

## After the Flood

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*Quand le monde sera rÉduit en un seul bois noir pour nos quatre yeux ÈtonnÈs,  
- en une plage pour deux enfants fidÈles, - en une maison musicale pour notre  
claire sympathie, - je vous trouverai.*

The building is falling down. This is why the rent is so cheap. Ron and Harry pay a pittance a month for their sprawling, antiquated flat on the top floor. Of course, the ceiling also leaks, the electricity regularly shorts out, and the floorboards are rotting. But this seems a small price to pay for roof access and a view of the canal below.

They spend very little time in the flat, anyway. Most of their days are spent on the roof, leaning up against the low wall that runs around its circumference. They smoke cheap, slightly ineffective pot and drink cheap, slightly ineffective beer, both of which are locally produced and easy to procure. Harry pulls bricks out of the wall and drops them over the side of the flat building and watches them explode into pinkish dust when they hit the pavement below. Sometimes Ron, lazily, half-opens his blue eyes and says, "Harry, if you keep doing that, the whole fucking building is going to come down."

"Let it come down," says Harry.

He loves being up on the roof. Sometimes he still dreams that he is in a dark, locked place and he cannot get out. Sometimes he still dreams that he is starving and there is nothing to eat. The pot and the alcohol that are so easy to get here help with that. They make him feel as if the world is opening up around him, infinite, that he could walk to the edge of the universe and find no end to it.

Some nights he drinks until he falls asleep on the couch and then Ron comes and takes the bottles out of his hand and covers him up with a blanket and puts his glasses on the table next to him. In the morning Ron gives him orange juice and anti-headache potion. Once he pulled Ron down to sit next to him and clung on to his wrist all night and Ron sat there with him patiently, if slightly anxious. In the morning he repeated back to Harry what Harry had said to him during the night but Harry refuses to believe that he said it.

Ron goes out sometimes during the day because he works. He has a job, on and off, in the Dutch offices of the Daily Prophet, although he does not tell Harry what it is he does there. When he brings home copies of the paper he hides them in his room. Once Harry caught him reading a newspaper in the living room and Ron flipped it over hastily but not before Harry saw the headline and the photo of Lucius Malfoy on the front page.

Harry spends the days that Ron is gone alone. Wandering up and down the narrow streets, over the various bridges, looking down into the canals, eating things that come wrapped in greasy newspaper. Inhaling the city smells: smoke, soot, dust, dirty water, open air. The wizarding part of the city is small, only a few streets long, and Harry and Ron's apartment is on the border of it, so that they have Muggle electricity and television (which Ron loves) but at night, sometimes, from the roof, Harry can look down and across and see the pale gold glow of torches.

The wizarding neighborhood has its own red light district, too. The live sex shows there are disturbing. At least a few of the acts, Harry is certain, constitute cruel and unusual treatment of flobberworms.

He is very rarely at home alone when Ron is not there. He does not like the feeling of the empty house, he begins to notice things like the fine sifting of dust in the light from the windows, the sterile empty hum of the refrigerator. He grows anxious and jumpy and begins to worry that when Ron finally does come home he will fling himself on him like a puppy cooped up all day. So it is actually something of a miracle that he is home today, alone, when the doorbell rings for the first time in Harry's memory.

It takes him a moment to realize what the insistent buzzing actually is. At first he thinks it must be the defunct fire alarm springing into unexpected action and wanders blearily into the kitchen -- it is noon, and he has only recently woken up -- rubbing sleep out of his eyes, shirtless and barefoot. Eventually he realizes it is the doorbell. He pads wonderingly downstairs, unbolts the door, and throws it open to find Draco Malfoy standing on his front steps.

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It is not that he has forgotten Draco. He has not forgotten him. He thinks about him sometimes, dreams of him oftener. He dreams him in bits and pieces: the curve of white fingers, the whorls and scrolls of his ears like seashells holding all the whispers of the ocean in them, hair that looks like hammered silver gilt but tastes like vaguely salty straw, the bitten nails that once dug brutally into Harry's skin and left their cicatrices behind, patterning Harry's back like a Rosetta Stone written in some secret hieroglyphics only Draco could read. Harry cuts himself on these memories, as when he was a child he would sometimes bite down on a broken tooth just to feel the pleasurable anguish of it. He would not give these memories up for anything but he has never wanted the reality back, either.

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Draco's silvery-light eyes widen when Harry opens the door; he might have been prepared to see Harry, but the slight of a barefoot, half-dressed Harry seems to have knocked whatever prepared speech he was about to deliver cleanly out of his head. His gaze flicks away from Harry's bare chest above the drawstring of his pajamas and fastens on a point just beyond his left ear. "You shouldn't just open the door like that," he says. "I could be anyone. I could be a Death Eater."

"Are you?" says Harry, curiously.

"No," says Draco.

"Well, it's been months since I've seen you," says Harry. "For all I know, you could be."

"If I was," says Draco, "you'd be dead already."

It has been less than a minute and already they are back to death threats. Harry is darkly amused. Draco looks quite a bit different than he did the last time Harry saw him, but then he had been a half-starved scarecrow with bloody ragged nails and nightmare-haunted eyes. He is still very thin but there is at least a smooth layer of flesh over his bones, his fair hair is soft and neatly cut, and his clothes are clean and fit him properly. Only his eyes still have shadows around them, as if someone has run a sooty finger all around their edges. His chin is raised arrogantly, his lips set in a firm line. There is little about him to recall the boy Harry left shaking and choking on tears at the edge of the lake back at Hogwarts.

"Is it Death Eater policy to kill people who are unarmed and barefoot?" Harry demands, putting his hands on his hips.

"Yes," says Draco, "of course it is, you complete fuckwit. Look, are you going to let me in or are you not going to let me in? I wouldn't normally mind exchanging unpleasantries on the front steps, but right before you came downstairs a brick fell off your roof and almost bashed my brains in. I don't fancy standing here until it happens again."

He points, accusingly, at the brick, which has fallen nearby, and cracked itself into several powdery shards.

"I guess you'd better come in," says Harry.

A few moments later he is wondering if perhaps he has just done something stupid. Draco is standing in his and Ron's sparsely furnished living room, looking around himself with the faint lip curl that is also a smile that is also a sneer, that smirk that he uses to devastate everything in his path. He says, "What a rat hole this is, Potter."

"Thank you," says Harry. "It's not much, but it's home. Can I get you anything? Coffee? Tea? Battery acid?"

Somehow Draco manages to give off the impression that he has just taken off a pair of gloves and tossed them carelessly on a side table, although he isn't wearing any gloves, and the closest thing Harry and Ron have to a side table is a pile of empty milk crates. He examines his nails. "You must be wondering why I'm here," he says.

"I figured you came because you're still in love with me and you couldn't stand not seeing me again," says Harry. "Either that, or you had an inexplicable craving for beer and wooden shoes."

"I was never in love with you," says Draco, quickly.

This gigantic lie hovers between the two of them as if a large, embarrassingly naked man had just entered the room and they were both pretending he wasn't there. Eventually, Harry clears his throat.

"So," he says. "No coffee, then."

Draco's cheeks have turned scarlet but his chin is still raised arrogantly in the air. "The Ministry sent me here," he says.

Harry is startled. "Why? They investigating flobberworm abuse?"

Draco blinks at this but plunges bravely onward. "They thought I could talk to you," he says. "Convince you to come home. England needs you, Potter."

This statement prompts Harry to grab a half-empty bottle of beer off the nearest flat surface and knock back a mouthful. The liquid is warm, flat and bitter. "England needs me to do what? England needs me to direct an updated version of 'A Chorus Line'? England needs me to perform an aerobic flamenco dance with a fat, heavily rouged woman named Imogen? You're going to have to be..."

"I know," Draco says. "More *specific*."

Harry blinks at him, then sets his beer bottle down carefully on back of the couch. "Look, Malfoy..."

But Draco is looking around the room, his eyes suddenly narrow as he takes in the sheer amount of clothes tossed on the floor, the kitchen table from which the breakfast dishes have not yet been cleared. "Wait a second," he says. "You don't live here alone, do you?"

"No," says Harry. "Boy, your intelligence back there at the Ministry must really suck. I live here with Ron."

Draco goes the color of a Gouda cheese. "With *Weasley*? You and Weasley?"

"Me and Weasley what? I mean, me and Ron what? Great, now I'm talking like you."

"Are you fucking him?" Draco asks, somehow managing to imbue this rather pitiful inquiry with a deal of outraged dignity. "How can you stand it? He's so...ginger."

"Me? Fucking Ron?" Harry bursts out laughing. It is something of a nice feeling. He cannot remember the last time he burst out laughing. He almost imagines that if he looked down he would see springs and cogs leaping out of his chest: his rusted amusement mechanisms coming apart completely at the coils. "You know, for all intents and purposes, like I told you..."

"You like girls, I know." Draco says this as if he regards it as extremely droll. "Only you didn't act much like you liked girls, back at school, with me."

"I hate to break it to you, Malfoy, but for a guy, you really are very girly."

Draco looks as if he'd like to slaughter Harry on the spot. "I AM NOT GIRLY."

"Actually, you really kind of are," says Ron, who has come in quietly and is standing in the doorway with a bag of groceries. "I mean, not that you look like a girl precisely. It's just that you have really long eyelashes and kind of a pouty lower lip and you're prone to sulking. Harry, can I talk to you in the kitchen, please? ALONE?"

Once inside the kitchen, Ron drops his groceries, shoves Harry into a corner and hisses so forcefully in Harry's ear that Harry winces. "What on earth is *he* doing here?"

"He says the Ministry sent him," replies Harry.

"Oh, and you believe that? Harry, he's probably come here to kill you!"

"If he was going to kill me, he would have killed me already," Harry points out. "Look at me. I'm not exactly dressed to put up a fight."

"I was going to mention that. You shouldn't be prancing around half-naked in front of Malfoy. You'll drive him insane with lust. I mean, I know what you told me about...er...the two of you, back at school. He's probably in there right now plotting whether he can get a good shag in before he turns around and stabs you in the back, the cold-hearted, traitorous..."

"Ron, please stop reading spy novels. I beg you. For the good of humanity."

Ron grabs Harry by the shoulders. "He's not to be trusted."

"Tell me something I don't know. Look, Ron. I'll take him for a walk around the city, show him the sights, then dump him off at the train station. Don't worry about it. He's just trying to make me feel guilty, or maybe the Ministry really did send him. It doesn't matter. He doesn't want to kill me."

"I don't know," Ron says, releasing his grip on Harry with a dubious look. "If you treated me like you treated him, I'd want to kill you."

"Thank you, Ron. You're a big help."

"Any time."

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It is a cool day and the sky over the canals is pinstriped blue and white. Draco and Harry are walking by the edge of a canal. Draco is drinking coffee; having taken a disliking to the Muggle plastic top, he had thrown it into the canal water, prompting Harry to scold him for littering.

