

A/N: This story was written for the LJ community serpentineion's Fantasy Fest for the following request:

A canon compliant Horcrux hunt story where Harry and Draco both have the same agenda--finding and destroying the Horcruxes--but that neither knows that that's what the other is doing, and that they keep running into each other without knowing why. One of their accidental meetings takes place in vault 713 at Gringott's. Whether the focus of the story is smut, romance, mystery or adventure doesn't matter, but I'd like a happy/hopeful (but not sappy!) ending. No need to resolve the war, getting Harry and Draco together, believably, is the main objective. Please no H/D character death, breathplay, bloodplay, foodsmut, chan, Draco/Snape, Snarry, or H/D het.

The Race

by SilentAuror

For Clara

"Ow!" Harry's ankle twisted, causing him to lose his footing on the slippery rock. He simultaneously cursed and dropped into a crouch, just managing to catch the tatty package he'd dropped. He stopped to listen to it, to feel... yes, there it was. The Horcrux was undamaged. Evil was thrumming through it like a horrid sort of music, its vibrations making the tiny hairs inside Harry's eardrums crackle with discomfort. Or perhaps it was not his eardrums.

The brief lurch had not hurt the object at all. Harry didn't know whether or not it even *was* a Horcrux. It might have simply been some random Dark object left behind during one of Tom Riddle's many journeys to this place, cast aside and forgotten. It felt like Voldemort, but he wasn't particularly acquainted with Dark objects that *didn't* have any connection to Voldemort, so how was he to tell? Harry sighed deeply, and trudged on. The seaside cave was rough and uneven, its rocks slippery from the salt spray and who knew what else, making for treacherous footing. Clutching the package under one arm, his wand in the same fist, Harry groped his way along the side of the cave, steadying himself on the dank walls. If only he could Apparate away from there, but he needed to wait until he'd reached the mouth of the cave, and besides, he didn't have his license yet. He could do it, and had been, but he didn't want to press his luck. Hermione had shown him a spell to suppress his magical signature, but at the same time, having the Ministry breathing down his neck for breaching the law concerning underage magic and using magic outside of Hogwarts was something he could live without. And unless he managed to find all five of the remaining Horcruxes and defeat Voldemort by the end of August, returning to Hogwarts was out of the question, anyway.

He renewed his grip on the package and advanced another few steps. Bloody cave. Why did the Horcrux have to have been right at the very back, anyway? He'd slipped and cracked his knee on a rock on his way in already, and it was throbbing. He hadn't even had a chance to explore the contents of the package; this was all a gamble in the first place. But he was anxious to get out of the cave first. Frankly, it was creepy, and he reflected found himself regretting how firmly he'd insisted Ron and Hermione go to Bill and Fleur's wedding rather than come with him for this. Not that he'd said exactly where he was planning to go, mind. If Hermione found out about the map, he'd never hear the end of it.

At last, nearly there. The daylight beyond the cave was beginning to spill over the rocks around Harry's feet and he stepped into it gladly, if cautiously. In a place like this, it wouldn't do to let down his guard for even a second. He emerged into the light blinking, switching his wand automatically back to his right hand. His eyes darted suspiciously over the sweep of rocky beach. Nothing. Right. Get away from the cave and into cover, have a look. Harry looked around again, nervous, and made his way toward the foot of the cliff in which the cave was nestled. He chose a place that would provide a little cover, but not so much that he wouldn't be able to see anyone coming. For safety, he Disillusioned himself, trying it three times just to make sure the spell had stuck. There was that cold, trickling feeling, but was it enough? It was difficult to tell in the shadows, but he thought that his body had more or less disappeared against the backdrop of the rocks. Good. The package. With cold fingers, Harry unwrapped it and shook out the cloth.

It was a chalice. Harry felt his breath catch in his chest. It was the Horcrux, or so it seemed. His pulse gathered speed. It was pewter, or perhaps very old, very tarnished silver. No. The part of Harry's inner monologue that came out in Hermione's voice reminded him that the chalice was supposed to be pewter. It was intricately carved in ancient runes that tingled faintly as his fingers ran over the grooves and etchings of the pattern. Along the stem and around the base of the goblet was another script. Harry squinted at it. Gothic script. German. Perfect. He had found what he

was looking for.

A distant-sounding crunch of weight suddenly compressing loose rock jarred against Harry's ears as he re-wrapped the Horcrux. His head snapped up, his satisfaction fading immediately into suspicion and not a little fear. There were few possibilities as to how many people knew about this place and what might be here; fewer still that would actually come. Still Disillusioned, Harry crept back over toward the cave. His feet were making more sound than the other party's. He stopped, alarmed by this, and thought quickly. Pointed his wand at his feet and softly said, "*Silencio!*" He took another step, and it was quieter. Perfect. Harry stole toward the cave.

He was just in time to see a flash of blond hair disappearing into the darkness. Harry's fury sparked. Malfoy. What the hell was *he* doing there? And how on earth was he managing to move so quickly on the slimy rock? It was infuriating. He got closer, and waited by the mouth of the cave, watching. Was Malfoy there to collect the chalice? If so, luck had been on his side - it had taken Harry awhile to locate the exact location of the cave. Malfoy had obviously been better informed than he had. He had used the same entrance that Harry had, avoiding the enchanted side door that Dumbledore had led him through not a month before. If it were anything less important, Harry would have fumed. As it was, he was torn between relief that he had arrived first, fear that he would be discovered, and just plain curiosity. Why would Malfoy be looking for the chalice? Who would have sent him? Harry hefted it under his arm, securing it.

Malfoy's steps were receding into the depths of the cave. Harry listened, waited. There was nothing, just silence. Then a little more movement. He was searching for it. Harry wanted to smirk, but had a quick look around for any look-out that Malfoy might have left. There was no one, at least not visible. A prolonged silence from the cave made him uneasy. Then the footsteps began again, and Harry pressed himself into the damp rock of the mouth of the cave. It was the strangest thing. The more Harry thought of it, the less sense it made for Malfoy to be looking for the chalice, unless Voldemort wanted it moved or something. Never mind, he told himself firmly. Now was not the time. Harry took a few cautious steps away, moving toward the Apparition spot.

He had not quite reached it when he heard a sudden suck of breath, and then Malfoy's voice snarl. "Who's there?"

It startled Harry, and he dropped the chalice in its wrapping. "Shit!" Malfoy was standing just outside the cave, wand trained on the general area where Harry was standing. The Disillusionment slid off in his surprise and he scrambled to dive for the chalice before Malfoy could Summon it, trying to keep his wand out at the same time. He very nearly broke it by driving it into a sharp rock, but he did get the package back safely, and Malfoy was striding over to him, seething. Harry tightened his grip on both the Horcrux and his wand. "Stop right there!" Harry ordered, heart pounding.

"Potter!" The fury had doubled. "What have you got there?"

He sounded as though Harry had just stolen a personal belonging. Harry glared at him. "It's none of your business!" he spat, still filled with rage over the events of the previous school year, particularly the end. The scene on the tower with Dumbledore and Malfoy came to mind and his rage grew bitter. "What are *you* doing here?"

"I don't have time for small talk," Malfoy snapped. "Give me that!"

"Sod off," Harry threw back. He had to concentrate - there was no time to muffle his signature - he focused, and Apparated.

Every one of his body parts arrived with him in the Leaky Cauldron. Perfect. Shaking, Harry jumped as a middle-aged man Apparated a meter to his right and walked without a backward glance out of the pub's Apparition and Floo foyer. Harry collected himself and went quickly to his room. He had the Horcrux, and that was the main thing.

* * *

"Why *would* Malfoy have been there?" Hermione asked, eyebrows drawn together as she surveyed the chalice from every possible angle. "Oh, this is so interesting - I'm pretty sure it says something about ancient power and the need to keep purity in our races. That fits with everything Grindelwald was about, and if this was his, then I should have translated it right. This script is hard to read, though. The *s* and the *f* look almost identical."

"Maybe the git's just trying to move them or something," Ron said, ignoring Hermione and unwrapping another Chocolate Frog. "You know, maybe he's been made errand boy for You-Know-Who, since he screwed up his other assignment."

Harry shook his head. "I don't know. It doesn't make sense to me." He glanced at Hermione. "What do you think?"

"I agree, it doesn't make sense," she said, setting the chalice carefully back down on the desk in Harry's room. "I mean, he was supposed to be making up for Lucius' mistake in letting you get the prophecy, right? But he didn't do it, he didn't kill - " she stopped, seeing Harry's expression, looking stricken. " - er - but you would think that they would have punished him worse than that, don't you think?"

"I would think so," Harry said, trying to keep his thoughts off Dumbledore.

Ron spoke through a mouthful of chocolate. "I wonder if he's supposed to off you, mate."

The words came out garbled, but Harry understood and frowned. "Why? He can't. Not if the prophecy's right."

"Voldemort doesn't *know* the prophecy. But what Malfoy *could* do is injure you and make it very easy for Voldemort to kill you," Hermione said, taking Ron's side, though looking exasperated at his automatic wince. "You have to be careful, Harry. I wish he hadn't see you."

"Well, never mind," Harry said. "The point is, I got it. Now we have to figure out how to destroy it."

"And you don't have a Basilisk fang this time," Hermione said thoughtfully. "Besides, I don't think that would work on this, anyway. Pewter. I don't know."

"How do you destroy regular pewter?" Harry asked, curious.

"I looked that up," Hermione answered promptly. "You can melt it; it has a low melting point. That part should be relatively easy. It's the fact that it's a Horcrux that makes it so difficult."

"What if we just lit the fire and had a go right here?" Ron suggested, fishing out another Chocolate Frog?

There was a small silence. Harry looked at Hermione. She bit her lip and hesitated. "I don't know, Ron."

"Come on," Ron said, immediately getting argumentative. "Harry destroyed the diary all on his own, and that was four years ago."

