Tea

Posted originally on the fanfiction.lol at https://fanfiction.lol/works/1589.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Categories:	Slash (M/M), Hetero (F/M), Queer
Fandom:	Harry Potter - All Media Types
Relationships:	Draco Malfoy/Harry Potter, Neville Longbottom/Hélène Blanche, Ron Weasley/Hermione Granger
Characters:	Harry Potter, Draco Malfoy, Hélène Blanche, Neville Longbottom, Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, Narcissa Malfoy, Lucius Malfoy
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Setting Change, Drarry, Happy Ending, Rich Draco Malfoy, Swimmer Harry Potter, Non-Explicit Sex, Implied/Referenced Drug Use, And They Were Roommates, Forced Proximity, Supportive Narcissa Malfoy, Romantic Fluff, Supportive Friends, Family Dynamics, Neville Longbottom Deserves Better, Male-Female Friendship, Golden Trio, Romantic Comedy, Non-Toxic Draco Malfoy, Childhood Friends
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-11-09 Words: 25,082 Chapters: 12/18

Tea

by AnnaVesper

Summary

Draco Malfoy had an excellent opinion of Harry Potter. Living with him was beginning to change that.

With his Mayfair flat under renovation, staying with the famous swimmer had seemed like a sensible suggestion from his best friend, Hélène Blanche. Potter was disciplined, polite, and had inconveniently lovely green eyes.

What Hélène hadn't mentioned were the mugs, the overnight guests, and the irritating ease with which Harry made him laugh.

Between afternoon teas and an Olympic qualifier, Draco might discover that he likes Harry even better once he stops seeming perfect.

A non-magical Drarry romantic comedy set in London.

Chapter 1: Darjeeling

Draco Malfoy arrived at Fortnum & Mason at half past four and found his table empty.

It was a disappointment. The room was busy enough for someone to have been foolish enough to occupy it, and he had come prepared to deal with the matter. Instead, the waiter greeted him by name, took his coat and showed him to the window without making a single mistake. Draco sat down.

Piccadilly was impossible. Getting out of the car, he had been obliged to wait while an entire family finished photographing something across the road. The mother had asked him to move a little. He had moved. She had asked him to move a little more.

They needed to find another tea room.

He checked his watch.

Four thirty-four.

He ordered Darjeeling for himself and white tea for Hélène, along with afternoon tea for two. She tended to claim she wasn't hungry and then eat his sandwiches.

At four forty, he considered starting.

At four forty-five, he started.

At four fifty, he decided she deserved to find nothing left but the cucumber sandwiches.

At four fifty-eight, he heard her laugh.

Hélène was making her way between the tables, chatting to the waiter who had taken his coat. Her cheeks were red from the cold, and a lock of hair had caught in a fold of her scarf. When she freed it, the light picked out copper first, then gold, then a colour Draco couldn't name.

He lost a few seconds looking. Then he remembered his watch.

"Have you ever heard of five o'clock tea?"

Hélène consulted her own wrist.

"Yes. I'm early."

Draco rose to greet her. She kissed him on both cheeks, smelling of lemon and cold air, and set her bag on the next chair.

"*Mieux vaut tard que jamais.*"

"An expression invented by people who are late."

"And kept alive by people who know how to welcome them."

She took off her gloves, settled into her chair and surveyed the table.

"You ordered without waiting for me?"

"No. I ordered while waiting for you. There is a difference."

Hélène picked up a cucumber sandwich. Draco regarded it with disappointment.

"Piccadilly is unbearable," he announced. "We need to find somewhere else."

"Agreed."

"The sheer number of people..."

"Have you booked for next week?"

"Yes."

"Here?"

"Obviously. We haven't found anywhere else yet."

Hélène nodded, satisfied, and poured herself some tea. His was already the wrong temperature. He summoned a waiter and ordered a fresh pot.

"I had a lovely morning," she said.

"I'm pleased one of us did."

"Remember the man who said I'd have to redo that assessment?"

"Vaguely."

"I don't have to redo it."

"He was wrong?"

"Obviously."

"Have you had a chance to tell him?"

Hélène set down her cup.

"I forwarded the confirmation."

"With how many people copied in?"

"The relevant ones."

Draco smiled.

"You have turned out to be a rather competent doctor, Hélène. All those years of training just to win an argument would have been an extraordinary commitment to stubbornness."

"You say that as though you don't admire dedication."

"I admire discretion."

"It must be difficult admiring something you've never practised."

The fresh pot arrived. Hélène thanked the waiter, waited for him to leave and reached towards the stand.

"Is that salmon?" she asked.

"It was the last one."

"I noticed."

Draco watched her eat it.

"You have an entire afternoon tea of your own."

"But that one was closer."

He opened his mouth.

"So?" she went on. "Still obsessed with the green eyes?"

Draco closed his mouth, adjusted his napkin and sat up straight.

"That is precisely what I need to discuss."

"The eyes?"

"I need to go home."

Hélène's hand stopped over the sugar bowl.

"Your house has no kitchen."

"I am aware of the state of my house."

"And half a bathroom missing."

"The builder has a very particular interpretation of the word 'half'."

"What did Harry do?"

Draco glanced at the next table. The two women sitting there were absorbed in a discussion about a third.

He lowered his voice.

"He had company."

Hélène waited.

"Last night."