Draco shrugs. "Fucking Muggles," he says. "Like they'll notice. They leave trash everywhere."

Harry does not feel much like getting into a discussion of trash production in the wizarding world versus trash production in the Muggle world, so he lets it drop. "I don't understand why the Ministry would send *you* to reason with me," he says. "Why would they think I'd listen to you?"

"Because Hermione told them we were dating," says Draco.

Harry snorts. "So I'm now famous not just for being an expatriate failure and a disappointment to the wizarding world, but for being a *gay* expatriate failure and a disappointment to the wizarding world."

Draco looks sideways at him. He has gotten milk foam on his upper lip. "Do you care?"

"No," Harry says truthfully, "although I suppose it makes for a longer footnote in the history books."

"Nobody thinks you're a failure, Potter," says Draco. "Well, I do. But nobody besides me. Everyone else thinks that you ended that siege. They all think you're here cooking up another brilliant plan to defeat Voldemort. Only I know you don't have the blindest bit of an idea why that siege ended, and I haven't told anyone."

"Why not?" Harry asks.

"Because I want you to come back," Draco says.

Harry stops walking and looks at him; Draco also pauses, turning towards Harry, eyes inquiring. The milk foam on his upper lip is still there. Harry leans forward, placing a hand on Draco's left shoulder for balance, and licks it off with a slow dragging of his tongue across Draco's lips. They are familiar: soft and pliant but still firm, a boy's hard mouth. Sugar and coffee and a faint taste of peppermint when Harry swipes his tongue along the bottom lip, too, just to be sure.

Draco, after a startled tremor, closes his eyes; the coffee cup slides out of his loosening hand and hits the ground at their feet, splattering hot liquid over the cuffs of Harry's jeans. Harry jumps back.

Draco opens his eyes and looks at Harry slowly and there is a bright spark of something at the back of his eyes but Harry cannot tell what. "You made me drop my coffee, Potter."

"I'll buy you another coffee."

Draco reaches into the pocket of his robes and draws out a pack of cigarettes. Lucky Snitch brand. "I'd rather you just restrained yourself from lunging at me unexpectedly," he says. His tone is cool, but his hands are shaking as he lights the cigarette and tosses the match aside.

"So." Harry starts walking again. Draco follows him. "Why would Hermione say something like that? And how do you know it was her?"

"I see her around sometimes at Resistance headquarters," says Draco. "She works with the hit wizards. She's quite an accomplished assassin. And she has this leather catsuit thing she wears..." His voice holds a vaguely admiring tone.

Harry snorts. "I don't see why you'd care."

"Very few people look good in a leather catsuit. One cannot help but be impressed."

"Why do you want me to come back, Malfoy?"

"Because," Draco says, avoiding Harry's eyes. "We need you. The Resistance needs you. I know, you're going to say you're bloody useless, and you are. But it doesn't matter. You're Harry Potter. You're a touchstone. You're a symbol. You mean everything to these people. You're their bloody King Arthur."

"Ron will be pleased," says Harry. "I think that makes him Lancelot."

"What's it make me?"

"You can be the Round Table," Harry offers generously.

"So that every day twelve strapping men can come and sit on me?"

"Don't tell me you wouldn't like that."

Draco takes a last puff on his cigarette, drops it, and grinds it out under the toe of his shoe. "I'll be Galahad," he says. "There used to be a painting of all the knights in a book I had at home. Galahad was the most fanciable one by a long shot."

"He also died a virgin," says Harry.

Draco looks unimpressed. "Fuck that," he says, then jabs a finger at Harry. "You," he says, "are avoiding the subject."

They are passing a bridge. Harry looks down at Draco's outstretched hand. Then he grabs him by the wrist and starts down the steps that run under the bridge. Draco's wrist and the bones inside it feel delicate, as Harry remembered them, not that Draco is small, but he is lightly built as Harry is, as all good Seekers are. Draco bought his way onto the Slytherin team, it's true, but Harry also knows that they picked him because he matched so well with Harry, was the same height, build, weight and lightness.

Draco stumbles slightly on the last step and yanks his wrist out of Harry's grasp. "Where are we going?"

Harry doesn't answer, just ducks under the bridge. It is dark here and smells intensely of damp stone and slightly dirty water. The space is thick with aqueous shadows. Half-rotted crates are piled by the water's edge. Harry pulls his jumper off over his head, drops it on top of a crate. He turns and sees Draco standing a few feet away, hands in his pockets, half-in and half-out of

the shadows. There is something unsettling going on behind that pretty face but Harry cannot tell exactly what.

"Are you going swimming, Potter?"

"In that water?" says Harry. He goes to work on his belt buckle, pulls his belt out of the loops on his jeans, drops it next to the jumper and looks up at Draco. "You could do this for me," he says. "Unless you'd rather watch."

"Why are you doing this?" Draco asks.

"I'm avoiding the subject," says Harry. He takes his glasses off and instantly his view of Draco explodes into a smear of blurring colors. Green-gray water, blackish stone, Draco like a swipe of white paint across it all, and Harry drops his glasses and holds out his hands. "Come here," he says.

Harry cannot see Draco's expression at all but he does see that the other boy almost trips over himself in his hurry to get closer. He knocks Harry's hands out of the way, slams into him, banging Harry up against the damp stones of the wall behind them. His hands are at Harry's waist, digging at the waistband of his jeans, fingers swift and fierce and fumbling, nails raking the skin. The zipper rips down; Draco loops his fingers in the pockets of Harry's jeans and drags them down that way, rough denim scratching over Harry's hipbones, and all this fierceness has gotten Harry hard: in truth, he has been semi-hard since he licked the foam off Draco's lip up by the canal. Draco sucks in a breath as his hand glides down Harry's flat abdomen, slides his underwear down, and only then, with his hand wrapped securely around Harry's cock, does he lift his face up and stretch to kiss Harry on the mouth.

He still tastes of cigarettes and he still kisses too fiercely to be good at it. Harry lets his head fall back, the stone of the wall behind him cold against his neck and shoulders. He lets himself fall into the kissing. It has a rhythm, like the regular slap of water against the side of the canal. His tongue outlines Draco's lips, their mouths open together, he finds that sweetness in the other boy's mouth that is so unexpected. Draco's tongue strokes his and he shudders. His hands find their way up and twist and tangle in Draco's hair; he keeps his hands there, tightly gripping, as Draco leaves his mouth and slides down his body, hands pressed flat and gliding down to cup Harry's hips, tugging them forward, and he closes his eyes and bites down on his lip hard as he feels Draco's lips wrap around the head of his cock. Draco sucks him into his mouth with a hot wet drawing pull, and Harry hears a ragged little gasp rip its way free of his throat.

And oh. This is what he has remembered. Not just the heat and the drawing, drowning pleasure but all of it. The way his mind goes blank and this is all there is left, this rhythmic careening tumbling rush as if he were running very fast or falling very far. His hands in Draco's hair, Draco's hands on his hips, gripping, and later there will be bruises there. Draco used to kiss the bruises, one by one, five on each side where his fingers dug in. Harry remembers all this but what he had forgotten is how well Draco had learned all his responses, when to go faster and when to be slow and when to flick with his tongue at just that spot that Harry likes, and he does it now, and the

pleasure of it is like stinging silver needles threading fire behind them. Harry gasps out something, he never really knows what, and Draco does it again, and Harry slams the back of his shoulders against the stone wall as he comes, gasping out, "Oh God, oh *God*," even though he doesn't believe in God, and really, never did.

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"Is that what you meant by showing me the sights?" Draco asks. He is sitting on the edge of the canal bank, legs dangling over, looking down into the water.

Harry, arranging his clothes, buttoning himself up, takes a moment to reply. "Well, I was going to take you to the art museum but I realized it's closed on Mondays."

Draco says nothing. He is still looking down into the water. Harry walks over and sits down next to him. They stare blankly into space together. There are all sorts of things floating on the surface of the canal. The sun strikes sparks off the metallic sides of candy wrappers, colorful empty bottles, torn posters and bits of trash. The water itself looks as thick as syrup. Harry suspects that if he touched it it would cling to his fingers.

He find himself looking sideways at Draco, or all he can see of Draco when he's looking at him serruptitiously, which is his hands. They are flat on the tops of his thighs, clean and pale, the nails no longer bitten down to the bloody quick. They are not quite the hands he remembers. Or perhaps it is just that he has to go farther back in his memory to find those hands. They are hands that reached for the Snitch alongside his, hands that batted his away when he reached for the fluttering golden ball. Draco had never wanted to mark his delicate skin and Harry had seen him wrap those hands in Spellotape before touching some of the more corrosive ingredients in Potions class. He remembered thinking how vain that was, how typical.

Draco looks over at him. "So," he says. "Now what?"

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When Ron gets home that evening Harry and Draco are sitting on the broken-sprunged couch in the living room, watching a television program. Or, at least, Harry is watching the program. Draco is just staring at the television itself with an expression of horror and faint disgust. He claims to have seen televisions before but Harry does not believe him. Harry explains to him that the image quality on this one is especially poor but Draco does not seem interested.

He has his legs curled up under him. He has not tried to touch Harry again since their interlude under the bridge. Still, when he reaches past him, stretching his hand out for the packet of matches on the arm of the chair, he deliberately lets the edge of his sleeve trail across Harry's arm when he sits back.

Harry, quietly eating crisps out of a packet, ignores this. When the door bangs open and Ron comes in, Harry waves at him.

"Hey, Ron."

Ron takes in the sight of Draco, who has put his bare feet on the coffee table and is busy examining strands of his hair for split ends.

Ron turns to Harry. "In the kitchen," he says. "Now."

Harry walks warily into the kitchen. Ron's bag of groceries is still sitting on the counter where Ron put it earlier in the day, untouched. Harry sticks a hand into it and retrieves a chocolate biscuit.

"Don't you eat that biscuit," hisses Ron in a stage whisper.

Harry looks at the biscuit in mild alarm. "Why not? Is it poisoned?"

"No! Because you owe me an explanation! What is *he* still doing here?"

"Oh, Malfoy?" Harry peers round the edge of the kitchen door. Draco is kneeling next to the television, poking curiously at the wires. Harry wonders if he should warn Draco about the dangers of electricity but decides not to. "Well, you said I ought to find something to do with my time."

"Something, Harry. Something. Not someone."

Harry takes a bite out of the biscuit. "He has money. He'll pay for his food."

"That's not the point."

"Then what is the point?"

"He could betray us to the Death Eaters."

"And if we send him back to England with our home address in his pocket, he *won't* betray us to the Death Eaters?" Harry has finished his biscuit and sucks the remaining flakes of chocolate meditatively off his fingers. "The only way to make sure he doesn't betray us is to kill him and dump his body in a canal. Do you want to do that?"

Ron has turned faintly green. "No. Not really."

