

“Masculine pride? You were twelve!”

“I was quite disappointed you weren’t really going to be my governess, either. I had an entire fantasy about misbehaving just so you’d punish me —“

“Glad to hear you were entirely perverse even at twelve.”

“I assure you, governess fantasies are quite the norm, especially among members of the upper class.” Draco steered her gracefully through a difficult turn.

“Is that why you’re telling me this story?” Ginny demanded. “Because I’m not going to dress up as a —“

“Shh.” Draco put a finger gently against her lips. She could smell the peppery scent of his cologne. “I’m telling you this story because I wanted you to know that for years I thought of you as *the* girl. The one I measured other girls against, even though I didn’t know you, didn’t know your name. And when I realized I’d actually known you all along but never recognized you —“

“Malfoy?” A familiar voice broke through Draco’s speech; looking as startled as Ginny felt, he stopped dancing. They both turned to see Harry

standing just beside them, and from the way the others on the dance floor were staring after him, Ginny suspected he'd shouldered his way through the crowd to get to Draco. His collar was askew and he looked dazed, as if he'd been hit on the head. "Malfoy," he said, again, "I need to talk to you."

Ginny was already pulling her hands out of Draco's, readying herself to let him go. He was staring at Harry, both corners of his mouth curled into that quixotic shape that meant he was truly nonplussed. "*Now?*" he said.

"*I need to talk to you,*" Harry said, again, and he really did look dreadful, Ginny thought, as if he were about to be sick.

Ginny tried to step back, but Draco was holding her hands tightly, so tightly she could feel the bones in her fingers press against each other, and he said, "Harry, now is not a good time."

"But—" Harry began, and then he looked from Draco to Ginny and back again, and a high flush colored his pale cheeks. "Quite right," he said, "I'm sorry to have been so rude," and he turned and walked off, pushing his way through the crowd as if he were trying to lose himself in it.

Ginny turned back to Draco. "I wouldn't have *minded*—" she began, but he was already pulling her towards him, starting to move them both back into the dance.

"It's all right," he said. "What was it we were discussing? Governesses?"

"And the upper class," she said, trying to make her voice light, but she could see from his expression that it was no good: the dancing light of mischief had left his eyes, and they were flat and grey as slate rocks. There was a strange resistance in him, too, as if instead of leaning to her he was pulling back, into himself.

"Right," he said. "I was telling you—"

She pulled away from him, and this time he wasn't expecting it. Her hands came free and she stepped back, seeing his puzzled look turn to a look of realisation when she said, "Draco. Just *go*."

"I —"

"I mean it," she said.

He looked at her steadily for a moment, then swore under his breath, and turned away. She watched his bright hair until he vanished, swallowed up into the crowd. She had forgotten to ask him if he knew where Harry was going, but there was no real need to ask. He always knew. Her hand went to the chain at her throat. They should make a pendant that quoted the words from Seamus' letter, she thought. *I love you, but*. After all, there was always something.

She was out on the balcony when he found her, sitting atop one of the marble railings as if she had no fear of the long drop to the garden below. Her black hair, unbound, fell to her feet and blew around her even though there was very little wind; her dress was the same color as her hair, a black that seemed to soak up the night. There was little color in her pale, pointed face, just the red slash of her lips, curled into a wide smile like a mask of Comedy. Her feet were bare.

"Diviner," she said. "It's good to see you again."

Ron stepped out onto the balcony and shut the door firmly behind him. He glanced around; there were other balconies than ran the length of this side of the Manor; most were occupied with couples. He could see a girl standing alone on a distant balcony, though it was too far for him to recognize her. In any case, no one was close enough to hear them. "I wasn't sure you'd come," he said.

Her smile widened. “I don’t normally obey summons these days — but I’m fond of you, so I came. Though I don’t flatter myself you missed me.”

“I associate you with being held prisoner by Voldemort,” Ron said frankly. “I can’t help that. But you did make it more bearable.”

“I have a certain native sympathy for prisoners. And you seemed so charming — so very *ordinary*, despite your talents.”

“I *am* ordinary,” Ron said, “and I like it that way.”

“Do you still see the future?” Rhysenn asked, and cannily ran an arched, bare foot down the front of Ron’s shirt, tweaking the buttons with her toes.

“Don’t do that,” he said earnestly. “I have a girlfriend now.”

“I saw. The redheaded one who looks like she bites. Do you love her?”

“Yes,” said Ron.

Rhysenn sighed. “That’s depressing news. Don’t tell me you brought me here just to announce that, or I’ll be awfully annoyed.”

“Actually, I wanted to ask you a favor,” Ron said. This was only somewhat true. Ginny was the one who had come up with this plan, and he had only agreed to it reluctantly. He had tried to ignore the small voice in the back of his head that said that half of Ginny’s plans were world-beaters, while the other half were sure disasters. He fervently hoped this one fell into the former and not the latter category. “You can travel in time, can’t you?”

She frowned curiously. “I can travel in dimensions, and time is a dimension,” she said. “But I don’t do it often — you can’t change the past,

and there's little point visiting the future; you'll be there anyway one day."

"I don't want you to change the past. I want you to make sure it happens," said Ron.

Rhysenn frowned at him. "Come again?"

Ron reached into his pocket and withdrew a scarlet circle that looked as if it were made of red glass, carved all over with peculiar runes. "Have you ever seen this before?" he asked.

"No," she said, and Ron felt his knees go weak, realizing that this plan might actually be one of the world-beaters and not one of the disasters after all.

"I need you to take this into the past and give it to someone," he said.

"Seeing the future has unhinged your mind, Diviner," she said, with a shake of her head. "What would be the point of that?"

"Because you've already done it — look, I know you have, because you're the one who gave this band to Charlie to give to Harry, and you warned Harry about it later, but you can't have done that yet or you'd remember it."

Rhysenn looked at him through grey, unblinking eyes like a snake's. "Who is Charlie?" she asked.

Ron turned and pointed through the window. "There — my brother. That one."

Rhysenn looked pleased. "He's very handsome. I like him. He looks like you, but more solid. And older."

“You don’t like younger men?”

“When you’re six hundred years old all men are younger, but one does like to narrow the gap.” She took the band from him and examined it. “These are powerful runes of protection.”

“I know,” said Ron, glancing nervously into the window. If he took much longer with this, Blaise would kill him. “That’s why you have to make sure to get it to Harry.”

“It sounds like a lot of trouble —“

“You have to,” Ron said earnestly. “If you don’t, and Harry never gets the band, then he and Draco won’t win out over Voldemort in Romania, and Lucius will never die, and you’ll never be free.”

She looked at him hesitantly. “Lucius,” she said. “How did he die?”

“I killed him,” Ron said, bluntly. And it was true — he hadn’t plunged the sword in, perhaps, but he’d killed him nonetheless.

Rhysenn’s hands tightened on the band until her knuckles stood out white and sharp, and her breath hissed through her teeth. “*You* killed him?”

Ron nodded.

“Then perhaps I do owe you, after all,” she said. “Tell me precisely what I am to do.”

Ron told her, repeating Ginny’s words to him exactly, though on some occasions he did forget specifics. “Oh, just say whatever you need to say to Charlie to get him to bring it to the party and give it to Harry,” he said,

finally. “Just make sure he doesn’t see your face and can’t describe you later. And when you get to the party, you can say whatever you like to Harry, as well. Just make sure he winds up keeping the damn thing on him and doesn’t toss it in his trunk.”

“I can do that,” said Rhysenn equably, sliding the band onto her wrist. She leaned forward then, shaking her hair out. “You won’t kiss me good-bye?”

“I can’t,” said Ron, with false regret. “Girlfriend.”

“Then tell me if I’ll ever see you again, Diviner.”

“No,” said Ron, and this time his regret was real. “You won’t ever see me again. But you’ll live a long time — thousands of years — and you’ll forget me, and forget my name. But I hope you will remember —“

Rhysenn drew back. She looked intensely strange and fey in that moment, the moonlight whitening her ageless face, her small teeth sharp and white as a kitten’s where she smiled. “Remember what?”

“That there is some value even in those of us who are *ordinary*. And that there is more to love than pain. Sometimes it can even make you happy.”

“Happy?” she said. “I’ve never been that.”

“No,” he said. “But you will be.”

At that she did smile, a real smile that looked nothing like a mask. She rose lightly to her feet, balancing on her toes on the edge of the railing, so precariously that Ron reached for her without thinking. She stepped backward, away from his hand, and vanished; Ron raced to the railing and looked over it, into the gardens, but she was gone entirely, leaving on the echo of her silvery laughter behind.



The library was dark. Harry was sitting in the window embrasure, looking down over the Manor grounds strung with lights, his hands clasped around his knees. Stepping into the room, Draco was hit with a powerful sense of déjà vu, so strong that for a moment he only stood in the doorway, looking and wondering. *Will it always be like this?*

He took an unlit lamp from the desk and whispered *Lumos* to it. It flared into light and Harry glanced towards him, blinking.

“Malfoy? I thought —“

“What did you think?”

“That you were busy,” Harry finished, a little lamely.

“I was,” Draco said. “Now I’m not.” He came over to the window, and Harry swung his legs down so that Draco could join him on the ledge. They were opposite the library’s two great windows of colored glass, and the moonlight that came through cast alternating patterns of poison green, ice blue, and blood red across their skin. “So what is it that’s got you looking like you just found out that you and Professor Trelawny are the last two people left on the planet and you have to repopulate the earth?”

Harry frowned. “Professor *Trelawny*? Where do you come up with these things?”

“So it’s not that.”

“It’s not—“ Harry began indignantly, then checked himself. “It’s Hermione.”

“This is me,” said Draco, “falling off this ledge with astonishment.” He raised the lantern a little to cast more light on Harry’s face. “You do look like death,” he admitted. “What did she do?”

“It’s what I did. I asked her to marry me.”

At that, Draco was so honestly startled that his hand jerked and he nearly dropped the lamp. He caught it again by its thin wire handle, and it swung in his grip, sending a crazy-quilt pattern of shadows shooting around the room. “Why would you do a completely blockheaded thing like that?” he demanded.

The look Harry turned on him was distinctly sour. “What’s wrong with asking people to marry you?”

“There’s a lot wrong with asking *people* to marry you. That implies you’re asking more than one person, and won’t they be annoyed when they all show up at the church at the same time? As for what’s wrong with asking Hermione: nothing particularly except that neither of you is old enough to get married. Do you expect her to be some kind of child bride?”

“Seventeen is adult in the wizarding world,” Harry muttered.

“Yes,” Draco agreed, “and that means you can get married, not that you *should*. Not everything that happens to be legal is a bloody brilliant idea. Of course the converse is also true—“

“But I want to get married. I want to marry Hermione. There isn’t anyone else I can picture myself married to, and I can’t bear the thought of losing her.”

“Losing her?” Draco set the lamp down carefully. “Who said anything about losing her? It’s not an either-or, you know, marriage or nothing. Besides,” he added, more gently, “you shouldn’t marry someone just to keep them tied to you. People stay because they want to, and if they don’t, there’s nothing you can do to make them.”

“My parents married young.”

“There was a war on. They knew they might die.” *And they did*, the obvious corollary, hung between them, unsaid.

“I feel like I might die,” said Harry grimly. “I feel like there’s nothing to hold on to.”

There’s me, Draco wanted to say, but was it true? Would it be true once the spell on them was lifted? He knew Harry was thinking the same thing, could tell it by the look on his face (*and would he ever know someone like that again, be able to deduce their every thought from their slightest movement?*), so he said, “Don’t be melodramatic, Potter. Did she say she never wanted to see you again?”

“No,” Harry admitted.