She went on waiting.

"Two women."

"Draco, if you pause after every piece of information, we'll have to stay for dinner."

✦ ✦ ✦

When he had arrived at Harry's house the night before, the hall had been dark.

Draco had taken off his shoes and gone quietly upstairs. Potter had to leave early in the morning, and Draco had been making a considerable effort to respect that habit.

On the second-to-last step, he heard music. Then a laugh. Then a sound that made him stop.

He stood there for a few seconds, waiting to hear something that would allow him to interpret the noises differently. He didn't.

He finished climbing the stairs, crossed the landing and slipped into his own room. He switched on the light, set his shoes on the floor and was about to close the door when he heard another laugh. Another voice.

He looked towards Harry's room. The door opened. A naked woman appeared on the landing and stopped when she saw him.

"Hi."

"Hello," Draco replied.

She tried to cover herself with her hands. He fixed his gaze firmly on her face.

"Sorry. I didn't know anyone else was home. I'm just going to..."

She gestured towards the bathroom. Draco stepped aside, though there was enough room between them for two people to pass. That was when Harry appeared.

He was wrapped in a duvet, his hair even worse than usual, a cigarette between his fingers. He looked at Draco, looked at the bathroom and seemed to realise something.

"Shit. Draco. Sorry."

"Good evening, Potter."

"I forgot you were..."

Harry stopped. Draco waited, but he failed to find an ending.

"That's Padma."

The information did not help.

"And this is..."

Harry turned back towards his room. There was another woman in the bed. Draco looked from the bed to the bathroom door.

"Parvati," she said.

"Parvati," Harry repeated, smiling.

Draco selected a wall light and concentrated on it.

"I hope we didn't wake you," Harry went on.

"I've just got in."

"Great."

Draco looked at him again.

"I mean... great that we didn't wake you."

Harry gathered up a corner of the duvet that was beginning to slip.

"We're finished. We won't make any more noise."

"Potter, there is no need to inform me-"

"Go to bed. Goodnight."

He stepped forward and kissed Draco on the cheek. An affectionate, damp and entirely unexpected kiss. Draco remained motionless. Harry took two steps back.

"Say goodnight, Parvati."

"Goodnight, Parvati," Parvati replied.

Harry started laughing. The door closed.

Draco stood on the landing for a few more seconds. Then he went into his room, closed the door and looked at his shoes on the floor. One had fallen on its side. He set it upright.

✦ ✦ ✦

Hélène pressed her napkin to her eyes. Draco waited. She tried to lower it, looked at him and started laughing again.

"When you've finished..."

"Sorry."

"You don't sound sorry."

"I'm trying."

He poured more tea.

"There is nothing extraordinary about a twenty-seven-year-old man entertaining people in his own home."

"Two people."

"The number is irrelevant."

"You mentioned it twice."

"Because there were two."

Hélène took a scone and split it in half.

"And he kissed you."

"On the cheek."

"I heard."

"He was drunk."

"I heard that too."

She spread jam on one half of the scone.

"You could show a little discretion," Draco said.

Hélène looked at him. Then she looked around.

"You told me."

"Quietly."

"Would you like me to laugh more quietly?"

"I would like you not to laugh."

She put down her knife.

"All right. He should have warned you he was having company. And remembered you were there."

Draco inclined his head.

"Thank you."

"But I would have loved to see your face."

He picked up a sandwich.

"You told me he was disciplined."

"He is."

"Hélène."

"He turns up on time, does what we agree and doesn't argue with every instruction he's given."

"Your definition of discipline is limited."

"Does yours include what he's allowed to do on a Saturday night?"

"It includes not appearing naked on a landing."

"He was wearing a duvet."

"You're defending your recommendation."

"And you're talking as though I chose you a husband."

Draco put the sandwich back on his plate. Hélène picked up the other half of her scone. He waited for her to finish chewing.

"I'll find a hotel."

"I can recommend one."

"Can you?"

"Near your house. Easier to keep an eye on the renovations."

"I don't need to check on them every day."

"Then you can choose any hotel you like."

She took her phone out of her bag and set it on the table. Draco drank some tea.

"There's no particular hurry."

Hélène looked up.

"You've just said you need to leave."

"I need to consider my options."

"I'm offering you one."

"There are other considerations..."

He stopped. Harry was standing at the entrance to the room. He wore a dark coat, and his hair appeared to have been subjected to a recent attempt at correction. He was chatting to the waiter in front of him and smiling, perfectly presentable.

Hélène followed Draco's gaze.

"Harry!"

He turned. His smile widened when he recognised them. Draco set down his cup.

"Did you have to call him over?"

"Would you rather hide?"

Harry came to the table and bent to greet her.

"Hi, Hélène."

Then he looked at Draco.

"Hi."

"Potter."

Harry hesitated.

"Are you telling her?"

Hélène lowered her eyes to her plate. Draco raised an eyebrow.

"Telling her what?"

"Right. Can I sit down?"

"Of course," Hélène said.

Harry took off his coat and sat in the empty chair.

"Sorry about last night."

"There is no need to discuss it here," Draco said.

"All right."

Hélène made a small noise. Harry looked at her.

"So you were telling her."

"I was discussing a problem with our living arrangements."

"Was it the noise?"

"Among other things."