"I didn't think so." Harry shrugs and turns to go back to the living room.

Ron catches at his sleeve. "Look, are you angry with me, Harry? Did I do something? Did I say something wrong? Is there something I'm *not* doing...?"

Harry looks at him pointedly.

Ron blushes, very slowly, a red stain that spreads up from his collarbone to the roots of his redder hair. "Oh. That." Gently he disengages his hand from

Harry's sleeve. "Well, I don't want to do *that*."

"I know," Harry says.

"I mean..." The red is gone and Ron is green again. "If you really needed me to for some reason..."

"Thank you, Ron. I appreciate your sense of self-sacrifice. However, I think sex would be detrimental to our relationship. Never mind that you're the straightest person I know. Possibly the straightest person in the world."

"And sex with Malfoy won't be detrimental to your relationship?"

"We have no relationship," says Harry.

"That's good," says Ron, peering over Harry's shoulder, "because I think he just electrocuted himself with the television power cord."

"Oh, bloody hell," says Harry, and goes to investigate.

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As it turns out Draco has only electrocuted himself very mildly and it is unnecessary for Harry and Ron to dispose of his charred body in the canal. Harry suspects that Ron finds this disappointing but it is hard to tell because Ron really, at base, actually is such a nice person, and eventually winds up giving Draco some ice wrapped in a washcloth and telling him to hold it on the burned part of his hand until it goes numb. Draco alternates doing this with sucking woefully on his burn and looking at Harry over his hand.

Harry flings himself onto the sofa next to Draco, annoyed. "You completely broke the telly," he says to Draco accusingly.

"Just be glad I didn't break it over your head, Potter, you fuck," says Draco, around his mouthful of burned hand.

"I'm going to bed," says Harry, and stands up.

Draco stands up too. For a moment, Ron and Harry look at him, and he looks back, and then he flushes a slow and painful red as if the rest of him was burning along with his hand.

"You," says Harry, "wait here."

Harry leaves the room and comes back with blankets and pillows. He tosses them at Draco, who catches them, and looks at him, blank-eyed, over the pile of linen. Ron, looking uncomfortable, slips away to his own bedroom.

"What is this?" Draco asks.

"I don't like sharing a bed with other people," says Harry. This is neither a lie nor not a lie precisely; Harry has never shared a bed with anyone else, but he suspects he wouldn't like it if he did. He is not sure whether he likes what

happens to Draco when he says this, either: the other boy seems to curl up at the corners a little bit, like a scrap of paper tossed on a fire.

"You don't have to stay here," says Harry, "you know that."

Draco shakes his head. He flings the blanket down on top of the couch cushions, and the pillows, and then himself on top of the blankets and pillows. "Any other house rules you want to spring on me?" he demands, hooking his thumbs into the waistband of his trousers. This bends the material forward, showing the gap between the corduroy and the slim flat planes of his stomach. "No smoking on the couch? No crawling into bed with Weasley? No eating the last chocolate biscuit?"

"No breaking the fucking television," says Harry.

Draco's eyes are a flat silvery gray like bits of mirror. "Go away, Potter," he says. "I want to get some sleep."

When Harry goes into his bedroom he lies down on the bed in his clothes, intending to rest his eyes for a moment, but for the first time in months he is asleep as soon as his head hits the pillow.

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The small clock in the kitchen says that it is two in the morning and Draco is lying on his back on the couch, covers kicked down to his bare feet, looking like an ad for something or other with all that pale hair and even paler skin striped by moonlight. He is shirtless in pajama bottoms, one hand flat on his bare stomach, the other curled against the pillow, and the insides of his arms and spaces between his ribs look, for some reason, especially vulnerable and poignant as Harry goes quietly across the room and climbs onto the couch and lies down on top of Draco, flattening him into the sagging cushions.

Draco wakes up instantly with a gurgling little gasp, eyes flying open. "Harry?"

"No," Harry says. "Someone else."

Draco's body fits under his, not entirely perfectly, but well enough. Their legs align, their hips and ribcages, Harry's hands on Draco's shoulders. Harry is reminded of puzzles he owned when he was younger, trying to fit the appropriate pieces together when sometimes you just couldn't find the exact right piece and instead ended up using one that was nearly perfect, or good enough. He wondered if it mattered, since he'd never gotten far enough with any puzzle for it to turn out to be an issue.

Draco squirms under him. Friction. Harry's heart skips a beat. "Potter, you're crushing my hand."

Harry pushes himself up off Draco just enough to give Draco room to pull his hand out from between them. His elbows sink into the pillow on either side of

Draco's shoulders. "Is that better?"

"Yes," says Draco automatically, and then, "Wait. No. What are you doing?"

"What the hell do you think I'm doing? I'm making a soufflÈ, Malfoy. I'm cave-diving in the Yucatan. I'm digging up the world's biggest diamond in the mines of South Africa. I'm competing in a clog-dancing competition. I could go on."

"I'd rather you didn't. Fine. So it was a stupid question."

"Yes," says Harry, "it was," and he shifts himself, slightly, on top of Draco. The thin t-shirt he is wearing is scrunching up and it is slick and sticky where their bare skin presses together. Harry reaches down between them, finds the cotton drawstring that holds Draco's pajama bottoms closed, and starts fiddling with it. It is not as easy to untie as he had expected. Draco appears to have tied six or seven knots in it. "What the hell is with all these knots?" Harry demands. "Trying to keep out a tribe of pillaging Ostrogoths?"

"No," Draco says. There is a defiant set to his chin, although he hasn't moved. "Just you."

Harry winds his fingers in the drawstring and tugs once, gently. "I can go back to bed if you'd like."

Draco's eyes narrow. "Does it matter what I'd like?"

Instead of answering, Harry ends the discussion by kissing Draco as this has been historically proven to be effective when these sorts of issues come up. Indeed, when any issues come up. Draco keeps his lips sealed shut for a moment, resisting, then seems to give up, and opens his mouth to Harry's. He tastes of toothpaste and has the softest lips Harry thinks he has ever kissed, softer than Cho's even. Harry lets go of the drawstring and wriggles his way up Draco's body, trying to get in a better kissing position, and Draco moans involuntarily, his back arching up. Harry grins against Draco's mouth, circling his hips against the other boy's, and Draco shudders, a faint shudder of melting resistance, defiance collapsing into heat as he pushes himself up off the couch cushions, jacking his hips up against Harry's.

Really, Harry thinks, they ought to be better at this, they have had enough practice. But it has been a long time and Draco has his eyes squeezed shut as if he's afraid to open them but his hands are locked across Harry's back and Harry can feel Draco's erection pressed against his belly as if there were no material between them at all. Harry decides that getting their clothes off or not getting their clothes off is going to be irrelevant. Neither of them are going to last that long anyway or have the patience for much fiddling around. Instead Harry braces himself on his hands and grinds his hips down slowly against Draco's, a rough circling motion that wrings a gasp out of Draco's throat and wins Harry a pair of feverish hands scrabbling against his back. Harry can feel a violent thrumming through Draco's veins and nerves that reminds him of the vibration that thrums through the metal of a railroad

track when the train approaches, every part of the other boy's body saying *Again do it again do it again.*

But Draco says nothing at all aloud and doesn't open his eyes, just grips with his hands fiercely against Harry's back, nails against skin, scoring through the thin cotton. Their lips are still sealed together although they are less kissing each other than panting into each other's mouths as after all they are teenage boys and neither is much good at multi-tasking. Draco is arched up off the couch like a bow pulled back, Harry grinding down against him, harder and faster now, it almost hurts, and Draco keeps his eyes shut tight but when he comes it is with his ankles looped around the back of Harry's knees, arms locked across Harry's shoulders, shuddering and biting on his own fingers, avoiding the burned part of his hand.

His convulsions push Harry over the edge, and he tumbles and falls into his own orgasm, the dark water surging up to close over his head, and he collapses onto Draco as if the bones in his arms have snapped in half like sticks of broken candy. He shudders as he comes, a series of diminishing tremors, one after the other, like waves of pain receding, fading slowly, leaving emptiness behind. Harry is only dimly half-aware that Draco holds onto him until he has come back from the dark drowning place and can breathe again.

Draco says something against Harry's ear, and his voice seems to pulse with the rhythm of the blood in Harry's head. Harry is not sure exactly what he says. It sounds like, *You go so far away* but that doesn't make sense, doesn't mean anything. He pulls away, sitting up, freeing himself from their tangled welter of limbs and damp skin and sweat and stickiness and the cool air hits his face and he tilts his head back and breathes and breathes, in and out, tasting what is carried on the cold air from the half-open window : canal water, dust, smoke, the cool taste of outside mixing with the salt scent of sex inside. Draco, half-propped on his elbow, looks up at Harry and does not reach out for him, seeing perhaps in Harry's face the answer to the question of what would happen if he did.

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Draco is a terrible house guest. He does not, probably, mean to be a terrible house guest, but he is one anyway. He leaves his clothes everywhere and when Ron asks him to do even the most minor of chores Draco reacts as if he has been asked to burn down an orphanage full of children. His lips curl up and his nostrils flare and Harry can see in his eyes the generations of Malfoys who went before him, staring scornfully down the years, house-elves cowering in their shadows.

Ron, being Ron, does not press the point, but glares as he cleans, and pointedly does not make enough food in the morning for all three of them. He goes up on the roof alone now, and Harry knows he is up there, he can hear the bricks as they tumble down past the windows and smash on the pavement. Sometimes he goes up as well and he and Ron huddle, smoking, in companionable silence under the windbreak of the shallow stone walls, but Ron never asks about Draco and Harry never offers any personal insights.

When Draco comes up to the roof he just stands at the top of the stairs and waits, watching them from a distance, and after a while Harry will stop what he is doing and get up and walk over to Draco and they will leave the house together and wander around the city. Harry always asks Ron if he wants to come with them and Ron always says no.

It is probably just as well that he refuses to come. Harry is rediscovering things: rediscovering the city he walks through every day. He is learning it in an entirely different way. He is learning the shadowy spaces under bridges where it is possible to kiss without being caught; he is learning the dark corners where nobody goes, where it is possible to do other things without being caught. Wanting Draco comes and goes in waves: it rushes in like a tide to fill an emptiness which Harry suspects might otherwise be unbearable and when he does want him, which is not all the time but is enough of the time, then he does not want or like to wait.

An example: they are in a café one afternoon, and Harry is watching Draco work his way through a pack of cigarettes, smoking each one in a thoughtful, dedicated, absorbed manner, cheeks hollowing out with the suction, and as he watches Harry's thinks about how back at school Draco used to sit in class and chew on the end of his quill, looking bitter and arrogant and unpleasant, and how much Harry used to wish he'd swallow that quill and choke to death on it, and Draco looks up as if he can hear what Harry is thinking and so Harry stands up and grabs onto Draco's arm and pulls him after him, out of the café and down the street and around a corner and into an alley and shoves him up against a rickety-looking wooden fence and Draco chokes on a snarling sound of amusement, half-pulling away, "I'm going to fall down, you're not that strong, Potter," and Harry says, "I'm stronger than you think." And he is, or is at least sufficiently strong for the matter at hand. He holds Draco flat against the fence and fucks him there, and Draco coughs and gasps when he comes, biting Harry's shoulder, spitting out dust and muttering, "Motherfucking *splinters*," which makes Harry burst out laughing -- after he's come himself, of course.