“Did she say it made her sick to look at you?”

“No.”

“What *did* she say?”

“She said no,” Harry replied. “She said ‘she couldn’t possibly.’”

“And what did you do?”

“I left,” Harry said, in a tone that indicated that this had clearly been the only sensible course of action. “I went looking for you or Ron, but Ron wasn’t around and you were —busy.”

“A delicate way of putting it,” Draco said. “Has it occurred to you to ask her *why* she said no?”

“Of course not! You just don’t do that. I mean, I have some dignity,” Harry added stiffly, looking suddenly very young in his elegant dress clothes, his glasses halfway down his nose and his tie coming unraveled.

“Dignity just gets in the way where romance is concerned,” Draco said thoughtfully. “I’d ask her. It’s Hermione. She’s probably got a reason.”

“But maybe I don’t want to know what it is.”

“It’s always better to know,” Draco advised him. “Otherwise you’ll rip yourself up wondering. And bore the hell out of me by jawing about it endlessly,” he added, in a helpful tone.

Harry put his hands up to cover his face; when he took them away, he looked resigned. “All right. But if it goes badly, Malfoy, I’m holding you responsible.” He slid down off the window ledge and Draco followed him, setting the lamp back down on the desk where he’d found it. They left the room together, both of them blinking in the sudden bright light of the corridor outside.

Draco looked sideways at Harry. “Do you need a drink to firm your resolve, Potter?”

“No. When I drink I just get stupid.” Harry squared his shoulders. “I’ll be all right.”

“I just wish you looked a bit more all right,” said Draco as they set off down the corridor to the ballroom. “You’re still sort of a pinkish-green color. It does complement your eyes, the green, but it also makes you look like a mollusc.”

“I can’t help it.” They had reached the double doors to the ballroom; Harry turned around and gazed mournfully at Draco “Don’t *you* ever get that feeling,” he said, “like there’s a huge scary monster inside your chest trying to burst free? Do you think that’s what being in love always feels like?”

“No,” Draco said, pushing the door open with his elegantly shod foot and gesturing for Harry to go in ahead of him. “I think you have indigestion. I’d see a mediwizard if I were you.”

Ginny, Draco had thought, ought to be easy to spot with her fire-engine red dress and equally bright hair, but search the ballroom as he might, she seemed to have vanished. He caught a flash of red as he made his way towards the silver punch bowl, but it turned out to be Charlie Weasley, steering Blaise Zabini across the dance floor. Blaise was looking pleased with herself. Draco wondered idly if she intended on dropping Ron for another one of the Weasleys — Charlie certainly seemed a better bet, looks and intelligence-wise — but Blaise was surprisingly loyal in her way. She’d certainly been loyal to him when he’d done little to deserve it.

He was about to head to the French doors to see if Ginny had decided to step out onto one of the balconies, when he felt a hand touch his shoulder. He turned and saw Dumbledore standing just behind him, holding a silver tankard in one hand and beaming inquisitively down at him. “I thought I’d see how the birthday boy was doing,” he said.

Draco blinked. “It’s not my birthday, sir,” he said. “That was the last party we were at here. This time it’s my mother’s wedding.”

“How silly of me,” said Dumbledore breezily, but Draco caught the glint of amusement in the headmaster’s blue eyes and wondered, not for the first time, what he might be up to. “And are you enjoying yourself?”

“I suppose so.”

“Not dreading tomorrow too much?” the Headmaster said. His tone was light, but his blue eyes were keen and penetrating.

“Tomorrow?” Draco said slowly. “You mean the — the spell reversal we discussed before. That will be tomorrow?”

“I expect to see you both in the study at noon, yes.”

Draco said nothing to that.

“Do not think I delight in being cruel to you,” said Dumbledore, more gently. “I would not do this if I didn’t think it was for your own good.”

“My own good,” Draco echoed, flatly.

“You don’t agree, Mr. Malfoy?”

Draco looked down at his left hand. The scar there, thick and double-cross-shaped, had its own whitish gleam under the flickering lights. He said, “Part of me wonders who will walk out of that room tomorrow, after you’re done with us. Harry will be the same. I didn’t change him like he changed me. But I wonder if I’ll even know myself — and if that means the self I’ll be tomorrow is a lie, or perhaps the lie is what I’m living right now. And have been for a year.”

“I am not sure you are correct about Harry and whether you have changed him, but we will leave that aside for the moment,” said Dumbledore with a certain dry concern. “If you don’t mind my bringing it

up, it is true, is it not, that in the last moments of your father's life, the curse Voldemort had laid on him was lifted?"

As always happened when he talked about his father, Draco felt as if the air was being suctioned from his lungs, leaving him gasping. He said tightly, "It wasn't a curse that was lifted. It was something Voldemort had taken from him that was given back."

"His paternal affection for you."

Draco nodded. Air, he thought. He wished he could go out onto one of the balconies and catch his breath.

"That must have been difficult for you," said Dumbledore.

"I didn't feel anything about it at the time," Draco said. "He looked at me and he said all these things, things he'd never said – never would have said — and I just thought: *more lies.*"

"But that was actually when he spoke the truth to you," said Dumbledore. "It was the past seventeen years that had been the lie."

Draco looked away, no longer able to bear the headmaster's steady gaze. "It doesn't matter," he said. "It was too little, too late."

"I agree," Dumbledore said, surprisingly. "And that is what I don't want for you. To find your true self too late. To live a lie."

"But what if I hate my true self? What if he's just the same unpleasant bastard I remember him as? What then?"

"That is always the choice," said Dumbledore. "The ugly truth or the beautiful lie."

“I thought truth *was* beauty,” said Draco with a short, unmirthful laugh.

“In poetry, perhaps. But not in life.”

“That must be why I prefer poetry,” said Draco. He looked up at the Headmaster. “There is something,” he said, an idea, which had nagged at him before but never been fully realized, blooming suddenly to life in his head. “A favor I wanted to ask you. If it were at all possible...”

“There’s something you want from me?” said Dumbledore, eyes glinting behind his spectacles. “If this is about the Quidditch Cup —“

“It’s not about the Quidditch Cup. It’s not really about school at all — well, tangentially, maybe, it’s about something *at* school, but not really part of school. I mean —“

“I think perhaps you should slow down,” said the Headmaster, looking amused, “and tell me exactly what it is you want. Who knows—? I might even give it to you.”

The sets of French doors at the far end of the ballroom each opened on to a small marble balcony that overlooked the gardens. They were supremely romantic spots, and Harry had already interrupted several couples mid-snog — including Aidan Lynch and an unidentified buxom female in a robust pink corset — before he found Hermione.

The doors were already propped open, so she didn’t hear him as he stepped out onto the balcony. She was leaning against the balustrade, her hand at her throat, worrying at something that hung around her neck on a fine chain. Her blue and white dress was simple, plain and Empire-styled without lace or ribbons to distract from its clean lines. Her riotous curly hair was knotted up at the back of her head, though much of it had already sprung free and haloed her face with a coronet of dark curls.

Through the blue satin band that held her hair back, she had thrust one of the black silk roses from the ballroom. Harry had always thought of Hermione's looks as timeless, as if she might be at home in any era — she might not be conventionally pretty but her face had the strong clean lines that spoke of inner grace and strength. With those bones, she would be lovely to him even when she was older, and Harry had always thought that he would be there, to see her grow more beautiful as she aged, and now realizing that perhaps that would never happen, he felt a keen pain just above his ribs as if he'd run too far and fast without catching his breath.



He said her name, and she turned, dropping her hand from her throat and looking at him in astonishment. Whatever it was she had been holding glittered blue against her skin. “Harry?” she said.

He shut the French doors behind him, tapping the knob with his hand as he did so and whispering a locking charm under his breath. He heard the click as the doors fastened shut. When he turned back to Hermione she was still staring at him, wide-eyed. “I...didn’t think you would want...”

“Would want what?” Harry tried to keep his voice as even as possible.

“To see me again.” She bit her lip.

“Ever?” He was surprised at the light evenness of his own tone. He would never have predicted he’d be able to hold his own emotions in check like this — and then he realized who he sounded like. Malfoy. It wasn’t as if Draco’s ability to conceal whatever he felt hadn’t annoyed Harry keenly in the past, but he embraced it now with relief. Shouting at Hermione would accomplish nothing but making them both more miserable; that he could talk to her at all made him grateful for that part of Draco he had absorbed into his own personality. “I wouldn’t want that,” he said, moving away from the doors. She stiffened as he approached, but he only leaned against the balustrade and looked at her from a distance of a few feet. “We can’t let our friendship be destroyed over this.”

“No, I...” He had expected her to look relieved, but instead she only looked even more distressed. “I wouldn’t want that either,” she finished.

“I’m glad to hear that.” Harry could see distant figures on the other balconies, mostly couples, and felt a sharp pang of jealousy — he might have learned how to conceal his emotions, he thought, but there seemed no way around having them in the first place. “So, is that what you want? To be friends?” Hermione looked away quickly, as if hiding the expression on her face, and Harry said, “If that’s all you want, tell me now and I’ll never bring it up again.”

Hermione's voice sounded muffled. "Don't be stupid, Harry."

"Stupid?" The flat edge of his tone was beginning to fray; apparently there was only so far even Malfoy cool could get you. "I thought we were going to be together for the rest of our lives and you just told me that that's not the case. Don't you think I deserve at least a straight answer as to why? Or what it is you want from me? How do you expect me to be around you if I don't even know how you think of me —"

"You don't have to be around me," Hermione said, her voice still muffled. He wished he could see her face. "I've accepted a place in Cornwall at the Institute for Medical Wizardry. I want to be a mediwizard, Harry. I don't ever want to have to sit by again while someone I love is injured or dying and know that there's nothing I can do." She took a deep breath. "The place starts next week and lasts a year. After that I would go on to an apprenticeship in London—"

"A year? Is that what this is about? Hermione, I can wait a year. We could get married when you come back, move to London —"

"That's not what this is about!" she flared, and turned back to him; he could see that her eyes were shining with tears. "This isn't about me, it's about you."

Somewhere in the back of Harry's head, a voice said dryly, *That's certainly a reversal of the old 'it's not you, it's me' line. Points for originality.* So now he was *thinking* like Draco. Harry shoved the voice to the back of his mind and said, "What about me? Do you think I wouldn't want you to go? I would miss you, but of course I know how important your studies are to you, and —"

"No, no, it's not that either," Hermione said in despair. "Don't you—"

"I could come with you, we could get a house and you could pursue your work - it would save you money on accommodations, and I —"

“Harry, *try* to understand, please—“

The anger finally broke through his calm. “I think it’s pretty clear that I *don’t* understand!”

“And I don’t know how to explain it to you, it’s just that —“ she took a shuddering breath —“ever since I’ve met you, Harry, all the time I’ve known you, your life has been about one thing. Killing Voldemort. And I always thought it was sad, that your life could never really be about you or what you wanted, that all of what you could accomplish was narrowed down to that one thing. But I understood it. It was life or death for you. For all of us. The problem is, though, Harry, that you never learned to live any other way. Since Voldemort’s been dead, I’ve watched you trying to make your life about something else — and now you want to make your life about me, and *I won’t let you*. If I loved you less, maybe I would let you. Maybe I’d be glad I had a boyfriend who showed me such devotion. But I love you too much to let you go on never knowing what you really want or who you really are.”

He stared at her, his mouth half-open. “That’s not true.”

“Isn’t it?” She sounded exhausted, as if her speech had taken all the energy out of her. “What would you do in Cornwall, Harry, while I was studying?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted after a pause. “I’m sure I’d find something.”

“That sounds fun for you,” Hermione said acidly.

“Fun?” Harry echoed, puzzled.