Harry rested his forearms on the table and waited. Draco had assembled several complaints that morning, but he hadn't anticipated Potter listening to them like this.

"You could have warned me you were having company."

"I could. You're right."

Hélène took a sip of tea.

"And I should have remembered you were home," Harry added. "It won't happen again."

Draco considered this.

"Good."

"I mean I'll remember you're there. I'm not promising never to have anyone over again."

Hélène turned towards the window. Draco briefly closed his eyes. When he opened them, Harry was smiling.

"You do that."

"Do what?"

"Close your eyes when you think I've said something stupid."

"It's an act of self-preservation."

Harry laughed. Draco picked up the sandwich he had abandoned. A waiter came over, and Harry asked for a cup. Then he surveyed what remained on the stands.

"Have you eaten all the salmon ones?" he asked Hélène.

"Not all of them."

Draco looked at her.

"No. I had the first one. She took the rest."

Harry turned to him.

"Can I have one of those?"

"Those are mine."

"I know. I'm asking."

Hélène finally finished her scone.

"Didn't you need to sort out somewhere to stay, Draco?"

He shot her a look. Harry lowered his hand.

"Are you moving out?"

"My house won't be under renovation for ever."

"Oh."

Harry leaned back, but kept looking at him.

"I thought there was still quite a lot to do."

"There is," Hélène said.

"I'm considering my options."

"Right." Harry glanced at his plate. "If I promise to warn you when I'm having company, can I have a sandwich?"

Draco pushed the plate a few inches towards him.

"You're a very poor negotiator."

"I got the sandwich."

Hélène smiled into her cup. The waiter returned with the crockery and asked whether they wanted anything else.

Harry looked at Draco.

"What tea are you having?"

"Darjeeling."

"I'll try that."

Draco lifted the lid of the pot. It was almost empty.

"Another pot of Darjeeling, please," he said.

Hélène put her phone back in her bag.

Chapter 2: English Breakfast

The next morning, Draco found his cup in Harry Potter's hands.

He stopped in the kitchen doorway.

Harry was leaning against the worktop, barefoot, in jogging bottoms and a grey T-shirt. His hair was damp, and he was holding, by its handle, the cup Draco had brought from Mayfair because he had no intention of spending weeks drinking tea out of promotional mugs.

There were six of them in the cupboard. Two advertised swimming competitions, one had a chipped handle, and another was large enough to serve soup in.

"Morning," Harry said.

Draco looked at the cup. Harry followed his gaze.

"I made tea."

"I can see that."

"There's more in the pot."

Draco came closer. The lid was off the teapot. He put it on.

Harry took another sip.

"I bought the one we had yesterday."

Draco looked at the box beside the kettle: Darjeeling.

"You did?"

"I liked it."

For a moment, the kitchen seemed a perfectly acceptable place.

"And that is my cup," Draco said.

Harry looked down.

"Oh. Sorry."

"I'm not insisting you stop using it."

"You're looking at me as though you are."

Draco opened the cupboard and examined his options.

"Are there no cups?"

Harry looked at the one he was holding.

"Besides that one," Draco clarified.

Harry took a blue one from the top shelf.

"That one was hidden."

"Behind a glass, Potter."

Draco accepted the cup, poured himself some tea and tasted it.

"How long did you leave it to brew?"

Harry thought about it.

"As long as it took to make toast."

Draco put down his cup.

"We need to have a conversation."

✦ ✦ ✦

Eight minutes later, Harry knew that "until it goes dark" was not a criterion, that adding more water to the same leaves would not necessarily solve the problem, and that Draco was not angry. That last point had been clarified three times.

"Do you always explain things like this?" Harry asked.

"Like what?"

"As though there's going to be an exam afterwards."

Draco opened the jam jar.

"You asked."

"I asked if it was bad."

"And I explained why."

Harry looked at the teapot.

"I'll try again tomorrow."

Draco found a clean knife.

"There's no need."

"I want to."

Draco spread jam on his toast with more care than the task required. Harry was watching him over the stolen cup.

"Have you been swimming already?" Draco asked.

"Yes."

Draco checked the kitchen clock.

"What time?"

Harry told him. Draco stopped with the knife poised over his toast.

"Voluntarily?"

"It's my job."

"Even so."

Harry laughed.

An open bag stood by the door, a pair of swimming goggles showing in the side pocket. Draco looked at the damp hair, then at the bag.

"And you're going back?"

"Later."

One had to acknowledge a certain consistency between this routine and the man Draco had watched competing. That reassured him for a few seconds.

Harry picked up a very dark piece of toast from the worktop, scraped it with a knife and ate it. The reassurance passed.

"Will you be home tonight?" Harry asked.

"Probably."

"We could have dinner together."

Draco looked up.

"Here?"

"It's where the kitchen is."

"I know where the kitchen is, Potter."

"Settled, then."

Harry put the cup in the sink.

"I'll make something."

"That covers rather a lot."

"Dinner," Harry clarified. "Something for dinner."

Before Draco could ask what, he was already in the hall. Draco looked at the sink.

The cup was in it, with a spoon. He removed the spoon.

✦ ✦ ✦

At eleven twenty, the builder rang.

Draco received the news standing by the sitting-room window.

"What do you mean, 'not exactly the same'?"

He listened to the explanation.

"I know natural stone varies. That is why I chose that one."

Another explanation.