The laughter still feels strange in the back of his throat. He watches Draco's face when they fuck, trying to decipher it, especially during the climactic moment, trying to see the stars exploding behind his eyes, wondering what he's thinking, feeling, hearing. Does he need this release of pressure like Harry does, does it build up and up like pain behind his eyes until he can't stand it anymore, or is it something else, something simple and straightforward, is he just in love? And is this what love looks like, twisting and writhing under Harry's body, hammering its heels against the backs of his legs, or is love the part where he absently kisses the back of Harry's hand when Harry reaches to hand him something, then blushes angrily as if he hadn't meant to do that and shoves the hand back with a curse?

Harry sees other people look at them when they walk along the streets together. Not because he is Harry Potter -- these are Muggles, he doesn't matter to them -- but because of the way they look, because they are so young, because of Draco's white-silver hair and striking scowl, because Draco cannot help but lean towards Harry when he walks, like a tree growing in the direction of the wind. People look disapproving sometimes, more often

complicit or admiring, and Harry suspects he ought to feel something about this -- gratified, amused even, but he feels nothing at all. Sometimes when other people stare at Draco long enough Harry gets the urge to drag Draco home and fuck him, and usually when he gets this urge, he gives into it. There seems no reason not to, really. Not much matters either way. Time trickles by as slowly and steadily as the water in the canals and sometimes when Harry is kissing Draco he tastes the siege dust as fine as powdered sugar on his mouth, he smells the stale cold air and hears the whispering silence of a castle full of people who have given up. Draco still closes his eyes when Harry kisses him, but he opens his lips instantly now, expectantly and without resistance, winding his fingers into Harry's hair or lazily stroking the sides of Harry's face or laying his fingers lightly against Harry's hipbones as if he were a dancer who needed only the slightest guidance to balance him, and Harry knows that this is because Draco trusts him, and that just as he has done with everyone else who has ever trusted him, just as he once did with a whole world which trusted him, he will fail Draco in the end.

The weather begins to change during the second week that Draco is there. The crisp chill fades out of the air and it begins to get warmer. Harry leaves the windows in his bedroom open. Ron is home more often, and out of a belated deference to his feelings, Harry does not touch Draco when Ron is around, and will not let Draco touch him. He has no idea if Ron would actually care but somehow he has the dim feeling that this minor concession will make up for the fact that Draco refuses to cook or clean the flat and often eats all of Ron's cereal. Harry tries to avoid even much physical contact with Draco inside his own room with the door closed when Ron is home, although Harry knows this is a pointless gesture. Partially he does it because it really annoys Draco, who tends to sulk on the foot of the bed, glaring ferociously at Harry until Harry crawls across the bed and either shoves him off the edge or pushes him down and rolls on top of him, depending on his mood.

It is therefore especially annoying to Harry that, despite these magnificent attempts at restraint on his part, the one time he actually does fuck Draco while he knows Ron is home he manages to do it so hard that he puts one of his feet through the wall at the foot of the bed.

"Ow!" he yells, rolling off Draco, despite its being something of a critical moment. "Ow, ow, ow, Jesus fuck, that *hurt*."

He pulls his foot back into the room and examines it critically. His foot seems to be fine, although when he looks at the wall, he winces anyway -- there is a hole there now that goes right through the cheap plaster. Harry can now see the living room through his wall.

Draco, meanwhile, is laughing so hard that he cannot speak.

Harry glares at him. "It's not funny."

"Yes, it is," says Draco. "It may well be the funniest thing that ever happened. I can't wait till Weasley sees what you did to the wall."

As if on cue, Ron's voice floats in from the living room. Harry cannot hear what he is saying exactly, but it sounds like angry swearing and the word "wall" is definitely involved. With a groan of annoyance, Harry rolls of the bed, wriggles himself into his sweatpants, and stomps out into the living room where Ron is sitting on the kitchen table. Much to Harry's surprise, Ron is not sitting there alone, either. Hermione is with him.

She looks at Harry with raised eyebrows. She is neatly perched on the edge of the table, one small hand wrapped around a slightly chipped teacup, her legs crossed at the ankles. She is, as Draco had said, wearing a leather suit: tight trousers and a tighter jacket decorated all over with ornamental and doubtless multifunctional zippers, loops and hooks. Boots adorn her long legs. Ron is staring at her with his mouth half open and Harry suspects that if he drools any more he will manage to once again short out the recently repaired television power cord.

"Hello, Harry," she says. "I'd hug you, but..."

She wrinkles up her nose. Harry does not take this personally. He is, after all, very sweaty and partially covered in plaster dust.

"I know," he says. "Hey, Ron. Sorry about the wall."

Ron glowers. "You should be."

"Oh, for goodness sake." Hermione bends over and slides her wand out of the top of her boot. Ron stares at her while she does this, eyes glazing over in silent appreciation. She waves her wand at the wall, muttering *Reparo!* and it closes up, sealing itself over as if it had never existed. "You two," she says, returning her wand to its place, "are completely useless."

"I don't do magic any more," says Harry flatly.

"Well," says Hermione. "That's just silly, isn't it?"

"Probably," says Harry. "So what's up, Hermione? You just dropping by? Nice catsuit, by the way."

"It's not a catsuit. It's a Ministry Assassin's uniform."

"I like it," Ron opines.

"Thank you, Ron." Hermione looks gratified.

"No," says Ron, "I mean, I *really* like it."

Hermione looks less gratified. "Yes. Well." She fiddles nervously with the zipper. Ron looks as if he might topple off the table. Hermione abandons her fiddling. "I came to warn you about Voldemort."

"I'm not sure I need warning off Voldemort," says Harry. "I think I'm already pretty clear on the majority opinion that he's bad news."

"Please don't be flippant, Harry," Hermione says darkly. "This is serious. I've been tracking the movements of the Death Eaters across Europe and quite a few of them have been spotted headed this way."

"That's hardly surprising. Where else but here can you see a goat doing illegal things to a flobberworm? I bet they come here all the time."

Hermione glares. "I think you should leave Amsterdam, Harry. Come back to England."

"No," Harry says flatly. "Although Ron can, if he likes. I wouldn't blame him."

Ron shakes his head. "What, and leave Malfoy here to live in my half of the house rent-free? Hardly."

Hermione's eyebrows quirk upward. "Malfoy?"

As if on cue, Draco enters, also ruffled and sweaty, wearing a pair of Harry's boxers. They have small mobile enchanted broomsticks on them, which zoom distractingly across Draco's crotch as he stands in the doorway. "I got tired of sitting around naked on the floor waiting for you to come back," he says to Harry. "Hello, Granger. Nice catsuit."

"It's not a catsuit," says Hermione. "Hello, Malfoy. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised to see you. I was wondering whose foot came through the wall."

"That was Harry's foot actually," says Draco.

"It hurt, too," says Harry, hoping for sympathy.

None is on offer. "Aren't those Harry's boxers?" Hermione asks, peering at Draco. "I swear I gave him a pair just like those for Christmas."

"They may well be," Draco admits. "Is there anything around to eat, Weasley? Sex makes me hungry."

Hermione looks at Ron. "What's going on?"

Ron shrugs, the weight of weeks of annoyance evident in the set of his shoulders. "Harry has post-traumatic stress disorder and is using sex with Malfoy to kill the pain of a lifestyle that might otherwise seem devoid of purpose or meaning."

"Harry is not using me for sex," says Draco.

"I do not have post-traumatic stress disorder," says Harry.

"Yes, you do," says Ron firmly. "Otherwise what you're doing with Malfoy would just be really weird and disturbing. I mean, you don't even *like* him."

Draco makes an incoherent noise of protest.

"Post-traumatic stress disorder implies that the trauma is over," Harry points out. "I happen to think the trauma is ongoing."

"Yes," says Hermione coolly. "I am sure that having lots of sex with Malfoy is very traumatic for you."

"Well, it would be for me," mutters Ron.

"If everyone is just going to talk about me as if I wasn't here I am going to go back to my room," says Draco, and stomps off to the bedroom.

Harry debates calling after him that it isn't actually his room but thinks better of it. Hermione is still looking at him coldly. "I guess I can see why you don't want to come back to England," she says in the same frigid tone. "I guess you've given up."

"Yes," Harry says. "Yes, I have, thank you."

There is an awkward sort of silence.

Hermione, finally, sighs. Her eyes are sad. "Oh, Harry," she says. "The siege is over."

Harry wants to say something grand and meaningless, like: "It will never really be over!" But, in fact, she's right, it is over. It's not the siege itself that bothers him, that weighs on his mind. In fact, he's not entirely sure that there is anything precisely weighing on his mind. It's more a lack of weight. He feels himself buoyant, drifting, a ship with its moorings cut free, watching the shore recede like a safe black line in the distance. Gravity does not apply to him; as always, he is unique without wanting to be.

"I can't go back," he says, now, to Hermione. "I didn't end that siege."

"Everyone thinks you did," says Ron.

"That's why I can't go back," says Harry.

Hermione slides off the table and comes over to him. She puts her hands on his shoulders and leans and kisses his cheek: a cool, dry kiss, sisterly.

"Whatever happens," she says. "I love you, Harry."

"Go ahead," he says. "That seems to be what I'm here for."

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Back in the bedroom, Draco is sitting on the floor, the blanket draped over his head and shoulders, making a peaked tent, the kind that children read under by torchlight when they're meant to be asleep. He looks up when Harry comes in, the blanket sliding back, hair in his eyes. "What happened?"

"Nothing." Harry looks down at Draco for a moment, then kneels and straddles him, knees on either side of his hips. Draco leans back, giving him room, the blanket falling back completely. "I want to do something," Harry says.

Draco puts his hands, flat, on Harry's bare stomach and slides them down. His nails scrape the skin very lightly, just enough to make Harry shiver, before his

fingers find the waistband of Harry's sweatpants and his hands glide inside, cool and dry as paper. His expression is absorbed, apt and careful, mouth a fine concentrated line.

"No," Harry says. "Not that."

Draco looks up, surprised. "Then what?"

"Something else."

"As far as distractions go, sex is a good one. Also, inexpensive and local."

"That's it," Harry says. "I want to go somewhere."

"Where?" Draco asks, reasonably.