“Yes, fun. You know, those brief shining moments we had in between you trying to kill or be killed. Snowball fights, that sort of thing.”

“I can’t make my life about snowball fights, Hermione.”

“And I’m not saying you should.” She shook her head, her dark curls bouncing against her cheeks. “I’m saying you need to be a whole person, Harry. You don’t even know who you are or what you want to do. You’ve let other people make your life for you, because you had to. And now you want me to make your life for you, but I won’t. How do you think I’d feel, watching you wander aimlessly around Cornwall, bored and miserable, just because I was there? You could be almost anything you wanted to be, Harry. Do anything you wanted.”

“I don’t know what I want to do,” Harry said. “There’s almost nothing I’m sure of, Hermione. Nothing except that I know I want to be with you.”

She looked at him sadly. Her eyes were still bright, though the tears hadn’t yet spilled down her cheeks. She said, “I’m not enough. Not enough to hang your whole life on. Some day you’d figure out exactly what it is you do want and then you’d hate me for not letting you find it out earlier...”

He moved towards her and this time she didn’t move away, just stood slumped against the balustrade as if all the strength had gone out of her. “I would never hate you,” he said.

“I went to the Mirror of Erised once,” she said, “and looked in it — though I knew better, even then — and in it, I saw myself *alone*. And I was horrified — I thought maybe it meant I didn’t really love you. Or that I couldn’t love. And then when all that happened with Ron, I thought maybe I’d gone mad and didn’t know what I was doing. That was a bad time for me, Harry. But I realized, later, when I saw you in Romania, what the mirror was telling me. I do want to be alone, I need to be alone, so that I can know who I am and you can know who you are. Because only then can we really choose to be with each other.”

“You sound so calm,” Harry said, looking down into the garden. The wind was blowing the rose petals from the afternoon’s ceremony across the grass in small white tornadoes. “I suppose you’ve been getting used to this, over all these months.”

“I’m not calm,” Hermione said tightly. “I’m terrified.” Her hand was at her throat again and he realized what it was that she was holding: the blue glass ring he had meant to give her at Christmas, that he had thrown against the wall instead. A silver thread ran through it, where it had cracked but not shattered.

“I could fix that, if you wanted,” Harry said, taking another step towards her and touching the ring lightly with his fingertips.

“No,” she said, letting go of the chain so that the ring slithered down the front of her dress. “I like it the way it is.”

“Flawed?”

She looked up at him, half-startled. “Flawed but perfect,” she said.

His hand brushed her hair. “This is really what you want?”

“It’s not what I want.” She shivered. “It’s what I know. You think I’m not terrified? Terrified if I let you go you won’t ever come back to me?”

“I’ll always come back to you,” he said, and was startled when she threw her arms around him, burying her face in the front of his shirt. He could feel her shaking, as if she were crying, though she made no noise.

“I love you,” he said. “I should have said it before, when I asked you. I’ll always love you.”

“I know,” she said, into his shirt. “I love you, too. Sometimes I wish I loved you less. This is too hard. I can’t do it. I can’t.” The last word ended on a wail, and Harry tightened his arms around her, feeling the sharp edge of the ring she wore around her neck as it dug into his skin.

“Don’t,” he said. “There’s never been anything you couldn’t do, once you set your mind to it.”

At that, Hermione actually laughed a little, and pulled away, looking up at him with too-bright eyes. “That’s so typically Harry Potter,” she said. “Now you’re trying to make me feel better about not marrying you?”

His hands slid to her waist, and to her surprise, he lifted her up suddenly so that she was sitting on top of the marble balustrade. Now her head was higher than his and she was looking down at him, her hands braced on his shoulders. “You’ll come around,” he said. “Eventually.”

She leaned down until the silk rose in her hair brushed his cheek. “And in the meantime, you’ll try to have fun, right?”

“I’ll do my best,” he said, and lifted his face so that she only had to lean down a fraction for their lips to touch. She slid down from the balustrade as they kissed, balancing precariously on the tips of her high-heeled shoes. Framed against the lights of the French doors, their clearly outlined silhouettes seemed to soften and reform as they clung together, two separate shadows melding into one.

When Ginny came back into the ballroom, she searched in vain for Draco. He was nowhere to be found. At first, she thought he must still be with Harry, but after dancing with several partners, including Viktor Krum, a Malfoy cousin or some such with slightly crossed eyes, and Aidan Lynch (“He’s all grabby, like an octopus,” Blaise warned her, not untruthfully), she saw Harry and Hermione come in to the ballroom through a set of

French doors. They were holding hands, Harry's former air of despondency having entirely vanished.

Ginny looked around the ballroom with a sinking heart. Perhaps Draco had found some other girl in the interim and gone off to snog with her in the gardens? After all, they had never established that this was a date, of the serious date variety. Technically she still wasn't quite broken up with Seamus — in fact, if she were entirely honest with herself, she still hadn't decided what to do about that love potion.

"You all right?" said a voice at her elbow. It was Charlie, looking concerned and a little ruffled. She wondered if it was just something about being a teacher: they all seemed to wind up looking as if they'd been crumpled up and left to straighten out on their own. Charlie's hair was ruffled and his tie creased, but his expression was bright and cheerful. "You look a bit confused. Where's your boy?"

It took Ginny a moment to realize he meant Seamus. "Oh, he was called away at the last minute. Family thing," she said, vaguely.

"That explains his sudden dash from the wedding," said Charlie. "And why you were dancing with Draco—"

"You haven't seen him, have you?" Ginny asked. "Draco, I mean."

"He was talking to Albus," said Charlie slowly. "And then, I think, he went upstairs — it looked as if he stopped to say goodnight to Sirius and Narcissa, so I'd guess he probably isn't coming down again." He paused at her expression. "Is that bad news?"

Speechless for a moment, Ginny glanced around the room again, as if Draco might reappear, despite Charlie's words. She saw Ron and Blaise, seated in a corner, their heads close together, Harry and Hermione dancing, Sirius and Narcissa, hand in hand, laughing with Professor Lupin by the ice sculpture. She lifted her chin. "Not bad news, no," she said. "I'm

glad you told me.”

Charlie looked baffled. “Hey, if you—“ he began, but by the time he got to the end of his sentence, she was already walking out of the room.

“Hiding up here, are you?”

“I’m not sure one can be said to be hiding, precisely,” he said gently, “if one is in one’s own room. At the very least, it’s not a very effective method of concealing oneself.”

“I didn’t say you were hiding from *me*,” she said, crossly.

Draco’s eyebrows went up. “Then who...?” His mouth curled at the corners. “I see,” he said. “You mean I’m hiding from myself, don’t you? Now *that’s* insightful. Really, you can just see right through me like a pane of glass, Ginny Weasley.”

She shook her head. “What did Dumbledore say to you? You weren’t acting like this before.”

“How do you know I talked to —“ He broke off and shrugged. “I doubt it’s old Albus,” he said. “I think it’s far more likely that I’m sobering up. I apologize if I was inappropriate. I tend to get flirtatious when I’m drunk.”

“You weren’t drunk. I didn’t see you go near the punch table all night.”

Draco only looked at her as if he were waiting for her to say something worth replying to. She felt herself flush.

“And you weren’t inappropriate,” she said. “*This* is what’s inappropriate, this stupid pretense of yours that I don’t care about you and you don’t care about me.”

“I never said that.”

“You don’t have to. You know just how to behave to drive me away. You’ve been doing it for a year, pushing me away but never quite far enough — it’s like you’ve sawed away at this tie between us until there’s only the thinnest thread left, but you can’t quite bring yourself to cut it entirely, can you?”

He looked up at her through heavy-lidded eyes. “Can’t I?” he said.

“I think if you could have,” Ginny said slowly, “you would have, already. You can’t stand letting yourself love someone because you think it’ll destroy you both. That’s why loving Hermione was so perfect for you. You could never have her. And Blaise, you didn’t love her at all. Which was cruel, you know, but I suppose in your backwards way you thought you were being kind. And me—“

“And you?” Draco was standing up very straight now, looking at her, his affected disinterest having vanished. His face was shut, making her think of a locked box whose plain design left no clue as to what was contained within. Over the months she had dreamed all sorts of things into it, and perhaps opening it, she would find she had been entirely wrong about its contents. But at least she would *know*. “What is it you want to hear?” he asked, musingly, and very calm. “The ugly truth or the beautiful lie?”

“I want the truth. That’s all I ever wanted from you.”

A sharp laugh escaped him. “Oh, now, that isn’t true. There’s nothing pretty about the truth, Ginny, especially about me. It’s all prickly bits and sharp edges. Try to pull it out of me and you’ll only wind up with cut and bleeding hands.”

“Then I’ll make it simple for you,” she said. “Say you don’t love me.”

For the first time, he seemed caught off guard. “What?”

“Say you don’t love me,” she said. “If it’s true, say it. I know you wouldn’t lie.”

Draco looked as close to nonplussed as she’d ever seen him — as if she’d asked him suddenly the answer to a deviously difficult Arithmancy problem while he was in the middle of doing something else. “Ginny…”

“The truth won’t hurt me,” she said. “Really, it would be a mercy, either way.”

“Maybe I don’t have an answer,” he said.

Ginny’s hand went to the front of her dress. She drew from the bodice of it her wand, and pointed it at him. “Then I’ll *Veritas* you,” she said. “I’m taking this out of your hands, Draco. That should be a relief to you — shouldn’t it?”

He had taken his hands out of his pockets, reflexively, as if he meant to ward off her spell. He had his head down, looking at the wand, but when he raised it, she saw that he was starting to smile — a smile of wry relief, the same sort of look she’d seen on his face once after an especially hard Quidditch match, a look that said that the battle had been hard fought but there was some joy, perhaps, in at least knowing that it was over.

“I don’t *want* to love you,” he said.

The wand in Ginny’s hand trembled. She could feel herself breathing hard, too hard; she was getting lightheaded. “*And?*” she prompted.

“And I remember when I knew you were *that girl*, the one I remembered,” he said. His voice had a tone she’d never heard in it before: defeated but not unhappy. “We were in Slytherin’s castle, and you were shouting at me about something. I knew you then. Something about how you looked

when you were angry did it, I think. Or it might just have been the fire — there was a fire in the library that day, when I was twelve.”

Because Lucius was burning the diary, Ginny thought, but she was remembering that room in the castle, the fire in the grate and Draco looking at her with sleepy, deadly eyes; their kiss had tasted like salt and brandy. “I remember,” she said.

“Perhaps that’s why I’ve always thought of fire, when I think of you,” he said. “Perhaps that’s why the red dress. Or perhaps it was because I knew there was something between us that, if we gave ourselves up to it, would burn us up and leave nothing behind.”

The wand wavered in Ginny’s hand. “I don’t know what you mean.”

He was looking at her thoughtfully now, the wry smile gone. “Perhaps you could survive it,” he said. “But that which is hollow burns easily. I couldn’t give you what you wanted — not without running the risk of being consumed myself. I had so little of me to go on...” He shook his head, as if snapping himself out of a daydream. “I put what roadblocks I could in our path — to keep me from disappointing you. And I knew I was disappointing you as I did it, but I imagined it was an easier disappointment than you would face if I let myself love you.”

“But you wouldn’t cut me off completely. You would push me away and then pull me back — *why?*” she cried, lowering the wand.

“Because I’m selfish,” he said. “Haven’t you been listening? And cowardly, too. And I made my actions seem mysterious, I suppose, so you wouldn’t know just how selfish and how cowardly —“

She shook her head so vehemently at that that he broke off with a choked laugh.

“You deserve *better*,” he told her, gravely.