"Then we agree that the one which arrived is not the one I chose."

Harry had a small table beside the sofa. On it were two magazines, a remote control, a folded bill and a medal with its ribbon wound round it.

Draco moved the bill off the medal.

"No, you cannot fit it so I can see what it looks like."

He sat down.

"Because then it will have been fitted."

By the time he hung up, he had written three messages, arranged a visit to the flat and decided to go out for dinner.

At six forty, however, he heard Harry arrive in the kitchen with shopping bags.

Draco was upstairs. He came down merely to ask whether Harry needed anything.

Harry had rolled up the sleeves of a blue shirt and spread the shopping over the worktop.

"I bought a lemon," he announced.

Draco looked at him.

"Congratulations."

"And other things."

There was fish, potatoes, a packet of green beans and a dessert in a bakery box.

Draco rested a hand on the back of a chair.

"You cook?"

"Two or three things."

"Which ones?"

"Today, this one."

Harry took the potatoes out of the bag.

Draco stayed.

✦ ✦ ✦

The first problem was the knife.

"Isn't there another one?" Draco asked.

Harry held up the one in his hand.

"What's wrong with this one?"

"It's blunt."

"It cut the potato."

"With difficulty."

Harry looked at the cut potato, then at him.

"It didn't complain."

Draco opened a drawer.

The second problem was the size of the pieces.

"Those will cook before these."

"Then I'll take them out first."

"You could cut them the same size."

Harry handed him the knife.

"Could you do that bit?"

Draco looked at the handle.

"I could."

Ten minutes later, he had produced six pieces of potato and a considerable number of observations about the utensils.

Harry picked a piece up from the chopping board.

"This one's bigger."

"Not significantly."

Harry set it beside another.

Draco took the knife back.

"I'm finishing."

Harry went to see to the fish.

For a while, they worked in silence. Harry opened the packet of green beans, switched on the oven and took a roasting tin out of the cupboard. Draco stepped aside to let him past; Harry briefly rested a hand on his back.

"Thanks."

Draco cut the last potato into three pieces.

He examined the results.

He put them in the tin.

"Did your builder ring?" Harry asked.

"He did."

"Bad news?"

"Absurd news."

Harry smiled.

"What was it today?"

Draco began with the wrong stone and finished with an assessment of the word "equivalent", which seemed to have acquired an entirely new meaning since the renovations began.

Harry listened while squeezing a lemon.

"And he wanted to fit it anyway?" he asked.

"So I could see what it looked like."

"But then it would already be fitted."

Draco turned to him.

"Exactly."

Harry nodded very seriously.

Draco grew suspicious.

"Are you laughing at me?"

"Not yet."

Harry picked up a green bean.

"Does this need cutting?"

✦ ✦ ✦

Dinner was ready twenty minutes later than Harry had predicted, but no one had died and the fish looked perfectly edible.

Draco had laid the table.

He had found plates without slogans, two cloth napkins and wine glasses.

Harry came in with the roasting tin and stopped.

"It looks lovely."

"You had the things."

"I know. I just don't usually..."

He made a vague gesture towards the table.

Draco adjusted a piece of cutlery.

"It was hardly a major undertaking."

"I like it."

Harry set the tin in the centre of the table and pulled out a chair for Draco.

Draco sat down.

The fish was good.

So were the potatoes.

He ate a little more before saying:

"You could have used less lemon."

Harry tasted it again.

"I like it like this."

Draco looked at his plate.

"I noticed."

"But is it good?"

"Yes."

Harry smiled with a satisfaction Draco thought disproportionate to the remark.

He served Draco more potatoes.

"Are you working tomorrow?" he asked.

"I'm going to the flat."

"And afterwards?"

Draco raised an eyebrow.

"Do you have another meal planned?"

Harry laughed.

"I'm trying to find out what you do when you're not here."

"There are quite a lot of things to do outside your house."

"Do you work with your dad?"

Draco put down his fork.

"Sometimes."

Harry waited.

"There are meetings I attend," Draco added. "Documents I need to read. People who insist on explaining those documents after I've already read them."

"Do you enjoy it?"

"The documents?"

"The work."

Draco thought for a moment.

"Some parts."

"Which ones?"

It was a simple question. Even so, he couldn't remember the last person who had asked it.

He spoke about a recent negotiation, something he had managed to put right before it reached his father, and a director who had a habit of repeating information no one had disputed.

Harry listened.

When Draco realised he had been talking for some time, he picked up his glass.

"But this can hardly be what you had in mind for dinner conversation."

"You look very pleased when you get to the bit where the director had to admit he was wrong."

"Because he was wrong."

"Yes. That bit was clear."

Draco tried not to smile.

He didn't entirely succeed.

Harry noticed.

"You should do that more."

"What?"

"Smile."

Draco drank some water.

"I'd need more reasons."

Harry leaned forward a little.

"I'm trying."

For a second, Draco could think of nothing appropriate to say.

Then he looked at the fish.

"Dinner was a reasonable effort."

Harry lowered his head, laughing.

Draco sought another subject.

"When's your next competition?"

Harry told him, then asked:

"Do you follow it?"

"Occasionally."

"On television?"

"That is where they tend to broadcast it."

Harry smiled.

"You could come to one."

"I have."

Harry put down his fork.

"You have?"

Draco picked up a green bean.