Harry doesn't know. But that doesn't matter. He stands up, and begins rummaging in the enormous pile of clothes on the floor for his jeans and jacket. Draco watches quietly from the floor for a moment, then begins to look for his own clothes. He had not brought that many clothes with him, and lately has been dressing in a combination of his own clothes and Harry's. Because they are the same size, the clothes fit him, but Harry still finds himself taken aback sometimes to see Draco wearing his own greying t-shirts, his jumpers with the stretched-out cuffs and holes in the sleeves. Like seeing a very expensive car parked in a decaying garage.

They take the back way out of the house and as soon as they are out in the street Draco starts smoking, which lets Harry know that he is nervous.

"Don't be nervous," Harry says, checking his pockets to see how much money he has with him.

"It would help if you told me where we were going," Draco says. "Red light district? More coffee shops? Canal boat tour? Crayon factory?"

"Train station," says Harry briefly, quickening his stride.

"Great," says Draco. "I feel a lot better knowing that."

Once in the train station, Harry checks for the next departing local train, then buys tickets for it, a haphazard gesture that pleases him enormously. Draco follows him onto the train, looking gloom-ridden and mutinous. Harry bangs the compartment door shut behind them and wedges Draco up against it, using his knee to push Draco's legs apart, working his hand down into the other boy's jeans and by the time he gets where he's going Draco is already hard, despite his expression of sulky annoyance. Harry jerks him off hard and fast because he knows Draco doesn't mind that, in fact rather likes it, and Draco squeezes his eyes shut and gasps out something as he comes but whatever it is he says is swallowed up in the shriek of the train's brakes releasing as it leaves the station.

Harry takes his hand out of Draco's pants and kisses him for the first time that day and Draco closes his eyes and leans into the kiss and says into

Harry's mouth, "Where the fuck is this train going?"

"I'm not exactly sure," Harry admits. "The beach, I think."

Harry's guess turns out, remarkably, to be correct, surprising no one so much as Harry himself. The train deposits them at a small seaside resort town that begins with a Z and has far too many vowels in it. Draco opines that there is nothing more depressing than a seaside town in the off-season and Harry tells him to shut up, although privately he agrees with this. The gray sky casts an isinglass pall over the waterfront and the small shops and the sea, and the streets are deserted.

Harry does not mind, although he is conscious of Draco shivering resentfully at his side, his shoulders hunched inside his too-thin jacket. They walk down onto the beach itself and Harry takes his shoes off and walks out into the water. It is as clear and icy and bitter-looking as cold white wine and it laps up around his knees as if it wanted to pull him outward and into itself. He tilts his head back and closes his eyes. He feels poised exactly in the middle of something, angles and planes reversing around him, the sky at his feet and the sea overhead.

When he shivers his way back up onto the sand Draco looks at him oddly. "Trying to swim back to England?"

"Not exactly," says Harry, bending down to lace his wet feet into gritty shoes. He puts a hand out to balance himself and Draco catches him by the shoulder. When he straightens up, Draco puts his head down and kisses him and Harry lets him but finds himself unable to kiss back. The sound of the sea is loud in his head but he still tastes dust in the back of his throat, that dry powdery dust so much finer than sand.

Draco lets him go, mouth tightening. "What now? Don't want to kiss in public? Afraid someone might see you with me?"

"No," Harry says. "I never think about that."

Draco puts his hands in his pockets. "I don't believe you."

"I'm not ashamed of you. I don't care what people think of me, anyway."

Draco just looks past him, out at the ocean which is the same sullen gray color as his eyes. "Fabulous," he says. "So I'm just another expression of your overwhelming apathy."

"Whatever, Malfoy. Look, I'm going to go try to find a hotel room. I'm freezing."

Draco shoots him a nasty look. "Do you want me to walk six steps behind you so you can pretend you don't know me?"

"If you think six is sufficient," says Harry, and stalks off. Draco follows him, swearing under his breath.

A few blocks in from the waterfront, the street is lined with small lodging-houses with signs in the window that advertise what languages are spoken by the proprietors and what kinds of television channels are available. The third one they come to is painted a violent shade of pink, has gingerbread curlicue decorations, and a rocking chair on the porch. In the rocking chair a middle-aged woman sits, thoughtfully smoking a cigarette and looking at them curiously.

Harry ascends the steps. He is aware of Draco, emanating bitter reluctance, trailing behind him. The woman looks up as they approach.

"Hello." Harry greets her pleasantly. "I'm Harry Potter and this is my homosexual lover, Draco Malfoy. He's in a bad mood because he thinks I'm ashamed of our relationship. Draco, come and say hello to the nice lady."

Draco has gone the color of a recently unearthed mushroom. "Fuck you, Potter," he says with a surprising amount of venom.

"Quite," says Harry. "Are there any rooms available?"

"All our rooms are available," says the landlady. Apparently quite unfazed by Harry's forthright declaration, she takes another pull on her cigarette. She looks as if Harry is the most amusing thing she has encountered in a long time.

"Have they got soundproofing?" Harry inquires. "Because we plan on having a lot of sex. On the floors. Up against the walls. Possibly in the bathtub."

"Bathtub costs extra." The landlady raises her eyes and looks Draco up and down, her amused blue gaze trailing from the top of his silvery-blond head to his scuffed trainers. She grins around her cigarette.

Draco looks as though if it were possible to die of abject humiliation, he would be dead already.

Once inside the hotel, the landlady having gone to find the key to their room, Draco pushes Harry into the alcove under the stairs and kisses him so hard that it hurts, biting down into his lower lip and digging his fingers into Harry's shoulders. "You," he says, when he lets him go, "have made your fucking point, okay?"

Harry sucks thoughtfully on his lip and does not reply.

The room they are given, at the top of the stairs, has in fact no bathtub and is decorated, with a thoroughness bordering on fetish, in a teddy bear theme. There are teddy bears everywhere. On top of the television. On the headboard. On the chairs. On the windowsill. The paintings on the walls are of teddy bears. It is the first thing Harry notices when he walks into the room after Draco, and he looks around the room and expels a breath of amusement. It is ugly but that does not bother him. Harry has never given much thought to the relative aesthetic quality of his environment.

Draco is standing still in the middle of the room. Harry kicks the door shut behind him and turns around to Draco all in one motion. He pulls him forward, he slides his hands around those familiar arms, looping them with his fingers. Draco is not a big person and he never will be, for all he has filled out since the siege. Harry can contain his wrists within the circles of his thumb and forefingers and when he presses down on the thin upper arms he can feel the delicate bones inside through the slim glove of flesh that covers them.

Draco turns his face to the side, looking away from Harry. Harry sets his mouth to Draco's temple, to the flax-spun hair there. "What," he asks, lips brushing the damp tendrils, "exactly, is your problem now?"

When Draco replies his voice is nearly inaudible. It appears that he has a problem with the decorations in the room. The teddy bears upset him. He feels that they are watching them. Harry points out that they are inanimate stuffed objects with coat buttons for eyes but this, apparently, only makes it worse.

Finally Harry releases Draco, and goes around the room, turning the stuffed toys to face the wall. He finds that this faintly ridiculous task does not bother him as much as he'd thought it would. It is almost amusing. When he turns back around Draco is sitting on the bed watching him. His eyes are half-lidded, considering. He has kicked off his shoes. He leans back on his elbows. "I didn't think you'd do it," he says.

Harry's wet shoes come off, and his socks, on the way to the bed. He kneels over Draco in his jeans and stares fixedly down at him. Draco at first looks faintly surprised to be regarded so closely. His eyes widen as Harry looks down at him, studying the details of his face: the eyelashes like silvery veils, the fine, pale-textured skin, slightly rougher over the cheekbones and along the ridge of the nose where the sun has most often touched it. His lips part as Harry stares at him, softening as if he is about to reply or expects to be kissed, but when Harry neither speaks to him nor leans closer, Draco flushes, a clear red blush like a child's, and scowls. "Don't," he says. "Don't play with me."

Harry puts the back of his hand to the other boy's cheekbone. Draco's skin feels smooth against the roughness of Harry's knuckles. "Take your shirt off," Harry says.

And Draco does it, reaching down to grasp the hem of his shirt with his hands, wriggling slightly as he drags it up, arching his back to pull it off, and then Harry stops him, grabs his elbows, the shirt halfway over his head, his face covered by the thin cottony material. "Stop," Harry says. "Wait."

Whatever Draco says back is muffled and nearly inaudible. Harry slowly lowers himself over Draco, down on his elbows, their chests pressed together, their hips aligned. He rolls his hips against Draco's and hears the other boy gasp sharply as their cocks grind against each other, sending a pleasure-painful ache through Harry. Draco whimpers, probably because he can't move, his arms are pinioned inside the shirt, but he arches back when Harry kisses his throat, his body jumping under Harry's quieting hands. Harry runs

the tips of his fingers gently along Draco's ribcage, touches his flat belly with moth-light fingers, bends and puts his ear to Draco's chest. He can hear the fierce syncopated tempo of the other boy's heartbeat, softly muffled by the cage of bone and flesh surrounding it. It sounds like a drumbeat heard through water. It is alien and familiar; it is unnerving and reassuring, it is a whisper and a scream.

"Stay," Harry says. "Stay where you are."

He can hear Draco's breathing, uneven, muffled by cotton and his own crossed arms. Harry moves down Draco's body, finds the waistband on his jeans, unsnaps and unzips with a quick mathematical precision. Pushes the jeans down, slides a hand into Draco's boxers, and frees his stiffening cock. Draco shudders and squirms and Harry puts his hands forcefully on Draco's hipbones, holding him down.

"I said don't move," he says quietly.

Draco swears at him, or at least Harry is assuming he's swearing, because otherwise he's just said something that sounds like "clucking muddy bell", and this seems unlikely. But he doesn't move.

Harry bends his head so that his hair brushes the other boy's bare skin. The muscles in Draco's stomach jump as if he's being electrocuted, and he gasps again, arching his back off the bed. He is rock-hard now, and Harry lowers his face slowly, slowly, and takes the tip of Draco's cock into his mouth, his tongue flicking out to rasp gently against the sensitive underside.

Draco jerks violently, canting his hips up towards Harry. Trickle of sweat have begun to run down his chest, tracing the spaces between his ribs. Harry keeps his hands on Draco's hips, holding him down, hard, as he moves his lips and tongue and mouth up and around Draco's cock, sucking and licking and tasting. Draco tastes of the salt air of the seaside now, of skin warmed by sun, which has a different taste than skin warmed by fire.

He can hear Draco gasping inside the shirt. He is shaking all over, rolling his hips back and forth under Harry's hands. His feet are drumming a heartbeat against the mattress. Every inch of his body seems as if it is trying to arch itself up towards Harry, mute with its need. He screams when he comes, and the sound is hardly muffled at all.

Harry eases up and back, his hands still on Draco, sliding up over his stomach, feeling the fluttering aftershocks of orgasm shuddering through the tight muscles, as if there were something alive inside Draco trying to claw its way out. "Shh," he says. His voice has gone gentle, pliant. "Shhh, be quiet."