"But he had Fawkes and the Sorting Hat, too," Hermione said defensively. "It's not the same."

"They didn't help with the part where he actually destroyed the diary, though," Ron contradicted, tossing the wrapper onto the desk. He stuffed the Frog into his mouth. "I say we give it a try."

Hermione looked at him. "What do you think, Harry?"

Harry didn't say anything. He stood and went to the fireplace, looking at it for a long moment. Finally, just as he sensed Hermione was about to say his name again, he pointed his wand at the fireplace. "*Incendio*." Flames sprang up, and he said, "I agree with Ron. Let's try it."

Ron, uncharacteristically, did not gloat, and Hermione said nothing. Ron got up, picked up the chalice. "Should we write anything down?" he asked awkwardly, directing the question to Hermione. "The words, or something?"

"I already wrote most of it," she said quietly. "The parts I could read, I mean." She stood, too, and they both came over to the fireplace.

"I reckon it should be you who puts it in, mate," Ron said, handing Harry the chalice.

Harry took it, feeling the tingle of Dark magic rippling through his fingers again. "Here goes nothing." He stooped and tossed the chalice into the flames. The metal began to liquefy at once, the rim and base of the chalice turning shiny as the pewter began to melt, the cup quickly becoming misshapen. Harry watched it warily. The chalice had all but dissolved when there came a long, low hiss - menacing in the extreme - and a cold wind suddenly blew out of the fireplace toward all three of them. Hermione's fingers dug into his arm, but nothing else happened. Instead of melting into a shapeless mass at the bottom of the grate, the last vestiges of tin and copper simply disappeared, as though the fire had utterly consumed them. The flames flickered and died down, then extinguished themselves entirely.

"Harry..." Ron said, staring at the empty fireplace.

"It's gone," Hermione said, and she was pale.

Harry looked hard at the empty grate, but nothing was happening. He waited for a long minute. Nothing. "Maybe it's gone," he said, though he felt dubious.

"Can you feel anything?" Hermione asked anxiously.

Harry shook his head. "No." He touched his scar. Nothing there, either. "I think it *is* gone."

He sensed them exchanging a look over his head. "Well, that's good," Ron said. "Right? So now you just have to find the other ones and everything will be fine."

"I still want to know how you thought of looking there," Hermione said, a touch sharply. "I mean, it just seems rather too coincidental. Are you *sure* you didn't dream about it or something, Harry?"

"I'm sure," Harry said, gazing past both of them into the empty grate.

Hermione's anxious look didn't fade.

* * *

Later, he was alone again. Before they had left, Hermione had started to talk about the wedding. "... it was really nice, Harry, you should have been there."

Harry had stared moodily at the fire downstairs in the pub and said nothing.

A pause, and then she went on. "Everyone looked really nice - there were flowers everywhere, and Ginny - " she stopped, presumably because Ron had given her a pointed look.

Harry's mouth was dry. "What about her?"

"Well - she really missed you," Hermione said awkwardly. She toyed with her empty Butterbeer bottle. "Harry, I just - I don't understand why you broke up with her. You've liked her all year. You haven't stopped being friends with *us* just because you're worried about endangering us. What's the difference?"

"She's younger than you guys," Harry said shortly. "It's different."

"I hope you don't think she can't protect herself," Hermione said sharply. "She's only younger by a year, and very intelligent. I hope this doesn't have anything to do with the fact that she's a *girl*, Harry."

Harry had rolled his eyes. "With you as one of my best friends, how could you think I would think that? It's just different, that's all."

"That doesn't make any sense," Hermione had said flatly.

Reflecting on this now, Harry knew that she was right, but it wasn't something he could explain.

"So... when the war is over, d'you think you'll be dating her again?" Ron asked, his expression unreadable, his still-mixed feelings showing quite plainly.

Harry had shrugged. "I don't know. I can't think that far ahead."

"If you find the rest of the Horcruxes this quickly, it could be much sooner," Hermione pointed out then. "I think you should at least know what you want. For Ginny's sake."

"Let's talk about something else," Harry said, his temper surfacing. "It's none of your business."

"Pardon me?" Hermione was very cool. "She's one of my best friends, Harry. It affects all of us."

Harry shot Ron a look, daring him to say something. "Who I date is *my* business," he reiterated. "I'll deal with it when the war ends."

Now, back in his room, he wondered why he had been so snappish about it. But Hermione had had a point, and it

was one he didn't have a proper argument for. The entire topic was something he had been trying to avoid thinking about since Dumbledore's funeral. It wasn't just that he had been too upset, that that had somehow nullified whatever it had been that he'd felt for Ginny. That was true - in a sense, he'd felt nothing but numbness after Dumbledore had died. But that didn't mean that there hadn't been problems even before that point. It was a subject that tended to leave him feeling angry and embarrassed. Harry rubbed his eyes tiredly, and decided to have a bath and go to bed. His knee was beginning to ache where he'd banged it on one of the rocks in the cave earlier, and a long, hot soak sounded like just the thing. Tomorrow would be another long day.

* * *

As it happened, it took Harry nine days to find the place where Moody had suggested he look for Slytherin's locket, and then it turned out not to be there. The map itself was a mystery, and he was reluctant to think too hard about where it had come from. Its origins were shady in the extreme. After having received it by anonymous owl, Harry had treated it with a great deal of suspicion. It appeared to be a plain piece of parchment until the incantation (provided on a separate slip) revealed what it really was. Harry, in the solitude of the Leaky Cauldron room he kept returning to between attempts, touched it, ran his fingers over the six places listed. It was a magical map, designed along the same lines as the Marauders' Map. Harry's private theory about it was that it was a map of the Horcruxes, their locations. He had nothing to base this on, save his success in locating Grindelwald's chalice. The only places shown on the map were the six locations, each highlighted with a particular marking. The first was the cave, which appeared to be near a town or perhaps a village in Essex. There was a tiny drawing of a house marked *MM*, in Wiltshire. There was a mark that Harry thought to be a skull and crossbones over a remote-looking place in Scotland, which proved upon comparison to a Muggle map to be close to the village of Glencoe. A faint mark over the approximate area where Harry thought Little Hangleton was located showed a tiny black circle. The final two marks were both in London. One gave a street number on Clapham Road in Lambeth, and the other was a tiny but accurate sketch of Gringotts in Diagon Alley. Regrettably, however, there was no further information given with it. Say, a vault number.

He had kept the information to himself, and had successfully managed to destroy one Horcrux already. Thanks to Dumbledore, Marvolo Gaunt's ring had already been destroyed, and Harry himself had done away with Riddle's diary. *MM* he assumed stood for Malfoy Manor, where he suspected the diary had been hidden for many years. Had Lucius known its exact importance, or what it even was? Harry didn't know. What he did know was that if the map *did* show where the Horcruxes were, then he did not need worry about going there. The cave had been a risk. He knew that. But it had worked, and despite its creepy isolation, he was glad it had taken the risk.

The Aurors didn't know what they were doing. It was all guesses in the dark. If he had a magical map, then why not use it? Hermione would kill him if she knew. All the more reason to keep it to himself, then. Harry scanned the map yet again and decided to try the address on Clapham Road. It was the most detailed entry on the map, and seemed the easiest. Harry looked up at the clock, but it was a magical one. The second hand was pointing to *Breakfast*, though it was inching closer to *Lunch*. He decided to go now, quickly. Muggle London was still quite unfamiliar to him, so Harry took the map he'd bought and stuck it in the back pocket of his jeans. He was wary of Apparating too often, so he left the Leaky Cauldron and headed directly into London.

The tube made him nervous, though he didn't like to admit it even to himself. There were so many unfamiliar faces, and his paranoia enlarged every strange look he received. Harry caught himself tamping down his fringe too often, too quickly. His map made a wedge between his arse and the seat and he wished he knew London well enough to go without it. The Bakerloo line took him to the Elephant and Castle station, where (after much furtive consultation of the tube map inside the first train) he located the platform for and eventually boarded a southbound Northern line train (or at least, it looked like it was going south on his map, which would have fit with where he thought Clapham Road was). It occurred to him then that Clapham Road might be quite long, and he had no idea whereabouts the address was. Surveying his options, Harry decided to alight at the Clapham North station and see where it would take him.

It took him a few minutes to get his bearings, but after a bit, Harry discovered that he was indeed on Clapham Road, and began to walk north, checking the address numbers. He was going in the correct direction, good. It took him a long time (during which, he passed the Stockwell Station and realised that it would have been faster to get off there), but eventually, he reached the destination. Or rather, the place where his destination should have been. There was no building or house that corresponded to the number on the map. It was disappointing. Harry had a quick look around and double-checked the Horcrux map for the number. Yes. This was it. It appeared to be a block of council

flats. A rather seedy-looking block, at that. Harry glanced over his shoulder and tried to behave as though he belonged there. What was he supposed to do? Was the Horcrux buried beneath the building, or what? There was nothing for it. He went inside.

Someone was just leaving, and held the door open for him. Harry darted inside. He'd been hoping for a receptionist or something, but this was clearly not that sort of place. A row of mailboxes along one wall attracted his attention and he crossed over to them. He surveyed the flat numbers and found one that actually matched. It was the last in the row. Harry looked around. A security camera in one corner pointed toward the door and paid him no heed. He stepped closer to the mailbox and tried to peer inside. He could not see anything. A quick check in the next mailbox proved that he could see a bit of paper, the plain envelope of a bill or something. He tapped at the mailbox. It was empty. Feeling nervous, and a bit as though he were being watched, Harry looked around again.

There was a directory of the names of people who lived in the building, and Harry went to examine it. There was no name listed for the number on the map; even the number wasn't listed. Perhaps it was a storage room or something. After a moment, Harry went to the lifts and pressed the button to go up. The number on the parchment map was 474, so he chose the fourth storey. The door labelled 474 was at the very end of the corridor, across from 473. Harry hesitated, drew his breath, then knocked. Waited. Nothing. He knocked again. Still no response.