"Hélène had tickets."

"Which one?"

He told him.

Harry stared at him.

"That was last year."

"Yes."

"Before we met."

"I didn't need to know you to watch."

"No. I just didn't know you'd been."

Draco ate the bean.

"You won."

"I did."

"Although the interview afterwards was dreadful."

Harry burst out laughing.

"I was tired."

"You answered 'yes' to a question beginning with 'how'."

"You remember that?"

Draco poured himself some water.

"It was a very inadequate answer."

Harry was still smiling.

"I'll try to do better next time."

✦ ✦ ✦

Dessert was an apple tart.

"I didn't make it," Harry said.

"I saw the box."

"Just so you don't get your hopes up for next time."

Draco, who was clearing the plates, stopped.

"Next time?"

Harry opened a cupboard, looking for smaller plates.

"We could have dinner together again."

"If I'm here."

Harry looked at him.

"Do you still want to go to a hotel?"

Draco put the plates in the sink.

"I haven't made any decisions."

"Right."

Harry found the plates, but didn't move away.

"I like having you here."

Draco turned.

Harry had said it as casually as he had announced dessert.

Draco waited for something to complete the sentence.

Nothing came.

"The house has a good layout," he replied. "The room is comfortable."

Harry looked at the plates in his hands.

Then at him.

"I'm glad."

"And the distance from Mayfair is manageable."

"Good to know I'm in an acceptable location."

Draco noticed the smile.

"That wasn't what I..."

His phone began vibrating in the sitting room.

He took a step towards it.

Stopped.

"It'll be the builder."

"You can answer it."

The phone kept vibrating.

Draco looked at the oven clock.

The man had promised to ring two hours earlier.

"He can wait."

Harry cut the tart.

✦ ✦ ✦

An hour later, the tea was ready.

Harry had put the lid on the teapot.

He had also returned Draco's cup, clean, to its place.

Draco noticed both things and commented on neither. Harry, however, followed his gaze.

"I think I've passed."

"I haven't tasted it yet."

Harry sat down opposite him.

Draco raised the cup to his lips.

The tea was better.

"Acceptable," he said.

Harry smiled.

Draco's phone announced a message.

Hélène.

Found somewhere else?

Draco looked at the screen.

Across the table, Harry was looking for the spoon he had just put down beside his own plate.

Draco pointed it out.

"Oh. Thanks."

He typed:

Still considering my options.

The reply came almost immediately.

The hotel or the tea room?

Draco locked his phone.

"Everything all right?" Harry asked.

"Hélène is being a nuisance."

"She does that."

"With remarkable regularity."

Harry laughed.

Draco poured more tea.



Chapter 3: White Tea

Hélène was waiting outside her building in South Kensington when Draco arrived. He lowered the car window, checked his watch, then looked at her.

"What happened?"

"Good morning to you too."

"You're early."

"Yes."

"Has the time changed?"

Hélène opened the door.

"If you carry on, I'll go back inside and do this properly."

She settled beside him with a bag far too large for a Saturday morning. Draco waited for her to pull her scarf clear of the door before closing it.

"Have you brought luggage?"

"I'm working."

"For how long?"

"I don't know. It depends how many questions you ask."

The driver pulled away.

Hélène regarded him with interest.

"You came to pick me up."

"We were going to the same place."

"You still came to pick me up."

"I can ask him to stop, if you'd prefer."

She settled the bag on her lap.

"No, I'm very happy."

Draco adjusted his cuff. Hélène began looking for something. She took out a pencil case, her phone, two receipts and a small tin of mints.

"You could have chosen a bag you can find things in."

"I can find things perfectly well."

She put the pencil case back. Draco waited.

"What are you looking for?"

"My accreditation."

He indicated the outer pocket, where the end of a lanyard was hanging out. Hélène looked. She retrieved the pass.

"How did you know?"

"It was visible."

She slipped the lanyard over her head and freed the hair caught beneath it.

"Very observant."

Draco turned towards the window.

"Potter's already there," he said.

Hélène looked up.

"Did he text you?"

"He sent the times yesterday."

"Just the times?"

"What else should he have sent?"

She opened the tin.

"Nothing. Want one?"

"No."

"Are you sure? You're a bit..."

"I'm perfectly all right."

Hélène put a mint in her mouth. The silence lasted two streets.

"I met someone interesting this week," she said.

Draco looked at the bag.

"Your pass wasn't lost, Hélène."

"That's not what I meant."

"Do go on."

She settled more comfortably in her seat.

"A researcher. Neville Longbottom."

"Longbottom?"

"Do you know him?"

"The name. I think he works with one of the research teams."

"He does."

"And where did you meet him?"

"At a project meeting."

Hélène had begun speaking to people about compounds found in cannabis and their possible use in treating sports injuries. So far, Draco had received three versions of the idea, two complaints about slow replies and one message asking whether a particular director always wrote like that. He did.

"He knows a great deal about the botanical side," she went on. "And he asked good questions."

"A new experience for you."

"You'd have enjoyed it. We spent fifteen minutes discussing exactly what I meant by one word."

"Which one?"

"'Promising.'"

Draco inclined his head.

"It is a word that invites considerable abuse."

"You'd like him very much."

"I'm beginning to consider it."

Hélène folded her arms.

"But then he made a joke."

Draco waited.