But Draco is twisting away from him, he is struggling into a sitting position, freeing himself from the t-shirt, yanking it off and throwing it to the side. He is gasping, his cheeks flushed scarlet, his hair soaking wet, rivulets of sweat running down his face.

He glares at Harry accusingly. "What the hell was *that*?"

Harry slowly runs his tongue across his bottom lip, which still tastes like Draco, that salty-bitter taste, then wonders if this is a silly, porn-movie type thing to do, and stops. "It was a blow job. You've had one before. Several, if I recall correctly."

"That's not what I meant. I meant, you -- covering up my face -- what the fuck was that? Are you trying to forget who I am, now?" He picks up his crumpled, sweaty shirt and hurls it at Harry. "Fuck you, Potter. *Fuck you.*"

"I have never," says Harry, "let you fuck me."

Draco grabs one of the teddy bears off the bedside table and flings it at Harry. Harry ducks and it hits the wall behind his head. "Maybe I don't want to fuck you," he yells.

"Then this should be your ideal relationship," Harry reasons.

Draco quiets suddenly. Some of the rage goes out of his expression, receding into a blank look, half-thoughtful, half-expressionless. "This," he says, "is nobody's ideal relationship."

Harry just looks at him. He is aware that while Draco is naked, he himself is still wearing almost all his own clothes. His hands against the knees of his jeans look pale and thin, defenseless hands, even useless hands, for all they can wring screams and moans and defiant curses out of Draco Malfoy.

"On the other hand," says Draco, "you never called it a relationship before. I expect I should be happy about that."

"Are you?" asks Harry.

"No," Draco says. He looks at Harry for another moment, then turns and crawls under the bedcovers, pulling them up around him. He puts his head down on his arms and shuts his eyes. Harry looks at him for a moment, wondering what he's doing, then realizes he's doing exactly what it looks like he's doing: he's going to sleep. Harry has never watched him fall asleep before. On one or two occasions they had collapsed into unconsciousness together, rolling apart as they did so as if they were magnets afflicted with some kind of reverse polarity. But this seems somehow different.

Harry takes his jeans off and slides under the covers as well, reaching to click off the light as he does so. He lies there, listening to the unsilent night, the sound of the sea outside, Draco's breathing next to him. It is a conscious effort not to let his own breathing lapse into rhythm with either sound, but he makes it, at least until he is too tired to notice any more and falls into a vanishing sleep.

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Later that night Harry wakes suddenly, as if something has startled him out of sleep, although there is nothing that could have woken him. If he has had a

nightmare, he does not remember it; if there was a sound that startled him, he can no longer hear it. The faint scent of ocean comes in even through the shut window. Draco is far away on the other side of the bed, his face buried in his arms, his breathing shallow and regular.

Harry slides across the bed towards Draco, carefully and gingerly, touches his bare shoulder, finding his way through the protective tangle of limbs the other boy has laced around himself, a construct of sharp elbows and whipcord knees and bent arms, but Harry finds his way through it like a prince cutting his way through the hedge of thorns around an enchanted castle. He finds his way through and brushes his mouth against Draco's mouth and kisses him, kisses him awake, and Draco comes awake slowly, making soft irritable noises of protest and confusion that turn into acceptance when he seems to realize who it is kissing him and holding him there in the dark.

And Harry continues to kiss him, pressing blindly towards him as if he were trying to reach through him to something else. There is a desperation to Harry's kisses, but Draco does not seem to notice that. He curls towards Harry as if he were magnetized in his direction. He touches his hair with butterfly fingers. He curves his hand around the back of Harry's neck as if it were something terrifyingly fragile: a blown glass flask with poison in it, the bones inside a child.

"Potter," Draco says at last. He has paused, his mouth against Harry's mouth. He is whispering as if he is afraid of waking someone up although Harry suspects that the hotel is empty aside from them. "Are you all right? We don't have to do anything, we can just --"

"No," Harry says. "Get on top of me, I want you on top of me." He pulls Draco towards him, up and over, and now he is lying on his back looking up at Draco, who is blinking sleep and surprise and confusion out of his eyes, but then he is often confused by Harry, this is hardly anything different.

"It's weird," Draco says. "Doing this in a bed."

Harry doesn't say anything back, just reaches down and between them, sliding his hand down Draco's flat abdomen, finding his cock and stroking it with rhythmic gentle touches. Draco is already hard of course, he is sixteen years old and generally Harry just breathing on him gets him hard. Draco closes his eyes at the touch; he is shaking the way that small animals shake when they are injured: wordlessly, with tiny shivers. He leans forward, finds Harry's mouth even through his blindness, nuzzling up against Harry like a cat seeking warmth. Harry bites at Draco's mouth, using his tongue to part the other boy's lips. Draco moans against him and complies, Harry rarely lets him kiss the way he wants to: mouths open and wet and hot, tongues tangled together, fierce and intimate. But Harry lets him now, because he is looking for something. He is not precisely sure what, and the waves that are rising in him from the contact of their lips, the friction of their cocks sliding together -- Harry has moved his hands now, they are flat-palmed against Draco's back, pressing him down -- are not giving him any answers. The waves are diffuse,

he cannot catch at them, cannot ride them, cannot quite gather their fragments to him in any cohesive whole.

Draco is gasping against his mouth now and his movements have gotten more convulsive, the grip of his hands blindly tight on Harry's shoulders, but he does stop himself, to Harry's faint surprise, and open his eyes and look down at Harry, and his pale hair falls down across his eyes, a threaded veil of light. "You don't want this," he says. "What do you want?"

"What I do to you," Harry says, not, for some reason, finding the words. "Do it to me."

Draco looks startled, almost upset. "You want me inside you?"

Harry nods. "I think so."

Draco winces, half-closes his eyes. "Potter...what you said before..."

"Doesn't matter," Harry says. "I do. I want that."

But Draco continues to require convincing, the sort of convincing Harry has learned and found with surprise that he is good at. At least he thinks he has learned convincing; perhaps he has merely discovered what surrender looks like. He does not mind the convincing, it takes its own pleasant form, a slow dance of lips and tongue and touches. He has learned Draco's vulnerable places, where he can be most effectively attacked: the soft insides of his wrists, the webbing between thumb and forefinger, the smooth temples under the locks of fair, sweat-darkened hair. He can tease out Draco's fierceness the way he had once patiently unraveled and drawn out threads from the ends of his school scarves during especially boring classes. He writes his name with the tip of his tongue along the curve of Draco's collarbone; he scratches his teeth lightly along the sensitive place under his jawline, he licks at his mouth with light touches as fine as a brushstroke, and as Draco gives up and folds into him, as their hands mutually travel, Harry knows he has won this battle too.

Still, when Harry locks his feet behind Draco's knees, arching his back, opening himself up, Draco looks for a moment as if he wants to run away. And when he does come into Harry, he does it slowly, so slowly that his hands begin to sweat where he is tightly holding Harry's upper arms and his grip almost falters. Despite this exorbitant caution, it hurts, as Harry had expected it would, although in fact not nearly as much as he had expected it would, but it does hurt, and Harry closes his eyes and puts his hand over his mouth and bites on it.

Draco immediately stops moving. "Harry, are you..."

"Don't," Harry says, tasting the salt sweat against the inside of his own hand. "Malfoy..."

Draco sounds panicked. "Don't what?"

"Don't be careful. You can hurt me," and Harry slides his hand away from his face, although he does not open his eyes, cannot quite manage what it would take to bring him over that final hurdle. "Hurt me," he says. "I want you to."

Draco takes his hands away from Harry's arms, slides them up to Harry's shoulders. "I can try," he says.

He leans forward, on his hands, kisses Harry's mouth, fiercely, tugging Harry against him, hands under Harry's shoulders, fitting the two of them more closely together. He rubs his cheek against Harry's, kisses his temple, and rocks forward against him, hard, and Harry gasps -- the pain is bright, sharp, startling, like sliding the pad of his thumb across the keen edge of a razor blade. He imagines the taste of blood in his mouth as he cranes himself up towards Draco, hands interlocking across Draco's back, and as Draco keeps moving into and against him the pain recedes like the tide drawing out and when it spills back up the shore it brings fire with it. Harry's hands spring away from Draco, fisting themselves in the sheets under him, twisting knots in the slick cotton. Draco's thrusts inside him have achieved a regular rhythm like the beat of a heart, and with every further movement Harry feels them more intensely, bright spikes of pleasure driven down through his wrists, his groin, the back of his eyes, his temples, more intense than any pain could ever be and he bites down on his lip the way that he used to, back at school, because he had no other way to express his disappointment.

Now, he whispers his disappointment against Draco's mouth and Draco whispers back that he is *trying*.

And then there is only the sound of the bedsprings creaking as they rock together, and Draco's ragged breathing in Harry's ear, and the feverish rasping of their bodies against the sheets, and his own voice asking Draco to hurt him, saying it over and over until the words have lost all organic meaning and have run together into a series of pained and painful gasps. Until finally Draco can no longer hold back, until he breaks and cries out and collapses against Harry like a child's toy smashed into fragments, his face buried in Harry's shoulder, and he whispers with the remains of his voice that he can hurt Harry no more than he has, that if Harry wants to be hurt so badly, he will have to find some other way.

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On the train going back to the city Harry is quite sure that Draco is looking at him strangely. Not as if he himself were strange but in an odd way that he never has before. Harry is not sure how to define it but it unsettles him and when he is unsettled he is even more laconic than he is usually. They say nothing to each other on the train and when it arrives Harry gets off the train without looking at Draco and is halfway through the station before Draco catches up with him and says, "I was thinking about going home."

"Home?" Harry looks at him blankly.

"Back to England," Draco says, enunciating clearly. "Home."

"Right now?" Harry blinks at him. "Well, I guess we are in the train station."

Draco's eyes, for a moment, betray a flash of loathing so intense that Harry is reminded of their days together back at Hogwarts. "I have to go back to the flat," he says. "My things are there."

They're on the brick front steps of the station now. The crowded street stretches out before them and a blue tram pulls up in front of Harry, cutting off his view, and he says, "Didn't you want to go to the art museum before you left?"

Draco looks at him. "Did I?"

Somehow, half an hour later, they are at the museum standing in front of an enormous painting of peasants drinking coffee and eating potatoes. Draco is saying things about light and dark and the composition of paint. It all sounds to Harry like complete bollocks. The unsettled feeling that had assailed him on the train is back. It feels like a cold hand slowly unclosing its fingers inside his stomach.

Draco is squinting at the painting. "It's weird that it doesn't move."

"It's not going to move. It's a Muggle painting."

"I know it's a Muggle painting. I just said it was weird."

"It's not weird. Moving paintings are weird. This is normal. This is a perfectly normal painting of people eating potatoes and symbolizes the inherent righteousness of the working classes."