“You told me love can’t grow in a dying heart,” she said, her mouth dry. “You said you would love me if you could.”

“With all my rags of heart are capable of,” he said, “I remember, Ginny. You don’t have to quote me to myself.”

“You aren’t dying any more,” she said.

“I know,” he said. “And I was so good at it, too. I’m not nearly as good at knowing how to live.” He searched her face for a moment with steady grey eyes. She could tell he was nerving himself up for something; he had that look about him, contained but kinetic. “Dying would have been the easy way never to have to answer your question,” he said, “or any questions, and if there is one thing that has always been true about you, it’s that you make me question myself — and questioning myself inevitably proves to me how little of myself exists to sustain that sort of interrogation. I know you, Ginny, better than I know myself. You are whole and entire — loyal and honest and stupidly, amazingly stubborn and beautiful as you are — and I’m shadows and the ghost of old lies held together by good intentions and hope.”

She dropped her wand. It landed with a *click* on the floor and rolled under a small night table. “Say you don’t love me,” she said.

He took a step towards her. “Ginny —“

“As a favor to me, please, just say it. I’m asking you —“

“*Do you really want the answer?*” He was standing in front of her suddenly, close enough to touch, and his face was very white but his grey eyes burned with a sharp clear light, like transparent crystals.

“Yes,” she whispered, “yes, I want it, yes.”

He caught her wrist, she knew it was with his left hand because she felt the light scrape of his scar against her skin. “I can’t say I don’t love you,” he said in measured tones, “because it would be a lie. I love you. I think I have for longer than I’ve known it. I tried not to love you. I didn’t want to love you. I did all I could to push you away, but in some way, somehow, I have found that you are — to me — essential.”

Her breath caught. It was suddenly very quiet in the room between them, Draco looking down at her, his mouth a flat hard line. She could hear the ticking of the clock on the bedside table, the rustle of branches hitting the window. The uneven sound of his breathing. He was looking down at their joined hands, where his fingers wrapped her wrist. As suddenly as he had taken hold of her, he let go.

“And there you have it,” he said. “The truth. I take it by your astonished expression that you had expected something different?”

She said nothing. She couldn’t find her voice; she had imagined this moment so many times, imagined his voice, saying those words, but she had never imagined her own response, what it might be. Her dreams had ended with him. They always did.

He put his hand against the wall as if to steady himself. “I suppose I deserve that,” he said, “your silence.”

She still said nothing, and he looked away from her, towards the window. The stars were just visible through the thick glass, like faint blurs of light. She could see herself in the dark glass as if it were a mirror; see her own white face, the bright flame-color of her dress, the metallic shine of the clasps that held up the straps. She lifted her hand to the clasps and undid them, one by one. The dress slid with a whisper of silk to the floor at her feet; she stepped out of it, and walked across the room to Draco, and put her hand on his arm.

He looked at her with what was, for that moment, the purest astonishment she had ever seen or imagined on his face. “Ginny...”

“That dress comes off more easily than any other piece of clothing I’ve ever owned,” she said. “Did you think of that when you bought it?”

“Perhaps,” he said, slowly, his eyes never leaving her face. “Ginny, you don’t have to—“

She put her hands, flat, on his chest. She could feel his heartbeat against the palm of her right hand, through the stiff white material of his dress shirt. The emeralds at his wrists winked at her, though he kept his hands at his sides. “I want to,” she said.

He reached for her then, but stopped mid-gesture, his fingers millimetres from her face. She could feel the warmth of him, radiating from his skin, but they were not —not quite—touching.

“What’s wrong?” she whispered.

His expression had not changed, but his light eyes had gone so dark that they were nearly black. Dark with desire, she thought, and felt an odd burst of something like triumph, or delight, mixed with desire of her own. “You have to ask me,” he said. “I told you I wouldn’t touch you — unless you asked.”

She raised her chin. “Please,” she said.

His fingers touched her then, hands cupping her face as he bent to kiss her — a kiss that started out gentle and quickly flared into a near-ferocity that left her mouth feeling bruised. Her nerves sang as he kissed her cheek, her jawline, her throat; she pulled at his tie, the buttons of his shirt, snapping some of them off in her impatience and haste to get it over his head, to feel his skin against hers. The scar where the arrow had gone into his shoulder gleamed like a silver crescent. She kissed it, and

heard him laugh, say something she couldn't quite hear, and then his arms went around her, lifting her up, and she realized he must have whispered *Nox* because the room went dark and there was only moonlight as he laid her down on the bed, only moonlight and through the window, the faint, changeable illumination of the stars.

The moon was out in all its brightness, and to an eye less trained in observing its every alteration, however slight, it might have looked full. Remus Lupin knew better. He felt the stir of the moon's cycles in his blood now, like an old sailor intimately familiar with the changing course of the tide. *Three days*, he thought. Then it would be full, but it wasn't yet, and that was fortunate because he was enjoying himself where he was, sitting at the top of an old and crumbling stone stairway that led down to a patch of thick grass and rocks that had probably once been some sort of private garden. The air smelled of grass, and faintly of roses.

"Contemplating your old enemy?" said Sirius, who had come up behind him with the silent grace that had earned him his nickname among his friends at school. He sat down on the step beside Remus and cast a considering glance at the sky. His tie was loose and his cuffs unsnapped, and in the darkness it was impossible to see the grey threads in his black hair.

"We've come to something of an understanding," said Remus, "the moon and I. I wouldn't call it an enemy."

"It looks full," Sirius observed.

"It isn't."

"Obviously." Sirius moved his considering glance from the moon to his old friend. "So where are you off too now, Moony? Teaching over the summer again, like last year?"

"No," said Remus. "Not this summer, I don't think."

Sirius cleared his throat. "You know, Narcissa and I have talked."

"That's good," Remus observed, "since you married her."

“Talked about *you*, I mean,” Sirius clarified. “And we’d both be happy – perfectly happy — if you wanted to live here, you know, in the summers. There’s plenty of rooms. And the dungeons have cells in them, you know, if you wanted to lock yourself up.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you.”

“I’m not joking, Remus. You know how James and Lily always said their house was ours too. I never thought I’d have a house to offer my friends — I never thought I’d live that long, and then, when I was in Azkaban, I never thought I’d get out. But now I have a home, and I want you to know it’s yours, too. Whatever’s mine — is yours.”

Remus rubbed the back of his hand across his tired eyes, and smiled. “I know. And when I was at school, I remember how we used to say we’d all live in a house together when we grew up, and we’d have Ministry jobs together and do everything together. It was comforting at the time. But I’m too old for that now, Sirius. I need my own house. My own life.”

Sirius was silent for a moment, toeing a pebble in the dirt with the tip of a shoe. “If it’s money you need then —“

“I don’t need money.”

“I thought you wanted to buy a house.”

“I do.”

“Teaching suddenly paying better these days?” Sirius inquired.

“Perhaps.”

“Those books of yours doing pretty well, too.”

“Yes, actually —“ Remus began, and stopped, realizing. “My ... books?” he said slowly.

Sirius was grinning. “I do know, you see. I’m not a complete idiot.”

“You mean you know —“

“That you’re Aurora Twilight? Of course.”

“But — how? I didn’t — I mean, I don’t —“

“I remember when you used to tweak Lily for reading those books,” Sirius said good-naturedly. “You always said you could write one yourself in a week and make a million galleons.”

“Did I say a million? I may have been *slightly* overestimating...”

“You used to say all you had to do was give yourself a stupid pen name like Rosamunde Moonlight and churn out some mindless pap and all the witches would go mad for it because after all, you’re a man and you know what women want.”

“I did NOT say that.”

“You did actually. Ah, sweet confidence of youth.”

“Optimism, I would say. I suppose I actually thought by this time of life I *would* know what women wanted.” Lupin propped an elbow on his knee and rested his chin thoughtfully on his hand. “Even the writing part turned out harder than I thought. It seems even mindless drivel requires some work.”

“Oh, it’s not all drivel, Moony. I found some parts of it surprisingly good — the part where Tristan thinks he’s going to die so he declares his undying love to whatserface, that was quite moving, I thought.”

“Yes,” said Remus drily, “I’m sure the love of Tristan and whatserface is one for the history books.”

“Anyway,” said Sirius, with a grin, “I thought it was quite well done.”

“It’ll buy me a little cottage, any road,” said Remus, “somewhere nice and quiet. I don’t need much — a teapot, a place for my books, and a good quantity of dog biscuits for when you come visiting.”

“And a desk to write at.”

Remus was silent for a moment, looking thoughtfully down at his hands, scarred by so many transformations. “I had thought I might write a real book,” he said. “A story about four friends and how differently their lives turned out than they thought they would when they were children.”

“A *real* book,” echoed Sirius, and then, “Don’t you think it’ll hurt, writing about all that? Aren’t you afraid you’ll remember it all?”

“I am much less afraid to remember,” said Remus, very quietly, “than I am to forget.”

Ginny opened her eyes slowly and blinked up at the ceiling in confusion, for a moment forgetting entirely where she was. She could have sworn that the ceiling of the guest room had a pattern of fleur-de-lis on it, where this ceiling seemed to be embossed with a design of curling snakes...

Memory hit her with a jolt, and she sat bolt upright. She was in Draco Malfoy’s bedroom, and that was his ceiling. It wasn’t the first time she’d looked at it, either. She put her hand over her mouth and glanced down; Draco was sleeping peacefully in the bed beside her, sheets tangled around his waist. The moonlight outlined him in patterns of shadow and frost, silvering the already-bright hair and etching the lines of muscle along his back. For a moment, she sat quietly, enjoying the view. Then she slipped out of the bed and went to retrieve her gown and wand. She dressed quietly, so as not to wake Draco, and wound her hair into a neat, if unglamorous, bun at the back of her neck. Her butterfly clips were gone — probably under Draco’s bed or lost in the sheets, but looking for them would only wake him up, and besides, it wasn’t as if she planned to see anyone. Or be seen.

She made her way down the steps barefoot, pausing only to retrieve something from her bedroom. It took her several tries but she eventually found the door that led to the rose garden outside.

The air was perfect: cool without being cold, and scented like roses and lavender. Since Christmas she had hated roses, the color and smell of them, but now she found it no longer bothered her. Some of the white petals from the previous day's ceremony still ghosted by on the wind, tickling her cheeks and catching in her hair.

She made her way down one of the paved paths until she stood a distance from the castle. Then she drew out the flask of love potion Hermione had given her and looked at it meditatively for a moment. She pulled the stopper free. The smell that rose from the flask was like the smell of rotted flowers, the corruption of something transient and sweet. She ran her finger slowly around the flask — it was slightly warm from the liquid inside it, and from being held in her hand — and then, with a set face, she upended it, spilling the love potion onto the leaves and flowers of a nearby rose bush. The liquid ran down the bush in threads of silver and sank into the earth.

“What are you doing?” said a masculine voice, just behind her.

Ginny whirled in surprise, half-expecting it to be Draco — perhaps she'd woken him after all — but the eyes that looked back at her were blue, not gray, and the hair was gold and not silver. He was dressed in jeans and a light sweater, and the freckles on his face were visible even in the dark.

“Seamus?” she whispered. She could feel the hand that held the flask trembling. “What — I mean, I thought you had gone.”

“I told you I was going to come back.”

His voice was even, almost toneless. She felt her hand tighten on the flask — it was solid silver, very heavy, a formidable weapon — before she caught herself. *This is Seamus, not Tom. Seamus would never hurt you.*

“I didn't know you meant you'd come back in the middle of the night and skulk around the Manor grounds,” she said.

A faint smile touched his mouth. “I came by broomstick, actually. I was about to knock on the door when I saw you sneaking down the path into the garden. I couldn't help wondering what you were up to.”