"About roots."

He went on waiting.

"I'm not repeating it."

"You brought it up."

"It was very bad."

"Then why do you remember it?"

Hélène looked out of the window.

"Because he explained it."

Draco smiled.

"And then he did it again," she added.

"The explanation?"

"The joke."

"Perhaps he thought you'd understand it this time."

Hélène gave a short laugh. Draco watched her.

"You laughed."

"It was nerves."

"Naturally."

She picked up her phone.

"Anyway, we're going to speak again."

"About roots?"

"Draco."

He looked out at the street again. For a few minutes, Hélène told him what she wanted to take to the next meeting. Draco listened, asked two questions and was accused of imitating Neville, although he considered both questions relevant. When they arrived, she was still defending an expression he found vague.

✦ ✦ ✦

The warm air of the aquatic centre hit Draco as soon as they stepped through the doors. He stopped. Hélène was already taking off her coat.

"It's hot."

"It's an indoor pool."

"I noticed."

"You can take your coat off."

"I intend to."

She took it before he had finished deciding where to put it.

"I'll leave it with mine."

"Don't crease it."

Hélène looked at him.

"Hélène Marguerite," Draco added.

"Oh. So it's serious."

She folded the coat with conspicuous care. Draco followed her down the corridor, watching people who appeared to know exactly where they were going. Hélène greeted two, stopped to speak to a third and ended up introducing him to a man who shook his hand while looking at his own phone. Draco decided not to like him.

"I need to sort something out first," Hélène said. "You can go up to the stands."

"I can wait."

"I'll be a while."

"How long?"

"I don't know."

He looked down the corridor.

"Where's Potter?"

Hélène smiled. Draco raised an eyebrow.

"It's a perfectly reasonable question."

"He's getting ready."

"I didn't ask what he was doing."

"I can try to find out the exact room, if you like."

Draco held out his hand.

"My ticket."

She gave it to him.

"Don't argue with anyone while I'm gone."

"Your requests cover rather a lot."

✦ ✦ ✦

Draco found an acceptable seat in the stands. He sat down, laid the programme across his knees and surveyed the pool. The view was good. There were too many people, but that appeared to be part of the arrangement. He checked the times.

His phone vibrated.

Are you here?

Draco replied:

Yes.

A few seconds later:

Where?

He looked up.

Harry was on the other side, near a passage leading to the athletes' area. He was wearing a training T-shirt, holding his goggles and searching for something among the spectators. Draco raised a hand.

Harry saw him. He smiled. Then he pointed towards a staircase at the side. Draco hesitated only long enough to establish that no one was watching his decision.

He stood.

✦ ✦ ✦

"You came," Harry said as he approached.

"You invited me."

"I know."

Harry seemed rather pleased with how the system worked. Draco looked at the goggles in his hand.

"Hélène's busy."

"She told me she was coming to work."

"And she's left me on my own."

"You've managed well."

"It's early yet."

Harry laughed. His hair was dry this time, though not much improved. He seemed attentive to several things at once: the conversation, the movement behind Draco, someone passing through the door. A man called him. Harry raised a finger to indicate he was coming.

"I need to get back."

"Of course."

"See you afterwards?"

Draco adjusted his sleeve.

"I imagine so."

Harry looked at him for a moment.

"I'm glad you came."

Draco could hear water, voices, a distant whistle.

"I hope the interview's better this time."

Harry smiled.

"I'll do my best."

He walked away, but looked back before going through the door. Draco stood there for another second. Then he went upstairs.

✦ ✦ ✦

Hélène arrived a few minutes before the race. She sat beside him and sighed.

"There."

Draco handed her the programme.

"Was something wrong?"

"Someone needed an answer yesterday and only thought to ask today."

"A popular practice."

"I should charge for it."

She searched the page for Harry's name.

"Which lane?"

Draco told her.

Hélène looked at him.

"I was reading," he explained.

"I didn't say anything."

She opened a bottle of water. Two men behind them began discussing the swimmers. One confused Harry's name with someone else's. Draco turned his head slightly. Hélène rested a hand on his arm.

"No."

"He's wrong."

"He'll survive."

The man carried on talking. Draco tightened his grip on the programme.

When Harry appeared, the conversation ceased to interest him. He was familiar and, at the same time, slightly different from the man who had occupied Harry's kitchen that morning. Draco watched him adjust his goggles, roll his shoulders and wait. Beside him, Hélène closed the bottle.

The race began.

Draco leaned forward.

For a while, he had a fairly clear sense of who was where. Then the movements seemed too fast, the water obscured important details, and a man two rows down stood up.

"Sit down," Draco said.

Hélène caught his arm.

"He's about to-"

"He's in the way."

The man sat. Hélène leaned forward too. Draco tried to watch Harry and the swimmer beside him at the same time. He couldn't decide whether one was ahead of the other.

"Come on," Hélène said softly.

Draco didn't reply. Near the finish, she tightened her grip on his arm.

"Come on, Harry."

He was perfectly aware that Potter couldn't hear her. He was also aware that he didn't want her to stop. When they finished, both looked up at the results.

Harry had come second. Hélène let go of his arm.

"Good race."

Draco examined the numbers.

"It was close."

"It was."

Behind them, the man with the wrong name offered an opinion. Draco turned. Hélène tugged at his sleeve.