Harry tried the knob. Locked. "*Alohomora*," he whispered, the tip of his wand held to the knob. There was a reluctant-sounding click, and the knob turned in his hand. Inside, all was dark. A similarly-whispered *Lumos* rectified that, revealing a very nearly empty room. There were no windows. The only thing in the chamber was a box, standing open on the bare, concrete floor. Harry went to it, his steps stirring heaps of dust lying in swaths over the floor. There seemed to be a path from the door to the box, but Harry couldn't think why that might be. There was also a whiff of something that was reminiscent of something else, in a very faint way. He could not place it, but the scent made his gut clench. A more immediate problem presented itself as Harry reached the box and looked inside: it was empty.

If his guesses about the map and the number and this room were all correct, then someone else had reached the Horcrux first.

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Harry stared into the fire over his mug of Butterbeer and pondered once again whether or not to tell Ron and Hermione about the map, and his search. Chances were, they'd both disapprove mightily. Which would mean no more searching. But he *had* found Grindelwald's chalice already - the map had not lied. And if something important had once been where the council flats now stood, that was hardly the map's fault. No, Harry privately decided. He would not tell them. If his next search turned up empty, then perhaps he'd rethink it. But for now, he wasn't going to.

Part of the problem, though, was that he had no idea whether or not his suspicions were correct, if his guesses were accurate. There were times when he felt the distinct sensation of another person's magic at work around these places. Was it Voldemort? The Death Eaters who had artfully hidden his Horcruxes around Britain? Harry didn't know, but there were even times when he had the feeling he was being followed. Stalked, even. He saw shadows move that shouldn't, thought he heard whispers that weren't there. He almost felt as though he were going a touch mad. Company would be nice, would make him feel saner, but it was his own secret, weighing on him like a stone.

Tom came by, wanting to know if Harry was finished with his mug. He looked down at it in surprise. When had he emptied it? And why was he still clutching it like that? He surrendered it at once and made himself sit up straight - any more of this hunching and he'd turn into Tom one of these days. He yawned and decided to go to bed. The map left him with two choices for his next trip, and one was so complicated that he wasn't even sure where to begin. He decided to leave that particular option for the time being, which meant that he was going to Scotland on the morrow. To search, he thought, for a graveyard.

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The village of Glencoe was a nice place, or so it seemed upon first impression. Harry wasn't sure where to start, but his Portkey had brought him to the center of the town and had come with a temporary Disillusionment, so that he wouldn't be noticed by any Muggles that happened to be nearby. Harry wandered somewhat aimlessly, hoping to find perhaps a visitors' center or some such thing. Every second place he passed seemed to be a bed and breakfast or a hostel warning for no vacancy. After a bit, he crossed a small wooden bridge and came to an information booth. The bells on the door tinkled as he passed inside, stirring the attentions of a middle-aged woman turning the pages of a magazine from her seat behind the counter.

"Can I help you?" she asked, sounding polite but disinterested through a thick, Highland accent.

Probably tired of dealing with tourists, Harry thought. He went to the counter and tried not to stutter. "Er - I was actually wondering if you could tell me if there are any, um, any cemeteries. In the village, I mean."

This brought a slight frown to the woman's forehead. "Class project, is it?"

What? "Er, yes," Harry said, wondering where this had come from.

"Hmm. Just had another one in here, asking about the cemeteries," the woman said. She leaned forward and folded her hands over the open magazine. "What school is it, then?"

"School?" Harry stared at her. "Oh, the project - uh, just a summer course. I'm from London," he added hastily, hoping this would make sense to her.

Evidently, it did. "Looking for the old places, then? Here, I can show you on a map." This she did, hauling out a map of the town and pointing out other salient bits of information, too, adding that if he wanted a place in the more popular of the youth hostels, he'd have to get a move on. "Just had a word with another young man about your age," she said. "Wasn't much interested in a hostel, but all the same - it's early now, and the town may seem like it's full of places to stay, but they fill up quickly!"

"Right," Harry said, trying to get back to the point. "So, are these two the only ones?"

"As far's I know," the woman said. "Good luck with your project."

"Thanks," Harry said. He took the map and turned to leave, but her voice called him back.

"I suppose you'll be wanting to know about Coire Gabhail," she said conversationally, as if Harry did not already have his hand on the doorknob.

"Oh - I think I have what I need, thanks," Harry said quickly.

"One canno' come all the way to the Glen and miss the hidden vale," she objected, the frown and accent both growing.

Something about the way she said it snagged Harry's attention. "The what?" he repeated, pausing.

"The hidden vale of Coire Gabhail," the woman said, seemingly irritated that he didn't already know. "The famous

hiding place of the MacDonalds."

He was remiss in his research, evidently. "The MacDonalds?" Harry asked carefully, not wanting to risk further offence.

"Aye, the MacDonalds. Before the massacre," the woman elaborated. "1692, that was."

"Oh," Harry said.

"Everyone comes here to see it," she said sternly. "Coire Gabhail. A place to go during times of trouble. Yes."

"Right," Harry said again. "I'll, er, bear that in mind. Thanks." He turned once more and this time made his escape.

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The two cemeteries to which the woman had guided Harry proved to be disappointing. They were both open, sunny places, the sort visited on Sunday afternoons. Very peaceful, to be sure, but nothing about either place caught his attention in any way. They were also too domestic, too out in the open for what he thought he might be looking for. Harry checked the map again and noticed this time that the place on the Horcrux map was not actually in the village proper, though it was difficult to tell as the village itself was not listed. He compared the two maps again. No. Definitely not in the village. Harry shook out the map that the woman at the visitor's center had given him and pondered his options. There was always the possibility that the location was some place hidden away from Muggle eyes. The question was, where? The village was in the Highlands; hills towered around it like a natural fortress. He did not have the first idea where to begin looking.

Suddenly, the woman's words rang in Harry's head: "*Coire Gabhail. A place to go during times of trouble.*" Had that been some sort of hint? Did she know what he was looking for? He was in trouble now. He needed to find the Horcrux, before anyone else got to it. But how was he to even get there? Harry looked at the map and searched for the words *Coire Gabhail*. Ah. It appeared to be a fair distance from the village. Perhaps he should risk an Apparition. Yes. His mind made up, Harry looked quickly around. The Rankin Cemetery was all but empty. He concealed himself near a tree, concentrated hard on the words *Coire Gabhail* and Apparated.

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He found himself in a steeply-walled valley. The bony shoulders of the hills jutted sharply out of the ground as though resentful of intruders. It was mostly green, broken with fragments of slate-grey stone. Harry caught himself holding his breath, as though it would echo and disturb the eerie quiet. Listening, he could hear water in the far distance, just a trickle. The crackle of the map as he unfolded it seemed unnaturally loud, but it revealed that the water must be the nearby river Coe. The map was replaced in his pocket, and Harry began to walk. There was something about the valley that felt like no one had been there in a thousand years, yet the sensation of being followed and watched grew. Surely, if it was such a popular place to ask about at the information booth, then people came here to hike and so forth. Harry tried to be rational. If there was someone here, it was likely a lost tourist. The wind hissed and sighed around the rocks and sounded disconcertingly like breath. It was also slightly foggy, thin scarves of it winding around the floor of the valley. Harry took a long, hard look around. At the moment, there was no one within miles of him, or so it seemed.

Harry checked over his shoulders every so often as he walked. The day was sunny in patches, but the occasional cloud would slide over the sun, making the valley rather chilly. He shivered and began to walk a little faster. A tingling sensation around his ears made him stop, abruptly aware of the presence of a spell of some sort. Magic, here? Harry looked around carefully, then took another step. The pressure building against his ears let up all of a sudden, and he recognised the feeling of Muggle-warding charms. Every nerve on high alert, Harry watched for whatever it was that

the spells were hiding. And he saw. Along the uneven side of one wall, there was a scattering of graves, just evenly-spaced enough to look like someone had placed them there deliberately, once upon a time. They were exceedingly old, from the appearance of the stone, which looked like part of the hills themselves. And yet they must have been protected somehow, as they were still standing. Who would have put a cemetery here, of all places? Kept it secret from the Muggles, and protected it with charms that would keep the rock from crumbling, the words from fading? And there were words. Harry looked around again. He was alone. The central grave was a little larger than the others, and he approached it first. It read:

*Her lyeth Rowena Ravenclaw
Foundresse of Hogwarts Academie
And of the House of Ravenclaw*

~ 903 - 952 ~

*Cold be earth o'er harte and bone
And mindes that turneth Dark to kille
let he that questeth for myn stone
No blessynge neede he but the Quille*

Harry felt cold. The epitaph sounded like a riddle, and he was no Ravenclaw. He'd worked riddles out before, but what did he know about the founders of Hogwarts? Only that they had lived about a thousand years ago. By the time Ravenclaw had died, Salazar Slytherin would have already been trying to turn Hogwarts into a place for pure-bloods only, and perhaps he had already begun to corrupt the minds of those around him. Harry read the words over again. If the first line suggested Ravenclaw's sorrow at her own death, then the second line was possibly likening the choice to pursue Dark magic as Slytherin had as death in and of itself. That fit: she valued intelligence, so perhaps it hadn't made logical sense to her for people to throw their lives away in pursuit of evil, Harry thought. *Yet he that quests for my stone no blessing needs but the quill?* Harry stared at the headstone for a long minute. The quill. It hit him. It was a clue. Perhaps Ravenclaw's quill had had magical properties even during her own lifetime. Surely Voldemort, seeing this, would have been interested in that. But it didn't make sense - if Voldemort had seen this and used the quill for a Horcrux, then how could this be a clue? Why would he have returned it? And how could the headstone, already inscribed long before either he or Voldemort got there, be a clue to anyone now?