Ginny glanced down at the flask, and then back up at Seamus. “Watering the rose bushes?” she ventured.

“Watering them with love potion,” said Seamus. “Are you sure that’s wise?”

She gaped at him. “How —“

“Hermione told me about your plan.”

I knew she was lying. Silently, Ginny called Hermione any number of profane names. Out loud, she said, “Is that why you left?”

“Not precisely. That was part of it, I suppose,” he said, reflectively. “I can’t say I was pleased that you felt you needed to drug yourself to care about me.”

“Seamus,” she said, wretchedly. “I do care about you. I honestly do. That’s why I wanted to — you know — use the love potion. Just to give myself a little push.”

“Interesting,” said Seamus. “And even more interesting that you seem to have changed your mind.”

“I thought you weren’t coming back,” she whispered.

“But I am back.” In the moonlight, his blue eyes looked almost blue-black, the color of dark pansies. “So what are you going to do now?”

She lowered her head. The sense of guilt and gnawing defeat was like a pain in her chest. “Whatever you want me to,” she said. “I can get more love potion — or if you don’t want that, maybe we could try something else. We could go away together. Maybe if it was just us —“

“Is it that you could never have loved me?” he asked, flatly, “or is it that you can’t love me as I am now?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “I made you as you are now.”

“If I told you to pack your things and come with me, would you do it?”

“Right now? Tonight?” She stared at him.

“Yes. Tonight.”

“And go where?”

“Does that matter?” he demanded.

“No,” Ginny said numbly. “I suppose not.” She glanced down at herself; her bare arms were bumpy with gooseflesh. “I’d need to get my clothes — and write a note to my parents.”

Seamus shook his head slowly. “All this just for guilt, Ginny?”

Her head came up quickly. “I told you. I care about you.”

“But you don’t love me,” he said, and took a step towards her, and another, and now she was pinned against the rose bush, the thorns catching in the material of her dress. “And you never did. It was always Malfoy. You would have done anything he told you to, because you loved him. Me, you only pity.”

“I don’t pity you, Seamus,” she said, struggling to keep her voice even.

“Not at the moment,” he said. “At the moment, you’re afraid of me.” She saw his mouth twist into a bitter line. “I suppose we’ll never know now, will we?”

“Know what?”

“If it ever could have worked out. You, and me the way I was. I won’t be that way again. I still have some of *him* in me. Like a residue left behind. His soul is gone, but the shadow it cast is still there, inside me.”

“Seamus —“

“No. Let me finish,” he said, so sharply that she tightened her grip on the flask. “I know him, Ginny, better than probably anyone other than you ever did know him. And he loved you. In his twisted, backward way —

something about the way you brought him back, your tears mixed with his blood, you were part of him. He couldn't get free of you. He killed shadows of you to try to burn you out of his head, but it didn't work. You obsessed him."

"But you're not him — we were together before any of that happened —"

"That doesn't matter," said Seamus. "He took my love for you and fed it into himself. He couldn't escape it, so he transformed it. He was in hate with you. He dreamed of killing you the way I might have dreamed of kissing you. Once."

"Once?" Ginny said faintly. "You don't want to kiss me ... any more?"

Looking down at her, he shook his head slowly. "How do you think it feels," he said, "to look at the one person you love most in the world, and dream about killing her? Not because you want to, because you can't help it. I used to think about how beautiful the curve of your shoulder into your neck was. Tom just thinks how your neck would look with blood splashed all over it."

Ginny made a faint, sickly sound. If she brought her hand up quickly enough she could catch him on the temple, and —

"I know you're thinking about hitting me with that flask," said Seamus. "Don't bother. My reflexes are better than yours."

"I could scream," she said. "They'd come running."

"Probably," said Seamus, sounding suddenly tired. "But I wouldn't bother. I'm not going to hurt you, Ginny. I came here to let you go."

"Let me go?" she echoed, puzzled.

"You stay with me out of guilt," said Seamus. "Don't bother arguing, I know it already. I appreciated that in the beginning. I did. It was a help to have you with me. But as time went on I started to realize that being around you was keeping that part of me that was Tom Riddle still alive. He feeds on your proximity. I need to not be near you, Ginny, for that part of me to die forever. You think you're being kind by staying with me,

but actually, your presence tortures me. I'm sorry, but I need to be away from you. Do you understand?"

"Seamus," she whispered. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"I didn't really understand it myself," he said. "Hermione made me understand it — she said she could tell from watching me what I was going through, that you'd never understand it because you couldn't see how I was when you *weren't* there, how different I was. And she said you'd bleed yourself out trying to help me when all along being away from you was the only thing that would help us both. I mean, I thought it was just that I was never going to get rid of that part of me that was Riddle, but when I talked to her I realized that when you weren't around, I didn't *have* those thoughts."

"If I'd taken the love potion—" Ginny began, suddenly transfixed with horror at the thought.

"Then we'd both be miserable. You'd love me, I couldn't stand to be around you. And I suppose Malfoy wouldn't have been too happy, though you never can tell with him. He's a strange one."

Ginny could only agree that this was true. "Where will you go, Seamus?"

He moved back, freeing her from the rose bush. She pulled her dress away from the snagging thorns.

"I don't know," he said, "and I wouldn't tell you if I did. When you hear from me again, it will be because I know there's none of *him* inside me any more. Without you around, I'm hoping he'll die of starvation." He shook his head, and turned to retrieve his broomstick from where he'd stashed it behind a tree. She wasn't sure if she was imagining it or not, but it seemed to her that the set of his shoulders was more confident, relaxed even, than she had seen it in months. "Quite a pair of right stupid prats we've been, thinking we were being heroically self-sacrificing when actually we were just putting the other person through hell," he added, mounting his Cloudburst with the ease of long practice. "So much for suffering in silence."

Ginny agreed that this was true. Her knees felt weak with relief, and she wondered for a moment if she was going to pitch forward onto the grass.

“Good luck,” Seamus added, more gently. “And I hope Malfoy makes you happy.”

So do I, Ginny almost said, but she stopped herself, knowing it wasn't what she really meant. “I am happy,” she said. “But not because of Malfoy.”

“Good,” said Seamus, and before she could say anything to that — before she could even wish him good-bye — he had kicked off from the ground and was flying, a bright speck in the dark sky that receded swiftly until it was lost among the clouds. She stood a long time after he had gone, staring up into the dark sky, before she headed back to the Manor with a determined stride.

Harry woke up early, with a faint and gnawing sense of dread in his stomach. It didn't help that it was a beautiful day, that beams of yellow sunlight were spilling into his room through the window, or that he was quite sure he could hear birdsong. He still had the sense that something was off-kilter, not quite right. It wasn't Hermione, he thought, swinging his legs off the bed. They'd worked things out. And the wedding had gone off well. And he'd worked out what he wanted to do for at least the next six months of his life — provided Malfoy was amenable — which was something of an accomplishment. Maybe he was just hungry.

He threw on some jeans and his Puddlemere United shirt and padded downstairs to find some breakfast. Narcissa had completely done over the enormous Manor kitchen, which had once sported a terrifyingly huge cast-iron stove that looked like you could bake a troll in it and stacks of burnt-black pots and pans. It was still huge of course, but much friendlier-looking, with a long wooden serving table that at the moment was laden with all sorts of breakfast items — meusli and milk, toast and eggs, bacon and kippers. Harry snagged a sweet roll and a yogurt and sat down to eat. There was a hot pot of coffee floating above a Heating Charm on the table, but Harry eschewed it. Coffee made him jumpy.

He could hear a murmur of voices from the dining room — so he wasn't the only one who was awake — and was considering getting up to check it out when Draco staggered into the room in his black pajamas, his hair sticking up, looking remarkably like the Ghost of Christmas Past as portrayed in a secondary school theater production. Harry choked on his sweet roll.

“M'foy,” he said, around a wad of roll, when he caught his breath, “wha' on urf —“

Draco threw himself down into a chair opposite Harry and stared at him with large, tragic eyes. “A terrible thing has happened,” he announced.

Harry swallowed. “What?” he demanded. “What terrible thing? Are you all right? Is Hermione all right? Ron —“

Draco waved an impatient hand. “I'm not talking about them,” he said impatiently. “I'm talking about me. A terrible thing has happened to *me*. Ginny,” he announced, “has left me.”

Harry felt his eyebrows shoot up. “She left you?”

Draco nodded.

Harry reached for his yogurt. It was quite possible that he was going to need protein to get through this conversation. “You know,” he said cautiously, “I always thought that for someone to leave you, first they had to be...” He paused. “*With* you. You know?”

“She was with me!” Draco snapped. “Where have you been? Get with the program, Potter.”

“I thought I was with the program,” Harry pointed out. “She was dating Seamus right up until yesterday afternoon.”

“Exactly,” said Draco, although, Harry felt, he had not made the kind of observation that merited an ‘exactly’ as much as it merited, perhaps, further explanation. “And after that she was with me.”

Harry blinked in befuddlement. “So what makes you think she’s left you now?”

“Because when I woke up this morning, she was gone.”

Harry choked on his yogurt, which was nearly as unpleasant as choking on a roll. “From your bedroom, you mean?” he said finally, when he got his breath back.

“Well, where else would we have been sleeping? Be reasonable, Potter.”

“So you — you mean to say that you —“

Draco heaved an elaborate sigh. “All right, look. Maybe you should just read this. It’ll clear up your confusion.” He tossed a folded bit of parchment at Harry, who caught it with a Seeker’s expert reflexes. “It’s the note she left on the pillow when she LEFT ME, to forestall your inevitable question.”

“All right...” Harry set the yogurt down on the table while he unfolded the note. Draco eyed it hungrily.

“Is that blackcurrant?” he demanded, and when Harry nodded, snaked it off the table and began eating it thoughtfully. At least being heartbroken hadn’t affected his appetite, Harry noted.

The letter had clearly been written in a hurry — Ginny’s normally neat handwriting sloped all over the page — and took up most of a sheet of parchment. Harry began to read, but was swiftly brought up short.

“Er, Malfoy,” he said. “there’s some pretty steamy stuff in this letter. I’m not sure I should be reading it.”

Draco waved his non-yogurt-occupied hand airily. “We have no secrets from each other.”

“Yes, but—eurgh, okay, I’m skipping *that* part...I don’t even know how you managed that without breaking something. There’s some pretty ripe

descriptions of your appearance in here, too. ‘Silver hair’? Who has silver hair?”

“I do,” said Draco. “Or what color did you think it was?”

“I dunno,” Harry said. “Blond?”

Draco snorted as if this were the most ridiculous thing he had ever heard.

Harry made a noise as if he were being strangled. “Not only that, Malfoy, but apparently you can go all night like a pile driver. Did I need to know that? I don’t think I did,” he added plaintively. “Now there is an image that will haunt me. Thanks a lot.”

“What’s a pile driver?” asked Ron, coming into the kitchen with his red hair sticking straight up as if he’d slept clutching a live wire.

Harry immediately shoved the letter down his shirt. “It’s a Muggle device that — that —“

“Runs all night long,” said Draco blandly. “Sort of a perpetual motion machine.”

“Perpetu-what?” Ron said good-naturedly, pouring himself a cup of tea. “You blokes do manage to have the most boring conversations ever, don’t you?” he added, and wandered by them into the dining room. As he went past Draco muttered under his breath, just inaudibly enough, “*Oh yeah? Well I shagged your sister.*”

MALFOY, Harry said silently, horrified, *That’s only funny when it’s not actually true.*

I disagree, said Draco, who was rapidly finishing the blackcurrant yogurt. “Anyway,” he added out loud, “did you finish the letter?”