"Don't spoil a good morning."

✦ ✦ ✦

They waited until they could see Harry afterwards.

Hélène had one last thing to sort out, leaving Draco beside a coffee machine he refused to consider an option. Harry appeared with wet hair and a bag over his shoulder.

"Well?"

Draco put his phone away.

"The man behind us should never have been allowed in."

Harry stopped.

"Was it that bad?"

"Your race was good. His analysis wasn't."

Harry smiled.

"Did you like it?"

"You nearly caught the other one at the end."

"Nearly."

"And the time-"

Harry interrupted him with a laugh.

"I meant did you enjoy yourself."

Draco looked at him.

"There were moments."

"Good."

Hélène appeared down the corridor.

"You finished strongly," she told Harry.

"I wish I'd started better."

"You can think about that later. Have you eaten?"

Harry looked at Draco.

"She asks that every time."

"Because every time you say 'in a minute'."

"In a minute," he said.

Hélène folded her arms. Draco considered the conflict with interest.

"Now I understand your assessments of his discipline."

She pointed at Harry.

"He does it to annoy me."

"I was answering."

"You were repeating an answer you already know annoys me."

Harry started laughing. Hélène turned to Draco.

"Don't encourage him."

"I haven't done anything."

"You have an expression."

He adjusted the coat over his arm.

"I would like to eat somewhere with chairs."

Harry lifted his bag.

"So would I."

Hélène started walking.

"Excellent. Settled."

✦ ✦ ✦

They found a table at a nearby restaurant.

Harry sat beside Draco, and Hélène took the chair opposite. She slipped the lanyard over her head, put her pass in her bag and opened the menu.

"I'm not working now."

"So I can order anything?" Harry asked.

She didn't look up.

"Yes."

"Even-"

"Harry, I don't choose your lunch."

Draco looked at him.

"Do you do this often?"

"She gets annoyed every time."

Hélène closed the menu.

"Because it wasn't funny the first time."

Draco remembered Neville. He smiled. She saw him.

"No."

"I haven't said anything."

Harry looked between them.

"What?"

"Hélène's met someone," Draco said.

"Draco."

"A researcher."

"She's interested in a project, Potter. A very promising project."

Hélène stretched her foot beneath the table. Draco moved his leg. Harry smiled.

"What researcher?"

She gave Draco a look before answering.

She spoke about the project for a while, uninterrupted this time. Harry asked different questions from Draco's, closer to the situations Hélène encountered at work, and the conversation changed pace.

Draco listened. She seemed pleased to have something concrete to discuss. When she disagreed with one of Harry's ideas, he wasn't offended; he explained what he had meant, and she thought for a few seconds before answering.

Lunch arrived. Hélène stole a chip from Draco's plate.

"You have chips," he said.

"They're still hot."

Harry pushed his own plate towards the middle.

"You can have some of mine."

Hélène thanked him and took another of Draco's. He looked at them both. Harry started laughing.

"It's a deliberate choice," Draco informed him.

"I know," Hélène said.

Over lunch, Harry told a story about a trip on which she had insisted she knew the way to the hotel.

"I did," Hélène said.

"We ended up at a different one."

"The same chain."

Harry lowered his fork, laughing. Draco looked at her.

"You did that in Paris."

Hélène sighed.

"Once."

"You practically live in Paris when you're in France."

"I don't live in all the hotels."

Harry turned to Draco.

"How did you find it in the end?"

"I asked someone."

"After I suggested it," she said.

Draco stared at her. Hélène drank some water.

✦ ✦ ✦

When lunch was over, Hélène checked her phone and looked pleased. Draco knew that expression.

"What?"

"We've managed to arrange the next meeting."

"With Longbottom?"

"Yes."

Harry picked up his coat.

"The one with the roots?"

Hélène looked at Draco. He spread his hands.

"You told the story over lunch."

"You didn't have to tell the part about the joke."

"It was the best part."

"It was the worst."

Harry was still smiling when he turned to Draco.

"Will you come to the next competition?"

Draco stopped adjusting his cuff.

"That depends on the date."

"I'll send it to you."

"And the time."

"I'll send that too."

Hélène put her phone away.

"Very organised, Harry."

"I'm trying to make it easy."

Draco put on his coat.

"I haven't confirmed anything yet."

"I know," Harry said.

The three of them walked towards the exit. Hélène took Draco's arm while Harry went ahead to hold the door.

"It was a good morning," she said.

Draco looked at Harry, waiting by the street.

Then at his friend.

"Apart from the spectators."

"Obviously."

She squeezed his arm. He didn't pull away.



Chapter 4: Oolong

Hélène arrived seven minutes early for the meeting. She thought it important to acknowledge when she made an effort.

Neville Longbottom, however, was already in the room. He had three folders open on the table, a glass of water and a pencil behind his ear. He stood when she came in and went to fetch a chair that did not need fetching, since there were five others.

"This one's better," he explained. "The other one sinks."

Hélène put down her bag.

"During the meeting?"

"Gradually. You only notice when you're already looking up at everyone."

She sat in the chair he indicated. Neville took off his jacket and hung it over the back of his own chair. Then he began rolling up his shirtsleeves. Hélène opened her notebook. Found the page, and read the first question. Had to read it again.

"I got your comments," he said.

"I wanted to start with..."