A cold wind blew, and the shadows of the hills faded from the rocky wall before Harry's eyes as the sky clouded over again. Harry shivered. The map showed this place or somewhere near there as being one of the Horcrux locations. Perhaps Voldemort, gambling on the cemetery staying the secret it had evidently been for however many years now, had hidden the quill where he had found it originally. Perhaps the words were mere coincidence, and the quill had simply possessed powers that Ravenclaw had assumed would be helpful to future generations of wizards and witches who felt the need to seek some sort of long-spent advice at her grave.

It hit Harry then. He was contemplating exhuming Ravenclaw's grave. Suddenly, he felt ill. Perhaps the hunt was getting to him. Perhaps it was all the solitude. He wished Ron and especially Hermione, with her sound sense, were there.

A *CRACK* of Apparition shattered the still air and startled Harry so badly that his heart attempted to leap into his throat. He jerked around.

"Potter!" Malfoy snarled, his wand trained on Harry. "I should have known. Put your wand where I can see it."

His pointy face was angry, but the words were delivered in utter calm, despite the tremor of Malfoy's pale hand around the wand. Harry wanted to curse. Why hadn't he been faster? His wand was in the back pocket of his trousers, along with the maps. Very slowly, reluctantly, he drew it out. "What are you doing here?" he demanded, getting over his surprise as fury took its place.

"None of your business," Malfoy spat. "Put it down. Yes, on the ground, Potter! Before I lose my patience!"

Harry, hating him, did as he was told. Malfoy's wand was fixed on his chest, the tremor gone now. "I mean it," he said angrily. "What are you doing here?" If Malfoy was there to get the Horcrux, then he was really in trouble.

"Sight-seeing," Malfoy said rudely. "Step away from the grave, Potter."

He gestured with his wand, and Harry's fears were confirmed. He held his ground. "What's in there that you want so badly?" he countered.

"You know as well as I do," Malfoy retorted. "Move."

His face was thinner, the shadows that Harry remembered so well from the past term deeper than ever beneath his cold eyes. The git practically looked as though he were starving to death. Though, Harry realised with a twist of irony, his concern was likely quite misplaced. "Is it the quill?" he asked, risking a guess.

"Of course it is," Malfoy said. "Don't play stupid with me, Potter. Get out of the way. I don't have time for school boy games. This is serious. Move, or I will have to hurt you."

Harry moved to the side, wishing with everything he had that he knew what to do to prevent Malfoy from getting the Horcrux. "What are you going to do with it?" he asked desperately, dropping the act.

"What do you think?" Malfoy returned cryptically. He stooped and picked up Harry's wand and put it in the pocket of his trousers. It occurred to Harry then that he had never seen Malfoy out of robes before, except in Quidditch robes, which were not all that different. Malfoy was dressed as a Muggle. Undercover, then. He looked strangely different to Harry that way, and it was off-putting. Malfoy, in faded jeans and a finely-knit jumper, and a black pea coat in deference to the cool day. Harry fought to think of a way to distract Malfoy, or at least find out what he was really up to as far as the Horcrux was concerned.

"How are you going to get it out, then?" he asked, trying to keep the frustration from his voice.

Malfoy ignored him and took a small piece of folded parchment out of the pocket of the coat. He unfolded it and scanned it quickly. He murmured something that Harry couldn't hear, but it sounded like an incantation. There was a creaking sound, and Harry shivered again. "Best cover your eyes if you're squeamish, Potter," Malfoy said contemptuously. "Or isn't this what you came here to do in the first place?"

Harry bit back his response and watched. The ground just in front of the headstone was quivering, and it seemed to Harry that the air around them was quivering, too. "Are you - " he began, but Malfoy cut him off.

"*Don't* distract me, or you'll bring the entire valley down on us," he said, his voice strained.

From where he was, Malfoy's face was at a profile to Harry, but even so, Harry could see the intense concentration all over Malfoy's pale features. A vein in his neck was twitching. The ground cracked. Just slightly, but it appeared to be a rather deep cut into the earth. Malfoy's concentration did not ease even slightly. Another incantation was muttered at this point, so low that Harry thought that he was deliberately trying to prevent Harry from hearing it.

"What are you going to do with it, damn it?" Harry hissed, losing his temper.

Malfoy continued to ignore him. "*Arcesso plumeus*," he said, much louder now. There was a commanding tone to his voice that Harry had never heard him use before. Different from his sniping sarcasm or petty contempt. There was a sound of rustling, almost a whispering, and a bit of dust rose from the grave. "*Ego sum arcessitor*," Malfoy said, more insistently. "*Arcesso plumeus!*"

Everything seemed to be waiting. For a moment, Harry forgot that he didn't have his wand. "*Accio* quill!" he shouted, his empty hand shooting out to summon it. That broke the silence and the waiting - the air crackled and a tarnished bit of silver caught the faint light before flying toward Harry's hand.

"NO!" Malfoy shouted. "*Accio!*"

The quill veered away from Harry's hand just before his fingers closed around it; the cold silver had just touched but he couldn't get a grip fast enough. Malfoy's fingers seized it. Without thinking, Harry roared in fury and dove at him. "Give me that! Give it to me!"

"No, Potter - get off - "

"Give it to me!"

"Potter - no - I need it! Let go of me! *Ow*, you fucker!" Malfoy was incensed, but Harry was even angrier. He pried at Malfoy's tightly-curved fingers and tried to find some way to get a solid hold on the other, but it was difficult. They were rolling on the rocky ground, fighting with every bit of energy they each possessed. Suddenly, Harry saw his wand. It had fallen out of Malfoy's coat pocket and Harry let go of him to grab for it. The familiar strip of wood was warm on his palm and he scrambled to his feet, aiming it at Malfoy.

Malfoy was on his feet just as quickly. "*Incarcerous!*" Harry shouted, and ropes flew out of the tip of his wand to bind themselves around Malfoy.

He was just in time, or so he thought. Malfoy cursed in fury as he lost his balance and fell. But the quill was still tightly gripped in his fist as he, the ropes, and the quill all disappeared at once in the *CRACK* of his Disapparition. Harry was suddenly alone again, and when he realised what had just happened, swore violently.

The earth over Ravenclaw's grave made a loud cracking sound, echoing Malfoy's Disapparition, and closed itself once more. It was too late: the Horcrux was gone.

* * *

"... So, after all that, I still didn't get it," Harry finished glumly. He sat back and looked at his two best friends, waiting for their reactions. He'd finally made the decision to tell them, because if he was going to get to the last Horcrux before Malfoy, then he would need help. The lateness of the evening meant that the pub was at its fullest, but their table had a clear berth, thanks to Tom.

They both looked rather shocked. "I simply can't believe you didn't tell us about the map," Hermione said slowly, shaking her head. "I mean, you don't even know who it's *from*."

"I can't believe that great git got the quill before you," Ron said, scowling. "After all you did to figure it out! You've got to wonder who's helping him."

Hermione looked sharply at Ron. "Who's helping him?" she repeated. Her eyes went wide. "What if he has the same map?"

Harry shook his head, not liking this. "How could he have the same map? That doesn't make sense at all. No, he's got to be getting help. I just wish I knew what he was *doing* with the Horcruxes, once he's got them."

"You think he got the one in that storage room, too?" Ron asked.

"It's obvious, isn't it?" Harry said. "I mean, he showed up not long after I got to the cave and got the chalice, and he was there in the valley, too. That can't be coincidence; he has to be looking for them. But what is he *doing*? I mean, does Voldemort want them moved or something? Does *he* know about the map? Is Malfoy hiding them somewhere else, what? I don't get it."

"Do you have the map?" Hermione asked. From the look on her face, it was evident that she was thinking furiously, every wheel in her scary mind going like mad.

Harry fished it out and handed it over. "As I said, it just came with an owl one day. I did a trace and everything, but it didn't come up with anything."

"Then it was blocked," Hermione said shortly. She performed the trace again, anyway - probably thought he hadn't done it right the first time, Harry thought with annoyance. "No, it's definitely blocked. I don't like this, Harry."

"Well, I'm not crazy about it, myself," Harry admitted. "But you have to admit, it's still a helpful tool. It works. The Horcruxes *are* where it says. So, my next question is, how am I going to find the one inside Gringotts? I mean, there isn't even a vault number."

Hermione opened her mouth to say - well, who knew what, but Ron silenced her with a jab to the ribs with his elbow. "No theories so far?" Ron asked in a would-be hopeful sort of voice.

Hermione glared at him. "Don't you elbow *me*, Ronald Weasley. I was just going to ask the same thing. I mean, Harry *can't* be thinking of just waltzing into Gringotts and asking if he can have a look around."

Silence fell. Harry's eyes met Ron's, and Ron shrugged.

"*Can* you?" Hermione gasped. "Oh, Harry, no!"

"I don't know what else to do," Harry said stubbornly. "And I have to get there before Malfoy - he's already got at least two of them!"

"What do you want us to do?" Ron asked, rather hesitantly.

"Harry - " Hermione started, but she stopped herself. "Okay. Yes. I can see your point. There isn't really time for us to argue about this. But really, do you have *any* sort of plan?"

"Sort of," Harry said, relieved beyond words that she wasn't putting up a fuss. "I thought - maybe - I'd try to, you know, borrow one of those carts. Have a look around."

"Borrow'?" Hermione repeated faintly. "Oh, *Harry*. You don't even know how to drive one of those!"

"I reckon it can't be that hard," Harry said, shrugging. "Maybe something will occur to me. I don't know."

"So, we create a diversion while you steal a cart?" Ron hazarded, his eyes narrowing at Harry.

Harry gave him an apologetic grin. "Do you have a better plan?"

"Not really," Ron said. "Right. Diversion it is."

Something occurred to Harry, a distant, far-off memory. "I need to find a Floo before we go," he said thoughtfully.