“Regrettably yes,” said Harry, fishing it back out of his shirt. “And I don’t see what you’re so worked up about.”

“She *left* me,” Draco said, again. “You don’t think that’s a big deal?”

“Well, I can’t say I’m surprised, given the bizarre way you’ve treated her for the past year. Anyway, she makes some good points here. She’s got another year of school and you don’t, so —“

“Hogwash,” said Draco. “She has used me for sex and then dumped me. Nothing like this has ever happened to a Malfoy before.”

“Maybe they just leave that part out of the family histories.”

“Impossible,” said Draco, glowering down into his empty yogurt container. “This is humiliating.”

“I don’t see how,” Harry pointed out reasonably. “You’ve been used for sex by a beautiful girl who disappears on you after a torrid night of passion. I bet that hardly ever happens to anybody. Much less anybody who’s seventeen years old.”

“You have a point.” Draco brightened. “Although I can’t believe you just said ‘torrid night of passion.’”

“Neither can I, really. Anyway, she didn’t *dump* you. She’s just sort of — put you off. For the time being.”

“I am Draco Malfoy,” said Draco, eating a biscuit. “I do not get *put off*.” Still, he looked moderately pleased with himself. “Perhaps she feels if she spends too much time around me over the summer, she’ll be overwhelmed by passionate yearning when she goes back to school, and explode. Or something.”

“Or something,” Harry said dryly. Draco had eaten all the blackcurrent yogurt, so he contented himself with raspberry. “Anyway, aren’t you going on that world tour of yours all summer? You weren’t thinking of canceling that, were you?”

“No,” Draco said, looking entirely startled. “I hadn’t thought about it, but no. Of course not.”

“Perhaps Ginny had a point about you not being entirely ready for commitment.”

“That depends,” said Blaise, gliding into the kitchen in a sort of green silk dressing-gown that made her fiery hair look impossibly bright. “Commitment to St. Mungo’s, possibly.” She poured herself some tea.

“There speaks the voice of bitter experience,” said Draco, buttering a roll. Harry wondered if he planned to eat his way through everything on the table. “Draco Malfoy cannot be tamed.”

Blaise rolled her eyes and came around Harry’s left side to get the sugar bowl. Her arm outstretched, she paused and stared. “That’s Ginny’s handwriting,” she said, staring over Harry’s shoulder. “Why have you got a letter from Ginny addressed to ‘my dearest darling’?”

“I don’t! I mean, that’s not what it says. I mean —“ Harry, rattled, crumpled the note into a ball in his fist.

“That is too what it said,” insisted Blaise. “Why on earth’s Ginny writing you love notes, Potter?”

She said this, Harry felt, very loudly, and just as Ron and Hermione entered the kitchen, holding empty plates and chatting in a friendly manner. Their conversation broke off abruptly. “*What* did you say?” said Hermione, with saucer eyes.

“Oh dear,” said Blaise.

Ron looked baffled. “Why would my sister be writing love notes to Harry? I mean, I thought that sort of thing was well in the past.”

“It’s not a love note,” said Harry, clutching the balled-up parchment to his chest.

“It is, rather,” Draco pointed out unhelpfully. “Clearly the product of an infatuated mind.”

“Yes, but —“

“But why would Ginny be writing a letter like that to *Harry?*” Hermione demanded, setting her plate down with a clatter.

“Well, you don’t need to make it sound like I’m an unfanciable berk who no one could possibly ever be fond of,” Harry pointed out, nettled.

“Don’t change the subject,” Hermione snapped, and before Harry could react, snatched the letter right out of his hand.

“Excellent reflexes,” Draco said admiringly. “Why didn’t you ever play Quidditch again?”

“Because it’s a loathsomely dull game,” Hermione replied, her quick dark eyes scanning the parchment. “It certainly *is* a love note,” she said coldly, and then, slightly less coldly, “but Harry, you haven’t got silvery hair, or moonlight colored eyes, or — my *goodness*,” she finished, flushing a dark red. “I have a feeling this letter was meant to be private.” She dropped it back on the table hastily, looking as if she’d picked up Crookshanks and he’d bitten her on the finger.

“Moonlight-colored,” mused Draco. “So true, so true.”

Ron, who might be a bit stolid but was not actually slow, looked from the letter, to Draco, and back. “My sister wrote a love note to MALFOY?” he demanded, and reached for the letter.

Harry, sensing imminent disaster, flung a hand out. “*Immolatus*,” he said, and the note shuddered once, and sifted into ashes.

“You burned my note!” Draco looked annoyed. “That note had sentimental value!”

Yes, well, your neck has sentimental value to me, in that if Ron found out what you got up to with his sister last night, he’d snap it in half, Harry pointed out.

Ron looked at Hermione, who was still pink about the cheeks. “What did it say?” he demanded.

Hermione looked from Draco, to Ron and then to Harry, who was wishing just this once that he could communicate silently with Hermione as he did with Draco. He did the best he could with his eyes, and she must have understood him, because she turned to Ron and said, “It was just a note saying that she’d had a good time at the party with him last night.”

“Huh.” Ron looked unconvinced. “Well, don’t think you’re going to get another chance to drool all over her today, Malfoy. She’s gone off with Fred and George for a beach holiday, and I’m not going to tell you where, either.”

Draco looked as if he were about to say something rude back when the kitchen door swung open again. It was Narcissa this time, dressed in pale gray, a worried expression on her face. She stepped into the kitchen, letting the door swing shut behind her.

“Boys,” she said, gently, looking from Draco to Harry, “Dumbledore’s come to see you. He and Severus are waiting for you in the study.”

Sorry I burned your note, Harry said, as he and Draco left the kitchen — Blaise and Ron looking after them with confusion, and Hermione with large, sympathetic eyes — and headed for the staircase that led to the Manor’s second floor. *I panicked.*

I could tell. Draco’s inner voice sounded dry and somewhat remote, a sea-change from the dramatic, ebulliently woeful tone he’d taken just a few minutes ago in the kitchen. “It’s all right. Look, would you mind coming with me to my room? I don’t fancy facing Snape and the Headmaster in my pajamas.”

“At least they’re silk,” Harry said. *It makes me nervous talking about Snape and Dumbledore out loud. I always have the feeling they’re listening.*

“We don’t have to talk about them, then,” said Draco flatly. They’d reached his bedroom door; he reached for the knob.

We don’t need to use our voices —

“No,” said Draco. His gray eyes were coolly thoughtful. “I think it’s about time we got used to not being able to do *that* any more.” He vanished into his bedroom before Harry could say anything back to that, and Harry was left to fidget aimlessly in the corridor for several minutes before Draco reappeared, now in a dark blue pullover and jeans. Something sparkled on the sleeve of the pullover, but he turned away and began walking down the hall before Harry could see what it was.

He did, however, hurry to catch up. “Look, before we go in there, do you want to talk about this?”

“If there was anything to say, we would have talked about it already,” said Draco. This struck Harry as an infuriating tautology, but he couldn’t think of anything to say to it. They had reached the study door; it was open by a crack. Draco knocked once and pushed it open.

Harry followed him inside. He rarely came into this room. It reminded him of Lucius, of the day Lucius had brought him in here and offered him the antidote for the poison that was killing Draco, in exchange for the Worthy Cup. It didn’t look much different now — clearly Narcissa had changed nothing in the room. There was the big mahogany desk, the sideboard with the brandy decanter standing on it, now covered in dust, and the box beside it that had held Lucius’ tobacco. But behind the desk now sat Dumbledore. The light that filtered through the narrow windows caught the bright sparks that shone off the rims of his spectacles, but his face was in shadow. Behind him stood Snape, looking more like a dark crow than he ever had before, his face a narrow white line between the parted halves of dark, greasy hair.

“Harry,” said Dumbledore warmly, “and Draco. Good to see you both. Please, have a seat.” He indicated two high-backed chairs that had been placed in front of the desk. Harry lowered himself into one; Draco remained standing, just beside the other one, and Harry had a feeling he too was remembering facing his father in this room. “You remember,” Dumbledore said, templeing his hands beneath his chin, “of course, why you’re here.”

“This is about the antidote,” Harry said, as Draco seemed inclined to remain silent. “To the Polyjuice Potion.”

“That is correct. Severus?” said Dumbledore, and Snape stepped forward and set two large glass vials of a brownish solution on the desk.

“These,” Snape said, “have been designed precisely to reverse the results of the potion you took last year. The effect should be close to instantaneous. I will of course be standing by in case there are any problems, though I anticipate none.”

“Nor any side effects?” asked Dumbledore, with a raise of his white eyebrows.

“None. This potion is quite perfect, I assure you.” Snape reached forward and snapped the lids off each of the vials. “I have measured out the correct amount for each of you. It would be best if you swallowed them at the same time, or at least within the same minute.”

Harry looked at Draco for his reaction, but Draco was simply staring at the vial in front of him, his grey eyes winter-bleak. There was no curiosity in them, nor really even any resignation, just a sort of blank acceptance. A sort of concern registered on Dumbledore’s face. “You may take a moment if you like, to prepare yourself,” he said. “Mister Malfoy, I hope you will pass on to your mother my compliments for what she’s done with this house. I was at Malfoy Manor once as a boy myself, and I recall thinking that for a structure so grand, there was precious little homelike or beautiful about it. That has certainly changed.”

“I’ll be sure to pass that along, Headmaster,” said Draco, with perfect politeness, and reached for the vial that was on his side of the desk. Very slowly, he turned to look at Harry, almost as if he were being dragged around by the shoulder by some unseen force and *made* to look at him. “Shall we then, Potter?” he said, and indicated with a wave of his hand the vial that stood swirling and smoking on the desk in front of Harry. Harry was reminded forcefully and suddenly of Lucius, in this same room holding a very different vial, and with a very different expression on his face than Draco’s, though they shared the same beautifully modulated, aristocratic voice.

Harry reached for his vial. It was cool to the touch, despite the smoke rising from the surface of the liquid, and smelled — well, rather like Polyjuice Potion, though undercut by something sour, like lemon juice or vinegar. He looked back at Draco, half expecting a sort of mordant cheer, perhaps a raise of his vial in a macabre toast, but Draco only stared down at his hands and Harry was reminded of the look on his face when Draco had kissed his cheek just outside the castle in Romania, kissed him and said, “*Te morituri salutant.*”

“Are you ready, then, Potter?” said Snape, in his slippery-cold voice, dry as snake scales. “The Headmaster and I do not have all day.”

“That’s all right, Severus,” said Dumbledore. “Harry, you look troubled. Is everything all right?”

Harry raised his head. “Yes,” he said, and saw Draco shoot him a look, narrow and thoughtful and surprised. “Yes, everything’s all right. I was just making up my mind about something.”

“Indeed,” said Dumbledore. “And have you reached a decision?”

“Yes,” said Harry. He leaned forward and set the vial back down on the desk. Then he stood up. “It’s awfully kind of you to go to all this trouble to create a reversal for the Polyjuice spell,” he said. “But all the same, I don’t think I want it. I’m sorry for having wasted your time.”

“But —“ Dumbledore began, sounding bewildered.

“You can’t *refuse* the potion!” Snape interrupted, looking shocked. “Headmaster —“

“Actually,” said Harry, “I think you’ll find I can refuse it. I’m seventeen — an adult. And I’m no longer a student at Hogwarts, Professor Snape, so I think you’ll also find that you have no real authority over me.”

Snape muttered something darkly in response to that, something that was only audible to Dumbledore, who sighed.

“Technically, Harry, you are correct,” he said. “Neither of us have any real authority over you. But I think you’ll agree with me, won’t you, that I have always looked out for your best interests?”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, more quietly — Dumbledore’s sincerity was much harder to take than Snape’s angry bluster.