"It does not symbolize the inherent righteousness of the working classes. It symbolizes the superiority of nature over man's transient accomplishments."

"It does not symbolize the superiority of nature over man's transient accomplishments."

"Yes, it does."

"Are you just stupid, or what?"

Draco looks injured. "I thought we were talking about art."

"'It's weird that it doesn't move' isn't viable art criticism. It's just you, being..." Harry searches for words. He is, suddenly, very irritable, although some small part of him is aware that his reaction is vastly out of proportion to its cause. "Muggle paintings are normal. Muggles are normal. How many wizards are there in the world? One for every hundred Muggles? One for every thousand? We're weird. Not them."

"I thought you didn't want to be a wizard anymore," says Draco.

Harry whirls on him, finds Draco looking at him with his lips slightly parted, eyes narrowed, and Harry suddenly wants to kiss him very much, so he does. He holds him with a hand on his waist and kisses him hard and ferociously,

prying Draco's mouth open with his tongue, licking and biting at his lips. Draco goes rigid before kissing him back, his tongue in Harry's mouth and his fingers tangled in Harry's hair. Harry remembers when he thought Draco was a terrible kisser and puts his other hand on Draco's waist and pulls him hard against him so he can feel that Draco wants him, which he does, and he goes for the other boy's belt buckle but Draco bats his hand away and says something that sounds like "...back to the flat?"

"Too far," says Harry, "there's a bench over there, we could ---" and his hands are sliding up under Draco's shirt, but Draco is stepping back, he is pushing Harry's hands down and away.

"No," he says. "Not here in the museum."

"Not here in the museum?" Harry echoes. "Why not?"

"It's a *museum*," says Draco, as if this explains everything.

"Yeah, and before it was an alley, and under a bridge, and on the roof, and back of the coffee shop, and in the old Potions classroom, and in the common room, and now, suddenly, it's a museum?"

"It's a museum," says Draco. He sounds tired. "Someone might come along."

"No one cares, Malfoy."

Draco looks at him. "No," he says. "Nobody does."

He walks out of the room. Harry stands there with his hands in his pockets and watches him go. He expects that Draco will come back after a few minutes. When he does not, Harry returns his attention to the painting. He is not sure why. It is not a painting he particularly likes. He stands there, staring at it, until he hears a noise at his shoulder and turns around, but it is not Draco. It is one of the museum curators, who looks at him curiously.

"You like this painting?" he asks, faint Dutch accent giving the vowels a pleasant rolling sound.

"I'm not sure," Harry says. "Does it symbolize the superiority of nature over man's transient accomplishments?"

"No," says the curator. "It symbolizes the inherent righteousness of the working class."

"Fucking Malfoy," says Harry.

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It is Ron, actually, who is the first to comment aloud on the fact that Draco is gone -- has been gone, now for several days, and has not returned to pick up any of his belongings from the flat. Harry is sitting on the couch, tracing uneven circles on the surface of his coffee with a forefinger, when Ron comes and sits down next to him and says, "Did you kill him and dump his body in the canal, or what?"

Harry says nothing.

"That was a joke," Ron says.

"I've no idea where he is," says Harry, taking a sip of the coffee, which is cold. "We had a fight. He went somewhere."

"His things are still here," says Ron.

Harry shrugs. "Maybe he doesn't want them anymore."

Ron raises an eyebrow. "His father disowned him, there's no more Hogwarts, and he's Malfoy -- it's not like he knows how to work. I'd imagine he wants his things."

"Then he can come back and get them," says Harry.

Ron looks at him. Then he reaches out and puts his fingers under Harry's chin and lifts his face up, and Harry raises his face, and thinks that for all that Ron is so much taller than he is, he has never quite before felt the discrepancy in their heights quite so forcefully, has never quite felt so much before that he was looking *up*.

"He won't come back," says Ron. "I wouldn't come back."

"I don't know where he went," Harry says. He hears his own voice, sounding small and complaining, and feels a burst of hatred for it and for himself by extension.

"Not far," says Ron. He drops his hand from Harry's face, and takes his coffee cup away from him. "He wouldn't go that far away from you."

"Then why leave at all?" asks Harry.

"So you'll come after him," says Ron.

"But I haven't," Harry says. "I haven't gone after him."

"You have, though," says Ron. "You're Harry. Going after people is what you do. Even if you stay here, you'll still be looking for him. You already are."

Harry is impressed. "You just said something that made absolutely no logical sense yet sounded somehow meaningful anyway."

Ron looks pleased. "Thank you."

Harry stands up. He tries to stand up swiftly, as if imbued with sudden noble purpose, but succeeds as he does so only in jostling Ron's arm and almost upsetting the coffee all over the sofa.

"Be careful," Ron says.

Harry pauses and turns around. "Sorry about the coffee."

"I didn't mean the coffee," Ron says.

Halfway down the block, Harry turns around and sees Ron standing on top of the roof, looking down at him, arms crossed over his chest as if he is cold. He waves towards him as he turns the corner but it is too far away for him to see if Ron waves back.

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Harry realizes he had been wrong when he'd said he had no idea where Draco would go. He has a fairly good idea where he'd go after all, even though it's an area they didn't really explore together: the small wizarding section of the city.

His search for Draco takes the form of a sort of aimless wandering, into and out of various stores and shops, into pubs, down into coffee shops and bars and basements. It is strange for him to walk around those streets. Strange to see the shopkeepers banishing their trash instead of carrying it to the curb, the windows full of Scrumdiddlyumptious bars and Finian's Finishing Potion and Quidditch supplies and wands, and oh, his heart aches looking at the wands, remembering when they all disappeared, how helpless everyone suddenly seemed, even people who it had never occurred to him before could be helpless.

He wanders the way someone in a dream might wander: the places he visits seem unconnected, and his presence goes unremarked on. He searches for a day, and then another day, taking breaks to sit on the side of the canals and throw broken bits of biscuit into the water, and then on the afternoon of the third day he wanders into a candy shop and spies a small door in the back wall that says Opium Den on it in moving letters. Wondering if there is truth in advertising, Harry slips through the door and down a flight of stairs and finds himself in shabby-looking cellar room full of torn rugs and armchairs and it reminds him a little of a Hogwarts common room. The room is full of smoke and everywhere there are wizards, most of them half-dressed, groping on sofas and snogging in corners and Harry thinks some of them look kind of familiar but that doesn't seem to matter a great deal because Draco is sprawled in one of the armchairs with his trousers open, getting an efficient-looking blow job from a boy who looks, from the back, a little like Colin Creevey.

"Malfoy," says Harry. "Can I talk to you?"

Draco jerks upright in one enormous spasm, his eyes flying open in shock. He pushes the boy between his legs away, and the boy tumbles back, looking up at Harry from the rug with a mildly surprised expression.

"Hey, Harry," he says.

"Hey, Colin," says Harry.

Draco, who has yanked his underwear back on, looks astonished. "You know each other?"

"That's Colin Creevey," says Harry, pointing. "He went to school with us."

"I was in Gryffindor," says Colin, sounding apologetic.

"No wonder you give such lousy head," says Draco. His fingers shake slightly as he does up the buttons on his trousers.

Harry looks at Colin. "Give us a minute," he says. "I need to talk to Malfoy."

Colin shrugs. "I don't care. He paid me already," he says, and goes and sits on a nearby sofa, obviously intending to eavesdrop for all that he is worth. Harry is just glad that Colin at least no longer seems to have his camera.

"I thought I'd find you here," Harry says to Draco.

Draco looks at him coldly. "You thought you'd find me in the opium-den basement of a sex shop, getting head from Colin Creevey?"

"Well, not exactly," Harry admits. "But it sounded better than 'I've been looking for you for two days.'"

"And you found me," Draco says. "What do you want?"

"I wanted to make sure you were all right," Harry hazards.

Draco looks up at him, as if startled, and then away. He is wearing the same clothes he was wearing the last time Harry saw him: an old red and gold hooded jumper of Harry's, frayed around the cuffs, from which the tips of his pale fingers extend like a row of small white baby teeth. The colors are too harsh on him to be at all flattering: it seems to suck the color out of his pale skin, and the angry flush on his cheeks stands out as if he had been slapped on both sides of his face. "No, you didn't," he says. "What do you want from me? Some kind of breakup thing? Closure? You want to make sure I don't bother you again?"

"No," says Harry. "And, actually, I brought something for you."

Draco looks briefly astonished. "What?"

Harry reaches into his pocket and takes something out. It is a postcard. He hands it to the other boy without comment.

Draco glowers at the postcard. "Is this one of those patented Harry Potter Breakup Gestures? You just hand me a postcard that says NO on it?"

"No," says Harry.

Draco turns the postcard over. "I see. It doesn't say anything on it at all. You're breaking up with me by giving me a BLANK POSTCARD. I hate you, Potter. I hate you and I hate your face."

"It's the painting," says Harry, doggedly. "The one in the museum. The one you said was about the superiority of nature over man's transient accomplishments and I said it was about the inherent righteousness of the working class. That one. I decided you were right. It's actually about the superiority of nature."

"No, it isn't," pipes up Colin. "It's about the old world versus modern industrialization."

"Shut up, Colin," says Harry, without taking his eyes off Draco.

Draco is looking blankly at the postcard, and then blankly at Harry, his gaze softening from anger into confusion. It is very evident to Harry that Draco does not understand what Harry is trying to say with this gesture, and that he really probably doesn't actually understand Harry that well, and maybe he never will understand him, but it doesn't matter, because for some reason, when Draco is around, Harry almost understands himself.

"Come back to the flat," Harry says.

Draco looks at him narrowly. "Why should I?"

"Look, I know you don't like it that I make you sleep in the living room. You've never said anything, but I know you think I don't want to see you when I wake up in the morning."

"So?" says Draco suspiciously. "And do please speak more loudly, by the way. It isn't a really good day until everyone in an opium den has heard about my personal insecurities."

"So, I fixed it. So, you know, we can see each other in the morning."

Draco blinks. "You mean you want me to sleep in your room?"

"Well," says Harry. "Not exactly."

"I wonder if it would be possible to paper cut you to death with this postcard?" Draco wonders aloud.

"It would be a lengthy and unrewarding process," Harry assures him. "It would be much better if you came back to the flat with me. I'll show you what I did. If you hate it, then I'll do something else."

"Something else aside from letting me sleep in your room?" Draco wonders aloud.

"I have issues," Harry says flatly. "Love me, love my issues."

"I never said I loved you," Draco says, raising his eyes and looking straight at Harry for the first time.