"I hope you know what you're doing," Hermione said dubiously.

* * *

Gringotts was bustling, as usual. They had decided that the noon-hour would be the best time to come, since it would be packed with people doing a little banking on their lunch breaks. After all, the Ministry was not far from the entrance to Diagon Alley and it would be easy for a wizard or witch to pop over to run a few errands. Either way, their guesses were accurate enough; the bank was very full. Hermione suggested they get into a queue. Harry, in his invisibility cloak, had to press uncomfortably close to Ron to avoid being jostled by the other people around them. They shuffled forward dutifully with the queue, Harry's heart beating too quickly with nervous energy. He'd brought his Firebolt as well, just in case, and his hand was slippery with perspiration from where he was gripping it beneath his cloak.

Hermione was clearly feeling it, too. "Harry," she whispered, leaning toward his general vicinity, "are you *sure* about this? I mean - it's awfully - "

"He *knows*, Hermione; give it a rest!" Ron hissed.

"I'm sure," Harry said, under his breath. "I have to do this."

"Well - if you're sure, then, I suppose now is the time." Hermione's eyes darted nervously around the surrounding area.

"Oh - okay," Harry said, and his heartbeat nearly trebled.

"Go," Ron said, poking him in the back.

Harry began to sidle away from them, watching as he went. As the queue moved forward, Ron nonchalantly stuck out his foot and his thumbs in his pockets, and did not move ahead with everyone else. Hermione tripped over his foot and dropped a large sack of Knuts, which then spilled everywhere. Harry just caught the movement of her fingers that allowed the sack to turn upside down that way. The diversion worked splendidly; Knuts rolled every which way. Hermione shrieked and began to chase after them. Really, it had only been ten Galleons' worth of Knuts, but the effect on the marble floor was magnificent. She began to shout at Ron, which was bang-on in character, and Ron shouted back. Anyone who knew either of them wouldn't have suspected a thing. Hermione crossly (and very loudly)

told Ron to help her, for goodness' sake, and the two of them began to disrupt every single other person in the queue in their efforts to recover the rolling Knuts. They were each particularly careful to bump several people needlessly, causing tempers to collide. The goblin guards began to frown and move closer, and Harry's moment had come.

He took off toward the vaults as quickly as he could, trying to keep his trainers from squeaking on the highly-polished floors. The goblin watching the entrance to the vaults was also frowning at the melee that Ron and Hermione were causing. The door leading to the tunnels was closed, but Harry slipped through it like a shadow. For a moment, he just exhaled in relief. The sounds of the bank had disappeared entirely when the door closed. There were no carts in sight, and he hadn't the faintest idea how to get to the vaults. He remembered the goblins whistling before, but had no idea whether or not the silence was a two-way deal, or if the guard would hear him. Harry paused, thinking, then decided that it was a risk he would have to take. He whistled.

It took a moment or two, but then a cart came hurtling out of the darkness toward him, rattling on the railway track. Harry hesitated, then stepped in. Following the whim he'd had the night before, he attempted to sound authoritative and said, "Take me to vault seven hundred and thirteen."

To his surprise, the cart took off immediately. He shifted himself, pulling the Firebolt out from under his cloak so that he could sit comfortably. *Pay attention*, he told himself sternly, and tried to keep track of the turns. As usual, it was too fast, but he thought he was remembering, at least partially. It occurred to him then that Hermione had once mentioned the fact that Apparition was impossible inside Gringotts; the goblins had their own particular brand of magic and used it to dampen most other forms. Apparition was an obvious one, of course. Harry swallowed. If he couldn't get out with the cart, then he'd just have to do his best. The cart gathered speed as it went, cold wind stinging his eyes and causing them to tear a little. A flare of orange down one cavern reminded him uncomfortably of the dragons. A plunge, and Harry's ears nearly popped. A faint trickle of water from somewhere far, far below told him that he was over one of the many gaping chasms that sometimes opened unexpectedly beneath the tracks. A glance showed nothing, but the wind that rushed upward was icy and smelled of rock, damp, and ancient things. Dizzy, he pulled his head back in and held the Firebolt tighter.

There was a series of bewildering turns, too fast for Harry to register, and he knew then for certain that he was lost. The cart dropped, turned to the right again, and Harry also knew without a doubt that it had taken a completely different route than it had the time Hagrid had brought him there from his own vault, several levels higher. He was so deep underground that even his breathing sounded flatter in his ears. With that thought, the cart screeched to a halt. With no goblin to announce the destination, the silence was unnerving. He had arrived at vault seven hundred and thirteen, however, and the door was closed.

Harry wiped his eyes and looked at it. The wind whistled eerily down the passage, and he was suddenly aware of how very alone he was down there. He could not reach the door from the cart, but was unwilling to leave its safety without a guarantee that he could even get into it. Another worry occurred to him: he did not have a key. Vault seven hundred and thirteen, he suddenly remembered, did not *have* a key. The key Hagrid had presented had been for his own vault, not this one. What was it that the goblin had said? *If anyone but a Gringotts goblin tried that, they'd be sucked through the door and trapped in there.* Harry bit his lip. Surely he wouldn't have to wait ten years to be rescued, if he couldn't get out. He didn't know what to do.

At that moment, a sound shattered the silence - and it came from within the vault! Harry's every nerve sparked, startled.

"Shit!" The voice said in frustration. "Fucking *hell*, how am I supposed to get it?"

Malfoy. Harry's anger blazed. Forgetting himself, he responded instinctively. "Malfoy! How did you get in there, damn it?"

There was complete silence. Harry could practically hear the other thinking. Then, "Potter!" He sounded both angry and relieved.

"Open the door, Malfoy!" Harry was angrier than he'd been in a long time, but he was under control. He pulled off the invisibility cloak.

The door to the vault opened a crack. Malfoy's face and the tip of his wand appeared. "You have a cart." It was a statement of clear relief.

Harry stared at him. "Yes, I have a *cart*. How the hell did you think I got down here?"

Malfoy's eyes strayed to the broom. "You could have used *that*."

"Right, because I knew the *exact* way to take to get here," Harry said sarcastically. "How did *you* get here?"

"I had a cart, too, but it left as soon as I got out," Malfoy said. The eyes narrowed. "Look, Potter. I don't know what you're doing here, but you can't have it. However, I'm in a rather compromising position, since I have no way to get out of here."

Harry nodded his chin at Malfoy's wand. "That won't work in here, you know."

It wavered. "I know," Malfoy said flatly. "I was hoping *you* didn't know that."

"Tough luck. You're in no position to bargain here," Harry said aggressively. "I'm coming in there, and then you're going to tell me what you're doing with the Horcruxes."

Malfoy sighed. He leaned his forehead against the door for a moment. After a bit, he said, "Fine. If I tell you, will you help me get out of here?"

Harry nodded briefly. He couldn't very well leave Malfoy down here to starve to death, either. "Promise. But I get the Horcrux."

"We can talk about that later," Malfoy said shortly, and stepped back, opening the door. "You'd better come in."

Harry climbed out of the cart, careful to keep a firm hold on his Firebolt, and it was just as Malfoy had said. The instant his foot touched the interior of the vault, the cart took off at high speed. Down the twisting corridor, far beyond the point that he could see in the dark, something howled. Harry shivered, one foot still on the tracks.

"Get in here," Malfoy said sharply, and yanked him inside by the wrist. The door closed of its own accord behind Harry.

Harry jerked his wrist away and looked around the vault. It was as small as he remembered. Just high enough to stand up in without having to crouch, but the ceiling was oppressively low and the urge to crouch was there nonetheless. The only two objects in the room were something that looked like a severed goblin hand, and a small, black box with a silver snake on its lid. The box itself was smooth and shiny, possibly made of onyx. Harry felt a hum of Dark magic and a surge of anger that the goblins would have allowed Voldemort (or some flunky, no doubt) to store this thing here. Of course, the goblins had always maintained as neutral a position as possible, and that could well mean that few to none of them actually knew what was inside the box. He looked at Malfoy, his face hard. "Start talking," he ordered. "What is *that*?" He pointed at the goblin hand.

Malfoy sighed and pushed his hair back impatiently. "We don't really have time," he stated. "Why don't we see if you can get the box open, and I'll explain later."

"Nice try," Harry said flatly. "I'm not doing a thing until you tell me exactly what you've been doing with the Horcruxes."

Malfoy's lips compressed in a hard line. "Fine," he bit out. "I'm in a bit of a hurry, so I'll make it quick. *That* is a goblin hand. I bought it in Knockturn Alley. The owner was an employee here who died a couple of weeks ago. It's a little tasteless perhaps, but you need the finger print of a Gringotts goblin to get in here, so - ?" He shrugged. "I'm working with Snape, and he's trying to destroy the Horcruxes. I've got to find them before the Death Eaters do. One of them could be along at any moment now, and I can't tell - it's sound-proofed in here, you know - but the cart is gone and we're stuck here unless we can get out on your broom."

Harry was still stuck a few phrases back. "You're working with *Snape*?"

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Always the sharpest knife in the block, weren't you?" he snapped. "Yes, that's what I said. He's not on anyone's side, now that Dumbledore's dead." A flicker of something passed over his face for a moment, but then he regained his composure. "So he's trying to eliminate Voldemort before he gets eliminated himself. Make sense? And since I'm in the same position after... well, Dumbledore, I'm helping him."

Harry still couldn't believe it. "So, you're looking for the Horcruxes and destroying them," he confirmed.

"Yes, Potter! How dense *are* you?" Malfoy was exasperated.

"I thought you were moving them for Voldemort or something," Harry said. "If I'd known you were actually doing the same thing - I mean, I don't care who destroys them, I just need them to be destroyed! Did you get the cup, then?"

"From where the orphanage used to be?" Malfoy asked.

Harry frowned. "The orphanage?"