“Looked out for his best interests?” said Draco, suddenly, surprising everyone in the room, even Harry. “You dumped him as a baby on a bunch of soulless Muggles who tortured him for eleven years. You’ve tossed him in front of dragons, let him stand up to Dementors alone, left the responsibility of saving his godfather from Azkaban entirely on his own shoulders when he was thirteen years old and you say you’ve always looked out for his *best interests*?”

Dumbledore raised his head, his glasses a gold blur in the dimness. “I did not realize, Harry,” he said quietly, “that you held quite such a catalogue of resentments as that.”

“I don’t,” said Harry, almost surprised that he meant it. “I know you’ve always looked out for the wizarding world’s safety first, and mine second. I don’t resent that. It was what you had to do. I’ve always admired you for it, and tried to be like you. To make unselfish choices. My whole life was always about trying to be whatever it was that I had to be, molding myself into what was needed, at that moment, to fight Voldemort. But Voldemort’s gone now, and I’m not a child any longer. The decisions I make now are going to have to be about my own life, and what kind of man I want to be. You can consider this my first decision, if you like. I don’t want that antidote. I will not take it. Is that clear?”

“What’s clear,” said Snape coldly, “is that you have truly mastered the art of ingratitude, Potter.”

Harry smiled at him, the bland, infuriating smile he’d learned from Draco. “I respect your position, Professor,” he said. “I just don’t share it.”

“Headmaster,” Snape said, turning to Dumbledore. “There is more at stake here than Potter’s petty show of independence. If he does not take the potion, it may well impact the efficacy of Draco taking it. Potter may be grown-up enough to make decisions for himself, but I don’t think he

should be allowed to make decisions for other students —“ He caught himself, his voice tightening, —“for others, I mean. Should he?”

“That is a point of some merit, Severus,” said Dumbledore, and looked at Harry. “You do realize how your decision affects Mister Malfoy?”

Harry bit his lip, then nodded. “If Draco wants to take the potion, I’ll take it as well,” he conceded. “I don’t want to be unfair.”

They all turned to look at Draco, then, who was standing quietly, holding the vial in his hand. The light was bad — Harry could only see the light color of Draco’s hair, part of the outline of his chin, and didn’t realize until Draco lifted his head entirely and looked straight at him that he was smiling. “You know,” he said, “I’ve really had enough of antidotes, myself.”

And he set his vial on the desk, next to Harry’s.

Snape looked at Draco with a sort of frozen horror. “You *cannot* be serious, Draco,” he said.

But it transpired that Draco was quite serious, and so was Harry. They stood their ground while Snape blustered at them, which was somewhat difficult, and while Dumbledore looked at them with thoughtful concern, which was more so. Eventually Snape seemed to wind himself down into silent glowering, and Dumbledore stood up, drawing his traveling cloak over his shoulders.

“Very well,” he said. “You’ve made your decisions, and I respect that.”

“Thank you, Headmaster,” said Harry, with some relief.

Draco said nothing, but Dumbledore touched him lightly on the shoulder as he passed, and said something quietly to Draco, something Harry could not hear, but Draco smiled faintly, and nodded assent. And as Dumbledore passed Harry, he put his hand on Harry's shoulder, and said, so quietly that only Harry could hear him, "And may that be the first of many wise decisions you make from this moment on, Harry Potter."

Snape, who had been gathering up his things, including the two vials, stalked after the Headmaster without a word — until he reached the doorway. He paused there and spun around, fixing Draco with a sharp look.

"I shall keep the potion on hand," he said, "in case you change your mind, Draco."

"Thank you," Draco said politely. He had always been polite to Snape. "I don't think I'll be wanting it, but thank you nevertheless, Professor."

Snape shook his head slowly, his narrow mouth twisted angrily. "So you are content, then," he said darkly, "to be, from this day on, Harry Potter's shadow? Is that all you want?"

Draco turned to look at him. His hands were clasped at his back, the window with its great Malfoy crest just behind him, and perhaps he looked to Snape much as his father, at his age, might have looked — but there were lines of humor around his mouth that Lucius had never had, and a certain quiet self-understanding in his eyes that all Lucius' years had failed to give him.

"I *am* content," he said. "Isn't that enough?"

Snape frowned, and stalked out of the room without another word, slamming the door behind him.

"I don't think he likes you much," said Draco.

“Yeah,” said Harry. “I used to be on his bad side. Then I thought I was edging more over towards the good side. Now I think I’m right back over on the bad side again.”

“You never mastered the art of sucking up,” said Draco. “That’s always been your problem.” He looked around and shuddered. “I hate it in here,” he said. “And I never did finish breakfast. Back to the kitchen?”

“In a second. There’s something I wanted to ask you,” said Harry. “I was going to ask you before, but we got sidetracked.”

Draco, halfway to the door, turned and looked at him curiously. “What is it?”

“You said you were still going to travel around the world,” said Harry. “That you hadn’t changed your plans.”

Draco shook his head slowly. “That’s true.”

“I was wondering if you’d mind if I came along with you. I’ve never seen the world at all, not outside England. Unless you count nearly starving and freezing while hunting down the Dark Lord, which I don’t.”

Draco started to smile. “You want an upgrade from ‘half-drunk staggering through the chicken coops of Eastern Europe in the middle of winter?’”

Harry shrugged. “I want to see what there is out there to see. And I want to see it with you.” He paused. “I can’t think of anyone better.”

Draco’s beginnings-of-a-smile had become a real smile. He looked lit up from within, as if someone had *lumosed* a light on inside him. “I’m leaving in a week, you know,” was all he said. “Do you think you can be ready by then?”

“I could be ready by tomorrow. What the hell’s it going to take you a week to pack?”

“Are you joking? I have to see my tailor and have clothes made up — traveling clothes, and then I have to plan my course, you know, there’s more to it than just sticking pins in a map. And there’s gadgets to buy — you can come with me tomorrow to Diagon Alley, there’s this new Wizi-Photo gadget I just have to have, it takes pictures, *and* memorizes directions so you’ll never get lost, *and* it makes soup — not very good soup, but they’re still working out the kinks, I think. And —“

“I take it this means, yes, I’m allowed to go with you?”

Draco came up short on that, and smiled. Almost a grin, really, if Draco Malfoy could be said to do anything quite as outré as grinning. “You saved the world,” he said. “You might as well see what you saved.”

In the end, Harry was glad for the week in between the wedding and their departure. The guests left the Manor slowly; the Weasleys went back to the Burrow the next day, but Ron lingered behind to have some time with Harry and Hermione before they were separated. Blaise stayed as well, and she and Ron were often to be seen strolling the grounds together. Blaise was clearly in owl contact with Ginny, though she said nothing about the notes she received; Draco got only a blank postcard with a seaside vista on the front, but he laughed when he got it and folded it away in his pocket.

Hermione sat on a chaise outside and studied for her course in Cornwall while Ron, Draco, Blaise, Harry, and often Sirius and Remus played pick-up games of Quidditch on the pitch in the back gardens. They went to Diagon Alley one morning and Draco bought everything in sight, including a pith helmet, and Harry promised all and sundry that he would be sure to take a photo if Draco ever actually wore it. On another

afternoon Draco took the sword Terminus Est and carried it up the hill to his father's mausoleum, where he wrapped it in layers of cloth and left it inside the plain marble structure. Sirius went with him, and when they came down again Draco seemed noticeably lighter, as if he'd left a weight behind him at his father's burial place. Ron came up to him and they spoke together, civilly and even thoughtfully, and never mentioned to anyone else, ever, what they had talked about.

The days slid by, languorous and golden. The evenings were often spent out on the lawn, picnicking, playing Flamingo Croquet, or lying on their backs watching the stars come out one by one. Nights, Harry spent with Hermione, and they did not talk about the future, and only a little bit about the past. It was a time that he would always remember as enchanted, as close to perfection as life could get without being unendurable in the ending or the recollection afterward.

The ending did come, as endings always do, and Harry said goodbye to Ron first, with a fierce hug on top of the Manor's front staircase. A carriage had come to take him to Blaise's house, where he would meet her parents — and afterward they were headed to the Burrow where she would, at long last, meet his. Ron looked half amused and half like someone headed to his own funeral, which Hermione remarked on as she hugged him too, before he climbed into the carriage alongside Blaise, and it vanished down the drive.

Hermione went next and that was more painful. She and Harry said their farewells privately, but there were still streaks of tears on her face when she carried her bags to the front steps of the Manor and waited there for the carriage that would take her to Chipping Sodbury to meet her parents. Sirius, Narcissa, and Remus all bid her farewell, and then it was Draco's turn and Harry went down the stairs with her bags to give them a moment to say goodbye to each other.

"Shall I write you?" he asked with languorous amusement, and she laughed.

"If you like," she said. "The black roses at the reception — did you make those?"

“No, but they were my idea. You know I prefer black to white. Why should white get all the adulation when perfect darkness is so much more soothing to the eye?”

She touched his face lightly with her hand. “You remember when you asked me if there would be beautiful things where you were going?”

Draco remembered a long corridor, fading light and fainter voices. He said, “I remember.”

“I think I can safely say yes, now — there will be.” She dropped her hand. “Take care of each other,” she said, and ran down the steps. Harry put her into the carriage, and as she leaned out of it to kiss him good-bye, the sunlight struck the glass ring on its chain around her neck and made it glow with the blue-white light of a star.

Harry came up the stairs. “There’s only us left now,” he said, and Draco had been worried that he would sound shell-shocked or distraught, but he sounded only meditative. “I suppose we’d better pack.”

“You haven’t packed yet??” Draco demanded, momentarily losing his cool. “There’s a bloody carriage coming for us in an hour, and we’ve got a boat leaving at —“

“Calm down, Malfoy.” Harry was laughing. “I packed last night. And *I* don’t have three trunks full of hair product, either.”

They went to get their things, and when they returned, each with a bag slung over his shoulder (through the magic of one of his gadgets, Draco had managed to shrink his three trunks of hair products down to a manageable size), Narcissa, Sirius, and Professor Lupin were sitting on the stairs. At the foot of the stairs was a carriage, its doors open. “All these good-byes are wearing me out,” Sirius said morosely, as he stood up to wish them bon voyage.

“We’ll be in Greece in August,” said Narcissa, hugging Harry and letting him go. “Maybe you could meet us there.”

“That’s our honeymoon you’re inviting them on!” Sirius protested. He looked as if he might hug Draco, but settled instead for shaking Draco’s hand in a manful sort of way, and promising to send him money if he needed it. Draco forbore from saying that there was little chance he was going to need any money; even if he and Harry drank nothing but expensive champagne and ate nothing but caviar for an entire year, it was unlikely they’d dent the Malfoy millions — not to mention Harry’s own not inconsiderable fortune.

Lupin handed Harry a slender book. “I wandered the world for several years myself,” he said. “I’ve written down some of my favorite places. If you’re interested...”

“I am,” said Harry, pocketing the book. “Very. Thanks.” He smiled as Sirius joined them, and briefly clasped Harry’s shoulder.

“I just wish,” he began, and fell silent, though all three knew what he had been going to say, *I just wish James and Lily were here to see you.*

“I know,” Harry said. “But they’re at peace now. That’s what’s important.”

“Are you?” said Lupin quietly, his lined face thoughtful as he studied Harry’s expression.

Harry thought for a moment of Draco, saying, *I am content*, with such assurance that Harry had been startled. “Yes,” he said. “I’ll always miss them, my parents. But I remember what you said to me, Sirius. That the things we do for love, those things endure. They’re always with me.”