"I know," Harry says. He steps closer to Draco, who doesn't pull away, and does something he has never done before. He puts his arms around the other boy, not for the purposes of drawing him closer or shoving him up against a

wall or even pulling him down into his lap, but just to have his arms around him. It is such an unfamiliar gesture that it almost seems to reshape Draco's body under his hands as something unfamiliar as well. He feels its lightness, the sharp blades of the shoulders, the beat of his heart, the delicate vertebrae, each knob of the spine against the gentle touch of his fingers. And although he has been over every inch of this body so many times, knows it with his hands and lips and teeth and tongue, it remains undiscovered country in its strangeness under his touch, or perhaps it is rediscovered country. Harry feels as if he has found something again, something he always had but left behind, something that is different each time he finds it. Like childhood, like magic: something lost but infinitely recoverable, something he had put away but that had never left him because whether he wanted it or not it had always been, uniquely, his very own.

"You're standing on my toe," says Draco.

"Sorry," Harry says, and moves as if to step away, but Draco drops the postcard and grabs onto Harry's shirt and holds him there. Harry lets him, shifting around so that Draco can get a better grip on him. Draco has his head down on Harry's shoulder and he smells like sweet opium smoke and sweat and cheap soap and himself. His hair tickles Harry's cheek, soft as dandelion fuzz, making Harry want to sneeze. Instead he looks around the room, at the faces of the strangers staring at them, at the peeling walls and the torn-up floor and the spilled ashes at their feet and then he tightens his grip on Draco and puts his own head down on Draco's shoulder, so that they make a closed system, the two of them, there-but-not-there, lost in the darkness that is the small space between them.

Very slightly, an infinitesimal gesture that Harry almost misses: Draco nods. "All right," he says. "I'll come back."

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They walk back alongside the canals together, not holding hands. Draco is rumpled and tired-looking after three days in the same clothes and in the bright sunlight he looks about six years younger than he actually is. He is worrying his lower lip between his teeth, not anxiously but merely thoughtfully, and his eyes are distant.

"Weasley isn't going to be very happy that you found me," he says, breaking their silence as he fishes a crushed pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. He lights it and throws the match out into the canal as far as it will go with an expert flick of his wrist.

Harry watches the arc of it as it flies towards the water and wonders how a tiny piece of falling grayish cardboard can remind him of the arc of a small golden ball as it soars through the air, wonders why he has chosen this moment to remember flying, and says, "I'm thinking about going back home like you asked me to."

Draco stops and stares at him. "To England?"

Harry nods. Draco just looks at him, poised between one step and the next, and Harry leans forward and kisses him very lightly on the mouth, keeping his hands in his pockets, and it is the first time he has kissed him in days and it feels like doing something very precise and delicate; he is measuring out the kiss as if he were measuring out unstable Potions ingredients and were unsure of the results of his experiment. Draco, however, does not blow up or explode, just rests the heels of his hands lightly on Harry's shoulders and kisses him back with an odd sweet resignation and when Harry pulls away he says, "Thank you," and Harry knows he is not thanking him for the kiss but is instead thanking him for being allowed the opportunity to be gentle.

"Yeah," Harry says. "Back to England, I guess."

Draco gives him a considering look. "Don't try to do too much all in one day," he advises. "You'll sprain something."

They fall back into step together as they near their neighborhood. Rounding the corner of their block they come to a standstill, both staring. There is a crowd of people outside the door to their apartment. Harry sees Ron, first and immediately, standing white-faced next to an enormous pile of bricks. He is talking, gesturing, to a surrounding group of taller men dressed in the robes of official Ministry wizards. Craning his head up, Harry can see an enormous gap in the bricks around the roof where the windbreak has given way and crashed down onto the pavement.

Draco's mouth has dropped open so far that the cigarette has fallen out of it and lies on the ground at his feet, burning itself out quietly. "The roof," he says. "It fell down."

"Yes, well spotted." Harry shakes his head. "They don't call the Ministry out just because you collapse your roof, though. Something else is going on here."

Draco makes a gurgling sound and points. Harry follows the direction that Draco is indicating and almost chokes in surprise: there is an arm extending from heaped brickpile, just at Ron's feet. The arm is clothed in the sleeve of a black wizarding robe and at the end of it is a white hand lying outflung in a spreading pool of blood.

"Come on," says Harry, and starts forward.

Draco hangs back for a moment. "I really don't like blood. I'm delicate -- when I was nine I saw my father kill a house-elf and I stayed in bed for three weeks --"

"Oh, come *on*," Harry says again, clamping a hand on the other boy's wrist this time. He hauls Draco over to where Ron is standing, still talking to the small group of Ministry wizards. "Look," Ron is saying as Harry approaches, "I didn't do it on purpose, I'm telling you --"

"He really didn't," Harry interjects. "It's my fault. I'm the one who weakened the roof."

The reception this announcement receives is not the one Harry would have expected. The nearest wizard takes a look at him and exclaims "Harry Potter! Of course!"

A moment later Harry finds himself the astounded recipient of a torrent of backslaps and hugs. Draco is separated from him by the flood, which Harry endures with the stoicism of the truly baffled. "The Boy Who Lived!" cries the nearest wizard, directly into Harry's ear. "Harry Potter has destroyed the Dark Lord!"

"Excuse me, what?" Harry asks, but no one is paying attention to him now, they have all begun hugging each other. Harry is reminded of the first moments after the siege ended; there is the same celebratory atmosphere. "I what?"

"Killed Voldemort," says Ron, irritably, from behind him. "That's the Dark Lord, right there, under all the bricks."

Harry stares at Ron. "You killed Voldemort with bricks?"

"Not on purpose," says Ron, looking sheepish. "I was just pulling bricks out of the roof wall as usual. Then I heard the doorbell ring and I leaned over the wall to see who it was, and the whole thing just gave way. I'm lucky I didn't fall off."

"And it was *Voldemort*?" Harry demands.

"Voldemort rang the *doorbell*?" Draco demands.

Ron shrugs. "This is the guy who contrived an elaborate plan involving Portkeys, a hedge maze, Polyjuice, and house elves last time he tried to kill Harry. I mean, he could just as easily have gotten hold of Harry's toothbrush and killed him with it. Maybe he thought it would be more dramatic this way."

Draco looks shattered. "Evil rings the doorbell," he says. "I am so disappointed in my side, I can hardly stand it."

"*Your* side?" Harry demands. "Voldemort came here to kill me!"

"Sorry." Draco shrugs. "Habit."

"I can't believe a pile of bricks would really do him in." Harry is astonished to hear that he sounds faintly hopeful. "Maybe he's still alive under there."

"Nah," says Ron. "I Avada Kedavrad the bricks as soon as I got downstairs, and then when the Ministry showed up, they did a couple more Killing Curses for good measure. He's dead, all right."

"Oh," says Harry. "It's..." he searches for words. "Unbelievable."

"Not at all!" cries the nearest wizard suddenly, turning to him. "We always had faith in you. We knew you'd defeat the Dark Lord in the end."

"But I didn't kill him," Harry says, and points at Ron. "He did."

The wizard blinks at Ron. "You killed He-Who-must-Not-Be-Named?"

Ron nods, pushing a lock of red hair out of his eyes and grinning nervously.

"But I thought Harry Potter had black hair," says the wizard, staring at Ron.

"He does," says Ron. "I'm not Harry. I'm Ron Weasley."

"Then how could you possibly have killed Voldemort?" the wizard demands.

"Er," says Ron.

"It's very un-wizardlike to take credit for things you didn't do," the wizard says to Ron sternly, and turns back to the rest of the group, who have surrounded the grisly brickpile and are singing "For Harry's A Jolly Good Fellow" in reedy voices.

Harry tugs on Ron's arm. "Come on," he says to his friend, who looks slightly stunned. "Before the press gets here, anyway."

Nobody tries to prevent them from leaving. The boys walk a little ways away, down the street, until the sound of singing recedes in the distance. Ron flops down by the side of the canal, and stares down at the water. Harry kneels down next to him, and Draco sits next to Harry, swinging his long legs over the side so that his dangling feet almost touch the canal's surface.

They sit there in silence for a long time, the three of them. Ron is staring off down the water, silent and almost expressionless. Harry looks sideways at Draco, who seems to have absorbed himself in pulling threads out of his fraying jumper sleeve. If he is aware that Harry is looking at him, he shows no sign of it, but he is leaning towards Harry as he sits, and the side of his arm and his shoulder are warm against Harry's body.

Inside Harry, disappointment wars with a strangely peaceful sense of tiredness. But that is all right; Harry knows about disappointment now, he is used to it. He thinks again of the puzzle pieces that didn't quite fit, and how, since he could never get the puzzle to look the way that it was supposed to be, he would instead arrange the pieces the way he wanted them, haphazardly, piled one on top of the other in grand collapsible towers, elegantly arranged in loops and whorls and scrolls and arrows that pointed in the direction of places that did not exist. At the time he had thought that it mattered that he was doing it wrong but now he wonders if there is perhaps more than one way to get something right.

"I'm sorry, Ron," Harry says, at last. "Rotten luck."

Draco pulls a piece out of the sleeve of his sweater and tosses it aside. The wind catches it and spins it up into the air, a tiny gold-colored dust mote in flight. He watches it go and Harry watches him watching it and wonders what he is thinking and if he ever will look at Draco and know what he is thinking,

and if it even matters if he does. Right now, with the red-gold thread spinning above their heads, it is enough simply to have the capacity to wonder.

"Harry," says Ron, at last, still staring off down the canal. "There's something I was meaning to ask you."

"Yes?"

"Is there some reason you took a crowbar and bashed a hole in the wall between your bedroom and the living room?"

Draco jerks his head up and turns to look at Harry in astonishment. "Is that what you did?"

Harry nods at him. "Uh-huh."

"Harry?" says Ron again, rather plaintively.

"I thought I needed a change," says Harry, as blandly as he can around the urge to laugh. "Sorry."

"There goes our security deposit," says Ron mournfully.

"Fuck the security deposit," says Harry, almost cheerfully. Abruptly, a flicker of gold teases the edge of his vision. He feels his Seeker reflexes jump inside him, like a nervous muscle, and he reaches out and catches something of the air and it is the gold thread that Draco had tossed into the wind and something bangs against his hand and he realizes that Draco had reached for it at the same time that he did.

Draco drops his hand. "Can't help winning," he says. "Can you, Harry?"

Harry says nothing, but raises his hand and opens it, uncurling his fingers slowly, opening his hand to the elements and the air, and the wind takes the tiny thread from his open palm and whisks it away on a current, out over the canal, until it dips and drops towards the water, gold vanishing into silver. Not wanting to see it drown, Harry closes his eyes.

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I decided to keep up the Rimbaud theme, so the title comes from another Rimbaud poem. The epigraph translated like this: "When the world is reduced to a single dark wood for our two pairs of dazzled eyes -- to a beach for two faithful children-to a musical house for our clear understanding-then I shall find you" and is also Rimbaud. Gay depressed poets, hurrah.

The painting in the museum is Van Gogh's *The Potato Eaters*.

With all kinds of thanks to Miss Breed for the beta, and to Ivy B. and Clary for advice and assistance with digging up obscure Rimbaud translations.

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