"The one where Riddle grew up. In London. On Clapham Road, in the storage room in the council flats," Malfoy said.

"Oh! *That's* what that was - that makes sense," Harry said, the pieces falling into place. "What was it? Hufflepuff's cup?"

"Yes. And yes, we have it. It's gone already." Malfoy frowned. "I don't even know what they all are. Snape has a better idea, but he doesn't know the details, either. He gave me a map, but he didn't have recent confirmations on the locations, even."

"He gave you a map?" Harry repeated, frowning. "What map?"

Malfoy pulled out a square of folded parchment from his robe pocket and held it out. "He made it himself."

Harry recognised his own map. "What? / have that map! Someone sent it to me anonymously!" He pulled it out and gave it to Malfoy. "See?"

Malfoy studied it, brow furrowing. "Yeah, that's the same," he said. "Don't you recognise Snape's writing after all these years?"

Harry shook his head. "I knew it looked familiar, but I could never place it. Why would he not have told you, at least? That he was sending it to me, I mean. Why make us compete for the same thing?"

Malfoy was still frowning, but he got it before Harry did. "Speed. He knew that we would work harder if we were competing. And he needed to get them before the Death Eaters catch up with us."

Harry scowled. "Why would he care if I get them before you? Explain that part, Malfoy."

Malfoy made a sound of disgust. "He figured you would probably turn them over to the Order or something - " (Harry attempted to disguise his surprise that Malfoy knew about the Order, but it made sense that Snape would have told him) - "and they would end up sitting on a shelf somewhere, still quite active, while all of your lot threw themselves into frantic Horcrux research and endless debate about the best way to destroy them. Safety precautions and that sort of thing. A big, pointless waste of time, in other words. *Anyway*, Potter, do you think we could get to the box now? Before the Death Eaters get here?"

Harry nodded quickly. "Yes. We should. You think they know it's here?"

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Of *course* they know it's here. Voldemort does, obviously. And he knows that people are destroying them. I take it, by the way, that you got the one in the cave?"

"Yeah. It was Grindelwald's chalice," Harry told him. He dropped to a crouch and stared at the box. "So, the problem is that you can't get it open?"

"That's exactly it," Malfoy said. He leaned against the wall beside the door and began counting on his fingers. "So there's the chalice, the cup, the quill, the diary, the ring, whatever's in the box, and Voldemort himself. Do you know where the diary is? Snape wasn't sure. I know that it says it's at my house - my father's house, that is - and that could be true. If it is, then we're screwed. I'd never be able to find it, and the elves would never tell me."

Harry shook his head, still looking at the box. "I destroyed that one in our second year. Your father was kind enough to sneak it into the castle."

Malfoy was silent for a moment. "Handy, that," he said, his tone devoid of expression. "The problem with the box is that I think you need magic to open it, and magic doesn't work down here. But it's also completely stuck to the floor. I can't pick it up at all."

Harry squinted at the snake and tried to imagine it moving. "Maybe," he said, half to himself, "it doesn't need magic. Maybe it needs something else."

"Like *what*?" Malfoy demanded. "If you've got any ideas, now's the time."

"If this is Slytherin's locket, and it must be," Harry said, "then it helps to know that Slytherin was a Parseltongue."

"Yeah, well - " Malfoy's retort stopped midstream. "Oh. I completely forgot about that. Well, do it, then! And hurry up!"

Harry nodded, feeling self-conscious. He tried to pretend that Malfoy wasn't there and began to imagine the silver snake moving a little. "[Open]," he said commandingly, and was pleased to hear the sibilant sounds coming from his mouth. Good, right language. The box, however, did not twitch. Damn. He tried again. "[I command you to open.]" Lots more hissing, but no response from the box.

Malfoy shifted then, and Harry glanced at him, still feeling self-conscious. Malfoy's expression was odd. Sort of uncomfortable, sort of interested, and sort of peeved. "What are you saying?"

"[Just to open]," Harry said, but it came out in Parseltongue. He was out of practise and the slip embarrassed him. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Just to open," he said again, and good, that was English.

Malfoy's cheeks flushed. "Ah," he said, which didn't explain the flush at all. He gestured toward the box. "Well - better keep at it, then."

Harry nodded, still feeling self-conscious, and resumed. Focused on the snake, he tried again. "[You must open]," he tried. "[Reveal your secrets!]" Nothing. "[Show me the Horcrux.]" Harry began to get frustrated. Louder, he said, "[Open up! I command you to unlock!]"

Malfoy coughed then, distracting him. Harry looked at him again. Malfoy was still standing by the wall, but he'd straightened up, not leaning back any more. He looked intensely uncomfortable, and his face had flushed even more deeply, staining his normally pale cheeks. His hands were clenched into fists at his sides, and if Harry hadn't known better, he would have thought that the other was angry. But that wasn't it - Malfoy looked embarrassed.

"What's the matter?" Harry asked, feeling awkward.

Malfoy bit his lip and refused to look at him. "Nothing."

"But you're - "

"Just hurry up!" Malfoy said sharply. "God."

Stung, Harry turned back to the box. "[Unlock. I command you to unlock.]" He touched the snake, and it moved slightly beneath his finger tip. "[Snake, you must open this box. I need to see what's inside.]" Still nothing. "[Come on.]" Harry tried, beginning to feel a bit desperate. If he couldn't convince the snake to open the box, what was he supposed to do? If Malfoy was right, then the Death Eaters could arrive at any moment. "[I order you to open!]" he tried, varying the words. "[You must open -]" Harry stopped, hearing something else.

It was Malfoy. His eyes were closed, and he had just made a sound, possibly a moan.

Harry was alarmed. "Malfoy?" No response. "Malfoy, what's - are you okay?"

Malfoy's eyes opened, heavy-lidded and burning with an intensity that Harry had not experienced before. "If you keep that up," he said, voice thick with the same thing that was smouldering from his eyes, "I'm going to embarrass myself. I know I told you to hurry, but I need a minute here."

Harry felt his face turn instantly, flamingly red. He certainly had not expected *this*. "Uh - "

"Use that on Weasley's sister?" Malfoy drawled, seemingly calmer, but using the same tone of voice.

Harry's face flooded again. "No!"

"Never got that far, I suppose." Malfoy smiled, a long, slow smile that was full of that *something* again, and Harry felt as though the floor had just been pulled out from beneath his feet. The expression on Malfoy's face was doing something to him that he had never experienced before. He glanced downward - *why*, for God's sake, he could never properly explain to himself, later - and noticed a sizeable bulge beneath Malfoy's robes.

He didn't know what to say, either to Malfoy's drawling comment about him and Ginny or to his disturbing observation. Was Malfoy - ? He didn't say the word even in his head. After a moment, he realised that he was still staring at Malfoy's crotch. He cleared his throat and quickly averted his eyes, but Malfoy had already seen.

"I guess not, then," Malfoy said, almost conversationally. "And why not, I wonder? Surely the great boy wonder was interested." The smirk was there in his voice, though his grey eyes were almost comically wide-open and innocent.

He's just trying to gain the upper hand so that I'll forget that he got hard over hearing me speaking Parseltongue, Harry thought desperately, but it was too late for that, too. This had never happened before. He'd seen other blokes' hard-ons before - it happened to everyone. In the showers, sometimes in the loo. It never mattered; it was just one of those things that you noticed and then didn't notice. Just part of being male. But now, with Malfoy just out of arm's reach away, Harry was getting hard over the fact that Malfoy was hard. He cleared his throat, hard. "I was interested. I just... had other things to do."

"Other things?" Malfoy repeated, and yes, the amusement was still there.

"I'm going to keep working on this," Harry said firmly. "I'm not interested in your little perversions." Malfoy made a sound of either anger or disbelief here, but Harry ignored him. "[Give me the Horcrux]," he commanded the snake. He touched it again, and it moved in response. "[Reveal the Horcrux.]" He didn't hear Malfoy moving. "[I am the Chosen One. Give me the -]" He stopped suddenly. Malfoy was right behind him. Before he could do anything or say anything about, this, a slender hand had shot out, quick as lightning, to close over the bulge in Harry's trousers.

"Not interested?" Malfoy murmured, in a tone unlike anything Harry had ever heard him use. It was soft and low and seductive as hell. Malfoy was close enough that Harry could smell him, an interesting blend of some sort of expensive aftershave and the lightest touch of sweat. His fingers squeezed lightly. "I beg to differ, Potter."

Harry grabbed Malfoy's wrist and meant to yank his offending hand away, but he ended up just squeezing it fiercely. "Malfoy!!" He was incensed. But his anger was half directed at himself, furiously angry at his body's betrayal. Why on earth was he hard *now*?

Malfoy's face was too close to his ear. "Could it be that the great Harry Potter actually gets it up for men? Is that it? I heard a rumour that you broke up with Weasley at the end of the year. Is it true, Potter?"

Harry was having difficulty breathing. Those fingers weren't going anywhere, and the palm was now pressing in against the hard shape of his cock, coiled tightly in his pants. "That's - none of your business," he got out. "Malfoy - we - I really have to - "

"Did she ever touch you?" Malfoy went on, his voice snaking into Harry's ears unstopably, the palm beginning to massage. His thumb rubbed against the length of Harry's cock. "Did she, Potter? Did she let you come all over her?"

Which was it, Potter - her hand, her face, her mouth, maybe?"

Harry groaned; he couldn't help it. The thoughts of doing *that* with Ginny made him uncomfortable. She had wanted much more than he had, truth be told - she'd even mentioned stories of things she had done with Dean, stories which had filled him with a helpless sort of jealousy, but had not made him any more eager to explore anything beyond, well, holding hands and the occasional snog. If he was honest with himself, he knew that they had really just been friends all along. That he was terribly fond of her and that her relationship with Dean had made him jealous, but it wasn't that sort of jealousy. Because the truth was that she had never made him feel like this, all hot and bothered and wanting nothing more than to forget all about the Horcrux and just let Malfoy do this. He knew that it was only for leverage, for Malfoy to get something to use against him so that Harry couldn't tell anyone about *his* arousal. But it didn't matter. All he knew at the moment was how good it felt.