Sirius’ eyes darkened, and he gripped Harry’s shoulder again, hard enough to hurt. Lupin seemed about to say something when Narcissa’s

voice rose over them, sounding perplexed, “I know, isn’t it peculiar?” she was saying, as she glanced over at a cluster of her white rosebushes, which lined the circular drive at the front of the Manor. One of the bushes sported roses which seemed to have turned overnight to a deep and glowing shade of scarlet. She frowned. “I don’t *remember* planting red roses...”

“Don’t fret about the herbaceous borders, Mother,” said Draco. “There are much more interesting things to fret about. Me, for instance. I’m about to go off into the wide world all alone—“

“Hey!” interjected Harry, affronted.

“—I might be kidnapped by gypsies, or set upon by bandits. Anything could happen.”

“In that case, I feel sorry for the gypsies and bandits,” said Narcissa, touching her son’s face with her fingertips. “If there’s one thing that doesn’t concern me, it’s you. My son can take care of himself.” She dropped her hand, smiling. “And that goes for Harry, as well.”

Muttering something about tragic lack of maternal concern, Draco kissed his mother’s cheek and headed down the steps with his bags. In a moment, Harry followed him. They kept the windows of the carriage open so they could look out and wave goodbye, long after the figures of Sirius, Remus and Narcissa had shrunk to the size of pinpoints and vanished, long after even the Manor was out of view.

At last Harry slid back into the carriage, collapsing into one of the thickly upholstered seats. Draco was still leaning out the window, saying something to the carriage driver. A moment later he dropped back into the carriage and began rooting around in his bag. “Have we got any chocolate?” he demanded. “I’m starving.”

“Those are our provisions! Leave them alone,” Harry said, kicking Draco’s hand away from the bag. “And what did you say to the carriage driver?”

“We’re going to Paris, Potter, not the Kalahari Desert. You can buy chocolate in Paris.”

“Fine, fine. But what did you say to the driver?”

Draco smiled more sweetly than the chocolate he’d liberated from the duffel bag. “I asked him to make a stop on the way to the coast.”

“A stop? Where?”

Draco bit into the candy bar. “You’ll see.”

It was afternoon by the time the carriage stopped with a jolt, shaking Harry awake. He yawned and turned toward the window.

A familiar scene met his eyes. The green lawns, the great gray staircase sloping up to the double oak front doors, the jumble of turrets and battlements rising high into the thin, clear mountain air. “Hogwarts?” he said incredulously. “Your stop was *Hogwarts?*”

“Yep,” said Draco, cheerfully. He had been lounging on his bench seat, reading through Lupin’s book of travel notes. Now he carefully tucked it back into the duffel bag and swung himself out of the carriage.

Harry followed him, looking around in amazement. “I don’t get it. Weren’t we just here? Are you nostalgic for school already? I thought that was supposed to take ten years at least.”

Draco, who was in the middle of asking the driver to wait for them, shot him an irritable look. “I have an errand here, okay? Hold on to your trousers, Potter.”

“My trousers aren’t going anywhere, Malfoy. But I feel compelled to point out that it’s summer holidays — no one’s going to be in the school, except maybe Dumbledore, and he won’t take kindly to us breaking in.”

“I asked him at the reception,” said Draco, heading for the stairs. “He gave me permission. Of course, you needn’t come with me if you don’t want to.”

Harry shrugged and followed him. “I suppose it’s too late to get expelled.”

“I love how you always look on the bright side.”

They had reached the top of the stairs; Harry was used to seeing them propped open to the sunset. It was odd to find them closed. He tried a knob, but it didn’t turn. “See? Locked,” he said. “I don’t think an *alohomora* is going to open this door, either.”

Draco shot him a long, dark look, then reached out and put his hand to the door. It slid open soundlessly. “I told you,” he said. “I have the Headmaster’s permission.”

Surprised past arguing, Harry followed Draco into the flagstone-floored entrance hall. The enormous hourglasses that normally kept track of House points stood empty. Draco passed them without a second glance and headed for the wide marble staircase that led upward. He was silent as he went, and Harry followed him silently, though the sense of being in the huge castle alone was unnerving. He noticed creaks in the floorboards he’d never heard before as they passed the statue of Lachlan the Lanky on the seventh floor, turned a corner, and found themselves in a long corridor that Harry didn’t recall. There was a single door along the west wall, and Draco went to it and threw it open. He stood in the doorway, staring into the room, as if he could go no farther.

Harry joined him in the doorway. The room they looked into was nearly bare, with a wall of unshaded windows. Dust motes danced in the air, gilded by afternoon light. The only item of furniture in it was a magnificent mirror on two clawed gold feet. The light struck the mirror at such an angle that the surface seemed to shimmer like water and the inscription over it was unreadable. Not that it mattered; Harry knew well enough what it said.

“I show you not your face,” he said, “but your heart’s desire.”

Draco said nothing. He was still staring at the mirror. A nervous pulse jumped in his throat.

“Is this what you came for?” Harry demanded. “The Mirror of Erised?”

“To look in it,” Draco said shortly. “Yes.”

Harry shook his head. “The Mirror isn’t a game,” he said. “It’s not necessarily pleasant to look at your heart’s desire, especially if it’s something you can’t ever really have.”

“And do you think my heart’s desire is something I can never really have?”

“I don’t know.” Harry thought of Lucius, and wished he hadn’t. “I don’t know what it is you really want.”

“Neither do I,” said Draco. He was leaning against the frame of the doorway, facing the room, but his gaze was elsewhere. “But I want to find out. In Slytherin’s castle he showed me a mirror of Judgement, that shows you what you’ve been, and what you might be. But I want to know who I am right now. I want to know if this past year has changed me.”

“You seem different to me,” Harry offered.

“Seem isn’t good enough,” said Draco. “Our heart’s desires don’t just tell us what we want, they tell us who we are.” He looked over at Harry then, grey eyes clear but unreachable. “You’ll wait for me here?”

Harry, feeling no need to stand in front of the Mirror himself, nodded once. “If that’s what you want.”

“It’s what I want,” said Draco, and went into the room, shutting the door behind him.

With the door closed, the room was enveloped in an intense quiet. The floor was layered with grey dust that showed no footprints. Draco wondered how long the Mirror had been here, though he suspected the manner of its conveyance from place to place was not the sort that left footprints behind.

It seemed to loom up in the center of the room, like an iceberg looming up out of frozen water. The windows shed light but not warmth; Draco shivered as he moved through a visible rain of dust motes towards the Mirror, kicking up grey puffs of more dust with every step. *Dust to dust*, he thought as he reached the Mirror. Its smooth reflective front was unsmirched by any grime. Standing at an angle from which the Mirror did not reflect himself, Draco saw that it gave back simply a reflection of the empty room, a clear and perfect likeness down to each crack in the floorboards.

He moved to stand in front of it and dropped his gaze immediately, his heart pounding. He wanted to look, and not to look; for it all to be over, and for him never to have had this thought, which had nagged at him subtly until he mentioned it to Dumbledore. *Who am I? What am I, really?* Perhaps he had been wrong, perhaps desire was not the way to know

himself as the Oracle instructed, perhaps it would only leave him chasing impossible dreams.

The Mirror is not a game, Harry had said, but then he had withstood looking at it, not once but several times. It was because of Harry that he knew that desire changed with the desirer, that one might outgrow one's yearnings and put them away, as one put away childish things. *For now we see as through a glass, darkly; then we will see face to face*. There was nothing to be afraid of here, he told himself; after all, the truth about himself would still be the truth whether he acknowledged it or not. And surely it was better to know the truth than not know it? And lastly, he told himself sternly, he was a Malfoy, and Malfoys were not afraid.

He raised his head and looked into the Mirror, quickly, before he could stop himself. For a moment his vision blurred, then it resolved, and he saw what was reflected in the silvered surface of the Mirror: saw his own pale and startled face, oddly vulnerable, and the white line of the scar under his eye, bright as silver wire. He stared at the reflection for a long time, not moving, until he realized that his face felt weirdly, peculiarly cold; and when he raised his hand to touch the back of it to his cheek, it came away wet, and salt-tasting as the sea.

When he pulled the door of the room open he found Harry sitting on the floor in the corridor, idly playing with a feather that must have drifted down from the Owlery. Harry looked up in surprise when the door opened, and scrambled to his feet. "You're all right?" he said breathlessly, making it more a question than a statement.

"O ye of little faith," said Draco. "I'm fine, thank you."

Harry looked at him hard. "Your face looks a bit strange —"

"Lots of dust," said Draco. "Made my eyes water."

Harry raised an eyebrow. “So?”

“So we should probably head out,” said Draco, squinting down the corridor, “We’re burning daylight here, Potter.”

“You’re not going to tell me what you saw?” Harry looked so dismayed that Draco nearly laughed.

“Oh, I saw myself,” he said casually. “Just as I am.”

“Bloody hell — you can’t be serious. Just as you are?”

“Maybe a few inches taller.”

Harry shook his head slowly. “Jammy bastard,” he said, and grinned. “I meant to ask you before, is that a girl’s barette you’ve got clipped onto your sleeve?”

Draco glanced down at the butterfly clip he’d found on his floor the day after Ginny had left. “What of it?”

“Bit peculiar, don’t you think?”

“Not really,” said Draco, with the air of one whose good humor could not be ruined.

“I suppose as long as you don’t take to wearing it in your hair,” Harry said with a shrug. “You know, maybe I should have a crack at that Mirror. I mean, if it worked out for you —“

“No,” said Draco firmly. “I don’t think Dumbledore’s lenience is going to extend quite that far.”

“All right, all right.” Harry looked at Draco with some amusement. “I guess what you told Snape was the truth.”

“What do you mean?”

“That you’re content. You must be.”

“I suppose I am,” said Draco, as if this were still something of a revelation.

Harry grinned. “You don’t even mind being my shadow?”

He said it as a joke, but to his surprise Draco looked at him long and steadily, without humor or annoyance or anger, only with a sort of level consideration. *If I am your shadow*, he said, silently and at last, *it is only because you are my light. And the one cannot exist without the other.*

He said it without affect, as if it were simply and obviously true, and Harry thought that after all, perhaps it was. “It’s a good thing we don’t have to, then, isn’t it?” he said. He glanced around, as if noticing the fading light for the first time. “If we don’t head out, we’ll miss the boat,” he observed, heading towards the stairs.

“I’m not the one who’s trying to get another crack at the Mirror,” Draco pointed out, falling into step beside Harry. “*I* said we should leave ten minutes ago.”

“It was not ten minutes. It was more like five. And how would you know? You won’t even wear a watch.”

“I refuse to be constrained by someone else’s idea of what time it is,” Draco said, but his mind was hardly on their good-natured arguing, which was, as usual, about nothing in particular. They had reached the ground floor now, and the sun was streaming in through the open double

doorway that led outside, laying a glinting path along the worn flagstone floors. And as Draco set his feet on that path, he thought for a moment that he could see the shape of his life stretching out before him like a shining line, and for the first time, he knew with surety that it would be a life that was well worthy of living.

THE END.

REFERENCES:

Last Buffy quote ever: “So you tripped and fell on his lips.”

“Hell is murky” —Macbeth

ART:

You’ll find the work of several artists in this part of the Trilogy. The illustrations in chapters 1-9 are by Monica Starling (monstarling@gmail.com), except the illustration of Hermione kissing Draco in Chapter Seven, which is by Ali. You may also recognize some of the art from the calendar created by Starling, Magsby, Alice, and Priscillie. The illustrations in Chapters 10-16 are by Alessandra Sunk. The illustrations in the epilogue are by Cambium (<http://cambium.deviantart.com/>) . The frontspiece is by Bhanesidhe (bhanesidhe@gmail.com).