"I have to - the Horcrux - " he gasped.

"Go on," Malfoy said, his mouth somewhere near Harry's neck. "Keep talking."

He moved even closer, so that Harry could feel his erection right against his arse. And *that* certainly did not help. "Oh, fuck, I - "

"Parseltongue," Malfoy reminded him softly, voice full of wicked laughter. "Concentrate, Potter."

"I - no - [In the name of Salazar Slytherin, I command you to open!]" Harry said loudly, his voice driven by the pressure in his groin. To his surprise and Malfoy's (which manifested in another squeeze to his trapped cock), the silver snake hissed and the box fell open, its top and sides fading into nothing. Slytherin's locket lay on the floor of the vault, exactly as Harry had remembered it. Heavy, gold, the ornate S carved into its cover. He assumed that Malfoy would release him then, since the Horcrux had been procured.

He was wrong. Malfoy spun him around. Pinning Harry to the wall of the vault with one hand, he stooped, picked up the locket and dropped it into the pocket of his robe. His eyes held Harry's the entire time, his gaze razor-sharp. "Now we finish this," he breathed.

Harry floundered for words. "I - are you - "

"You want this," Malfoy said, all traces of humour gone. His eyes had gone dark and were relentless. "Say it. You want this."

Harry squeezed his eyes closed, and fought to deny it. He lost the battle. "Yeah." It was hardly more than an exhalation, but he'd said it.

"Good boy." Malfoy released him, but only to pull his robes off in a single, swift motion. His hands were on the button of his trousers and then on Harry's. "Don't just stand there, Potter. God!"

That hand pushed the material of his trousers aside, slipped past his pants, and every nerve leapt into action as it closed around his cock, pulling it out. Harry's balls caught on the waistband of his pants and he shoved them down around Malfoy's hand, suddenly impatient. Malfoy had his other hand and was pulling it to his own cock, eyes riveted to Harry's, both of them wordless. Harry consented silently, his fist closing around the stiff length of Malfoy's hard, flushed cock. It was already wet, and this made Harry even harder. Malfoy's hand was wrapped around his length, beginning to slide up and down it, and it was the best thing Harry had ever felt. He felt powerless; no one else had ever touched him like this - his orgasm had never depended so entirely on anyone else. And yet, Malfoy was in the same position, his lips parted as Harry began to reciprocate the motion, fist slipping in the moisture from the rosy

head of Malfoy's cock. His breath was hitting Harry's lips. It didn't make any sense, but here they were, trapped in the depths of Gringotts, getting off together. Malfoy. Harry repeated the name in his head, reminding himself, and it made even less sense.

"Harder," Malfoy said, and there was an edge of plea to it, just a hint of desperation. His own hand worked Harry harder, and Harry had to fight to keep from moaning aloud. It somehow seemed to him that Malfoy should want it more, that Malfoy should be the one more undone than Harry was. That that would make this an acceptable thing to be doing. He gripped harder and began to jerk him off faster.

"You like that?" Harry asked, his voice almost growling. "Have *you* done this before, Malfoy? Tell me."

Malfoy closed his eyes and breathed harder. "No. I - oh, *fuck* - " His face spasmed, his hips jerking, cock pushing into Harry's fist.

"Didn't know you were *gay*," Harry said, his other hand coming to rest on the curve of Malfoy's arse for better grip.

Malfoy moaned. "I'm - oh - Potter, I'm - oh, yeah, hard - like that - "

Watching Malfoy going incoherent like that was intoxicating. Harry was furious with himself for finding it even more arousing than just knowing that he'd given Malfoy an erection, but how could he help it? His cock was apparently loving every second of this, and so was Malfoy. Evidently. He heard himself groan without meaning to. And Malfoy didn't say anything, just opened his eyes and levelled Harry with another of those hard stares. That look snapped Harry's control. He grabbed Malfoy by the shoulders and swung them around, trapping him up against the wall with his hips. With his left forearm he held Malfoy's shoulder, pushing it into the wall while his right hand grabbed both his own cock and Malfoy's and began to thrust against it and his own palm. Malfoy's head fell back against the wall and he moaned again, his own right hand coming to join Harry's on their cocks. He wasn't arguing for once, his cock throbbing alongside Harry's, and the sensation was so intense that Harry was nearly sure that he would black out from the strength of his impending orgasm.

He could feel it, curling up through his body from his toes, and he had never in his life thought that this would happen - that he would be clutching Malfoy's shoulder and rubbing his cock against Malfoy's until they both came.

"I'm - going to - " Malfoy gasped, and that was all there time for. His entire body tensed as his orgasm hit, and then his cock was erupting all over Harry's fist, spurting hard. Harry had never witnessed someone else coming, felt a cock jerking in his hand while thick, white come jutted out its swollen head, and this proved to be too much for his already overstimulated brain. His hips snapped forward in a last hard thrust against Malfoy's wet cock and then the sensation was wracking him from head to toe. He could feel it rushing out of him in a hot flood, Malfoy's hand and cock feeling too good to bear on his sensitive flesh.

For a moment, he just kept his eyes closed as the feeling ebbed from his limbs, leaving him weak but sated. A deep sigh happened, and he realised belatedly that it had come from him.

Malfoy's hand let go of him, and Harry opened his eyes. Malfoy looked uncomfortable, but equally sated. He pushed Harry away, but his hand was gentler than it could have been. Harry found his balance and went to reach for his wand, until he remembered that cleaning spells wouldn't work there. He wiped his hand on his trousers instead, grimacing, then tucked himself away before zipping them up. Malfoy was making a similar expression, but did not break the silence.

Harry cleared his throat. "Give me the locket," he said, his heart still racing.

Malfoy was still breathing hard, too. He reached into his pocket, but did not bring it out. "Do you know how to destroy it?" he asked, voice uncertain.

"I'll figure out a way," Harry said shortly. "If not... maybe I'll owl Snape."

"You could owl *me*," Malfoy said, not meeting his eye.

There was a strange sort of pause. "Yeah, I suppose I could," Harry said, his mouth dry.

"Just if you need help or something." Malfoy was looking at the door of the vault, shoulders stiff.

"If I do, I will." Harry held out his hand. Malfoy saw it, walked over and dropped the locket into his palm. "Thanks."

Malfoy fixed him with a look. "You said you'd get me out of here, Potter. That's the only reason I'm giving it to you."

Harry nodded too quickly. "I know. And I will. Come on." He moved toward the door and picked up the invisibility cloak. "Incidentally, I don't suppose you know the way out?" His heart was still beating rather quickly, but he knew that he was nervous, now.

Malfoy shook his head. "I got completely turned around on the way down."

"Then I guess we'll just have to figure it out as we go," Harry said. He picked up the Firebolt and went to open the door. He could not open it. It wouldn't budge.

"You need this," Malfoy said, and brandished the goblin hand.

Harry looked at it in disgust. "You do it, then."

"Move, and I will," Malfoy said curtly. The door was opened, the hand tossed back into the vault. "Let's go, and mind the dragons."

Harry stepped out onto the tracks and listened. He did not hear a cart anywhere nearby at all, so he sighed and swung a leg over his broom. "Coming?"

Malfoy made a sound that might have been a muffled snicker, but he didn't explain. "Yeah." He climbed on behind Harry, hands sliding onto Harry's hips. "Don't throw me off or anything."

"I'll do my best," Harry said. It felt odd, having Malfoy there, so close. He began to fly slowly, keeping his head down - the tunnels were low, built for the carts. There was headspace enough that Hagrid's head wouldn't have touched the ceiling, but the Firebolt hated being flown particularly close to the ground for any length of time and kept pushing upward. Harry held it firmly and kept it parallel to the tracks. He began going in the direction the cart had first come, but there were forks almost immediately.

"Go up, wherever you can," Malfoy advised.

Harry glared, though he knew it would be wasted on the dark. "No shit!"

Malfoy's grip on his waist tightened. "Take this fork, then. To the right."

Harry veered right at the last second and began to fly along that passageway. The invisibility cloak was bunched beneath his hands, around the broom - he hated wearing it while flying, and didn't want it over his head, anyway. It was definitely in the way, but there was nothing he could do about that. "Which way now?" he called, as they came to another three-way fork.

Malfoy hesitated, thinking quickly. "Left, I think. Yeah, go left."

Harry swerved left. It was a long, narrow tunnel. As he flew, he noticed that chunks of the cart's track had dropped away - they were above a deep canyon, and parts of the track had fallen in. The doors of long-forgotten vaults hung in shreds of rotting wood or else gaped like missing teeth in a dark mouth in the walls. "Oh, shit!"

"Right, that was a bad call," Malfoy said decisively. "Uh, let's get out of here. I guess it's too tight to turn around, and I sure as hell don't want you doing any crazy turns with both of us on here. Just get out of here at the next possible opportunity!"

"Will do." Harry renewed his concentration and began to watch for possible openings. There weren't any. Behind him, Malfoy shivered and inched closer, his long fingers holding on even tighter.

"This was a bad idea," Harry heard him mumble to himself.

Harry said nothing, just kept flying. Suddenly, a dark opening gaped to his left, and he took it automatically. It was wide and almost pitch-black, but warmer than the last one had been. It was also sloping upward, and this, he felt, must have been a good sign. "Well, we're out of the canyon - " he started, but then another fork came along. There was more light down the middle tunnel, and there was no time to deliberate. He took the middle fork.

"Oh, good choice," Malfoy said approvingly. "That last bit was so dark, I - "

A flare of light was all the warning they got before Harry very nearly flew into the dragon. A blast of flame nearly took his facial features off, and he swerved upward. Luckily, the tunnel was higher here, allowing for the dragon's height and girth. "Hold on!" Harry yelled, and it wasn't enough warning, but Malfoy got it. He wrapped both arms around Harry's torso and his thighs clamped Harry's tightly just as Harry turned a full circle, upside down. Racing away from the dragon, he could still feel the heat of its breath, which could only mean one thing.

"Fucking hell, Potter, that thing is almost on top of us!!" The panic in Malfoy's voice was unmissable, and confirmed Harry's fear.

He put on a burst of speed and nearly crashed into an unexpected wall that reared up suddenly, almost invisible against the darkness of its background. "Fuck!" He careened off to the right, taking what should have been the left fork from the last divide, and they hurtled along the passageway blindly. "Is it still there?" He heard the panic in his own voice, too.

"Yes! Can't you go any faster?"

Harry didn't even warn him this time - the dragon caught up and was sending clouds of flame after them. Harry

gripped the Firebolt around the bulk of the invisibility cloak and turned a corkscrew twist and nipped around a right turn that came up unexpectedly. A shock of cold wind nearly blasted his face off; they were over another open canyon. Malfoy was cursing behind him, pressed against Harry's back. The dragon sped up - it was faster than they were. It was an evil-looking Welsh Green, its webbed wings stretched wide as it echoed their path, directly beneath them now. *Like a shark shadowing a canoe in the ocean*, Harry thought. He had only one last trick to play and then the dragon would either roast them in a single breath or else he would crash and kill them both. "Malfoy!"

"Yeah?"

"I've got my invisibility cloak here!" Harry called. "It's wedged under my hands - can you get it out and get it over us? I'll try to keep flying in straight line, but hurry, okay?"

"Oh - sure. I'm sure that will work, Potter. Brilliant idea." Malfoy was griping, but it was only because he was terrified, Harry knew. He slid the cloak back toward his body to get it as close to Malfoy as possible.

"Just hold on tight with your legs," Harry said, glancing down at the dragon. He turned slowly, a wide arc that wouldn't dislodge Malfoy, and began another long line in a different direction. It was a wide-open pit, no tracks anywhere in sight. He had no idea where he was.

Malfoy's hand was tugging at the cloak. Harry was terrified that he would drop it. He could feel Malfoy's nervousness, and reached back with his left hand to grip Malfoy's thigh. "I won't let you fall," he said firmly.

"Don't make stupid promises," Malfoy shot back. He got the cloak and Harry had a clear space to hold the broom again. "Okay, I think I see how this works. Hang on, Potter, I'm putting it over your head now."

The dragon roared and sent another blast of flame at them, nearly scorching Harry's trainer. Malfoy put the cloak over him then, and everything was blurrier, as always. It didn't help that it was fairly dark in the tunnel, too. Malfoy was struggling, trying to get it down over his own back without losing his balance, and then over the end of the broom. It was a nightmarish few moments that Harry didn't remember clearly later, only that he was sure that they were not going to make it.

But then Malfoy whooped. Harry looked around carefully, trying not to make any sudden moves or fly into anything, but the dragon appeared to have lost track of them. "Fly left!" Malfoy said in a low voice, his arms coming around Harry's torso again. "The cloak is on!"

Harry obediently veered left, and after a few minutes, the dragon was gone. He found a tunnel entrance and took it.

"That was close," Malfoy commented grimly. "Okay, let's stay with the tracks. One of them must go back to the surface!"

"Sure," Harry said, and concentrated. He was shaking with nerves, but relieved that Malfoy was holding on again and that they were at least dragon-free again.

Malfoy's arms tightened, and he didn't say anything. Harry followed the tracks religiously. They turn any path that led upward, and managed not to run into any more dragons. At one point, a cart was rattling noisily down a parallel track on the opposite side of the wall from them, but they stayed silent and managed to remain undetected. Eventually, there was a gleam of light that was not an underground light - it was Gringotts proper. They had found the way out.

"I have never been so relieved to see daylight in all my life," Malfoy said, and Harry agreed rather fervently.

Sneaking out of the vaults and back into the bank was not particularly difficult. They had to go slowly, shuffling together under the cloak and trying not to let the Firebolt show, but they were out at last. They made their way down the front steps of Gringotts with difficulty, Harry wondering where Ron and Hermione had ended up - they had not been anywhere in sight inside the bank - and what was going to happen next.

At the bottom of the stairs, they eased around a corner and Harry pulled the cloak off. Both their faces were sweaty from the heat of the cloak, the underground, and the furious flight. Malfoy's hair was mussed. They faced each other. Harry found himself unsure as to what to say. Now that the proximity was unnecessary, Harry suddenly felt strangely reluctant to let it go. And it didn't seem right not to say anything about the whole *thing*. "Uh, Malfoy - "

Malfoy waited.

"Erm - thanks for - well, I guess I wouldn't have been able to get inside the vault if you hadn't already been there, or out again either," Harry fumbled. "And - well - I guess it's good knowing that you haven't been handing the Horcruxes over to Voldemort or anything, too."

Malfoy raised his eyebrow. "I suppose I could say the same," he said coolly. "Thanks for letting me know that you're destroying them right away. If you defeat Voldemort before he finds Snape, then you'll have saved my life."

Harry didn't know what to say to that, either. "Oh - right. Well, here's hoping, then."

Malfoy reached out and gripped his wrist. "Do you have Marvolo Gaunt's ring?"

Harry shook his head. "Dumbledore had it," he said. "It's already been destroyed."

"Then this was the last one?" Malfoy asked.

"Yeah. I think so. Well, except for - " He stopped.

"Voldemort," Malfoy said quietly.

"Right." Harry watched him carefully, wondering what Malfoy was thinking.

Malfoy fidgeted. "Do you... I mean, I have nothing better to do. What are you going to do now?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't know. Ask the Order what to do now, I guess. Wait until they've found Voldemort." He saw Malfoy's quandary, but hesitated to ask. "Do you want to keep helping us?"

Malfoy's lip twisted. "Well, it's not really a question of helping you or your side, Potter. It's just a matter of survival."

"I know that," Harry said impatiently. "But you can't be on no one's side. Maybe Snape can, but he's got a long, complicated history. Yours isn't that complicated yet."

"I'm Marked," Malfoy said bluntly.

"It doesn't matter," Harry said, matching him for stubbornness. "Look, I'm sure the Order would welcome anyone who isn't on Voldemort's side. If you want to come, the choice is yours. You can owl me."

"Oh, so that's your method of trying to keep me around," Malfoy said, sneering, but there was insecurity behind it.

Harry's face warmed. "I'm not gay," he said harshly. Whether or not that was a lie was none of Malfoy's business. But he had a lot of thinking to do. "I don't know what happened down there."

Malfoy's features hardened. "Don't you?" The sneer deepened. "Let me explain it, Potter. It's called six years of sexual tension. Don't tell me you haven't felt it. Besides, you sure came hard for someone who purportedly doesn't get his rocks off with men."

Harry's cheeks burned. "That's none of your business!"

"I disagree," Malfoy snarled, and shoved Harry against the dirty alley wall. "It's my business when it's *my* cock and *my* hand that got you off, Potter."

"It was my hand, too," Harry retorted. He looked at Malfoy's hand on his shoulder. "Stop that."

"It was a joint effort," Malfoy said, not releasing him. "The point is, you got off with *me*. Looking right into my face and knowing who I was. No pretending it was anyone but me now, Potter."

"What's your point?" Harry was trapped by Malfoy's stare, too, and it was every bit as unnerving as the entire underground flight had been.

Malfoy stared at him, then shook his head in disgust. "You may be the stupidest git I have ever known," he pronounced, then leaned forward and grabbed Harry by the back of his neck. The kiss was long and wet and rather violent. Harry didn't know when his struggle turned from an effort to get away from Malfoy to an effort to dominate the kiss, but the change happened, and they both knew it. His tongue was struggling against Malfoy's, their mouths biting at each other's, and Malfoy's hands were up Harry's shirt, warm and somehow entirely too right. Harry's arms had wound themselves around Malfoy's shoulders and his fist was clutching a handful of Malfoy's robes. When they finally separated themselves, Malfoy licked his lower lip and murmured, in that same voice, "Well, that settles *that*."

Harry gave in with bad grace. "Guess that means *you're* the one who can't bear to not have me around," he threw back.

"Fine," Malfoy said. "Have it your way."

It was Harry's turn to stare. "What?"

"Fine," Malfoy repeated. "I'll join your precious Order. If only to make sure that you really do destroy the locket properly."

"Right," Harry said, and rolled his eyes.

"Look," Malfoy said, and became rather brusque. "I'd rather not be standing around in the open here. Where are you staying?"

"Here and there," Harry said. "I stayed at the Leaky Cauldron last night. Uh - "

"I'll come with you," Malfoy said.

* * *

And in the end, that was what happened. Ron and Hermione had gone back there to wait for him, and Harry suffered through the ordeal of trying to explain Malfoy's role in all of it. As the tension of the day faded, Harry tried to quieten his thoughts sufficiently to fall asleep, but it had been a strange week. From the oddness of the clues left along the way, the empty storage room in the council flats, the silent solitude of the hidden valley in the Scottish highlands, and the riddles deep beneath London in Gringotts' vaults, Harry had been to more places in this strange race against time and Malfoy than he had in years. And between his subsequent discoveries about Malfoy and his allegiances - not to mention, another particular discovery about himself - Harry was exhausted. The seven Horcruxes were accounted for: Riddle's diary, Marvolo Gaunt's ring, Hufflepuff's cup, and Grindelwald's chalice had all been destroyed. It was only a matter of time before Ravenclaw's quill and Slytherin's locket would join those, and that left only one thing: Voldemort.

Harry turned over in his bed and listened to Malfoy's soft breathing through the Leaky Cauldron's thin walls. It was going to be an interesting summer.

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