Neville waited. She looked at the paper.

"The population we're proposing to study."

"Good. I think it's still too broad as well."

Hélène looked up. His expression was quite different from the one he had worn while explaining the chairs. She pulled the notebook closer.

"I don't want to put people with different conditions together and then pretend the results answer the same question."

"I agree."

"In your message, it sounded as though you didn't."

Neville searched for one of the sheets.

"Here?"

She pointed. He read it.

"That's badly written."

Hélène had prepared a response to that part. She looked at him.

"It is."

"I meant we need to choose the condition before we finalise the criteria. I've written it as though I'm proposing we leave everything open."

She examined the sentence again.

"That's how I understood it."

Neville crossed out a line and made a note in the margin.

"Better fix it."

Hélène watched the pencil for a few seconds. Then she turned the page.

✦ ✦ ✦

Forty minutes later, they had reduced an idea that appeared to encompass everything to a question that encompassed rather less. Hélène wasn't entirely satisfied. Neville seemed to be.

"This way we know what we're trying to find out," he said.

"I knew what I was trying to find out before."

"You had four things."

"Related things."

"Yes."

"You agree with me and still keep contradicting me."

Neville smiled.

"I'm trying to do it politely."

She went back to the notes. There was a good side to narrowing it down. She could now see the work she would need to do before proposing any study involving athletes. There was also an irritating side: Longbottom was right about two of the four things.

"We can keep these as questions for future research," she said, marking the paper.

"We can."

"I'm not abandoning them."

"I noticed."

He slid another sheet across the table. Hélène took it.

Neville waited for her to read it, then added:

"At least the project's starting to put down roots."

She looked up.

He was smiling. Hélène laughed before she could help it. Neville looked pleased.

"Because of the botanical side," he explained.

"I got it."

"Of course."

He picked up his pen, looked at her and smiled again. Hélène returned to the text.

Five minutes later, finding a task they hadn't yet assigned to anyone, Neville said:

"This one still needs someone to help it grow."

She put down her pen.

"Isn't that the same joke?"

"It's a variation."

"A very small one."

"It's still developing."

Hélène laughed again. That was a mistake.

✦ ✦ ✦

By the time they finished, lunchtime had been over for nearly an hour. Hélène closed her notebook and began gathering her papers. Neville was searching the table for something. He lifted one folder. Then another. She watched him for a few seconds.

"The pencil's behind your ear."

Neville reached for the wrong side. Hélène indicated the other. He found it.

"Thank you."

"Couldn't you feel it?"

"I suppose I got used to it."

He put the pencil away. Hélène placed her notebook in her bag. Neville opened a folder again.

"We just need to decide when to pick this up."

She checked her phone and found two possibilities the following week. He consulted his diary. They agreed on a day.

"Good," Neville said. "That gives the idea time to..."

Hélène raised a finger. He stopped.

"Don't finish that."

"You don't know what I was going to say."

"Take root?"

Neville was silent. She closed her bag.

"Was I right?"

"Possibly."

"Then don't finish it."

He picked up his jacket, still smiling.

"You laughed before."

"Twice. I was generous."

"I thought it was working."

"It worked. It's had its moment."

Neville nodded with a seriousness that lasted until they reached the door.

"I'll give it some time to mature."

Hélène turned. He raised both hands.

"That was the last one."

✦ ✦ ✦

The café on the corner had a free table by the window. Neville looked at the menu outside.

"I'm hungry. Would you like something to eat?"

Hélène examined the choices. There was soup, sandwiches and a tart that looked good.

"I have something on later."

"So do I."

Neither mentioned a time. They went in. Neville let her choose her chair. Hélène settled beside the window and put her bag next to her. He sat opposite.

"This one doesn't sink," he said, testing his chair.

Hélène smiled.

"We're making progress already."

They ordered food. For a few minutes, they carried on discussing the project. Then the waiter brought water, Neville thanked him and asked:

"Did you always want to study medicine?"

Hélène pulled her napkin out from under the cutlery.

"Not exactly."

"What did you want to do before?"

"I had several ideas."

He waited. She unfolded the napkin over her lap.

"Someone said I wouldn't be able to."

Neville tilted his head slightly.

"Study medicine?"

"Yes."

"And you decided to do it?"

"Not immediately."

He looked at her. Hélène sighed.

"Almost immediately."

Neville began to smile.

"It's rather a long course of training to win an argument."

"My best friend makes that observation with unnecessary frequency."

"Is he wrong?"

She picked up her glass.

"It was my choice."

"I didn't say it wasn't."

Hélène drank some water. So did Neville. She put down her glass.

"I was good at the subjects I needed. I liked studying. It wasn't an absurd decision."

"It doesn't sound absurd."

"You have an expression."

He tried to get rid of it. He didn't entirely succeed.

"I was just thinking I'd have chosen a quicker way."

Hélène looked at him for a few seconds. Then she laughed. Neville relaxed in his chair.

"Did you tell them?" he asked.

"What?"

"That you'd managed it."

Hélène opened her mouth. Closed it again. He waited.

"There have been opportunities," she replied.

"More than one?"

"Over the years."

Neville laughed. Hélène tried to remain serious, but his laugh was a problem. It took over his whole face and seemed to require company.

"You'd get on very well with Draco," she said.

"The company's director of business development?"

"The very same."

"I haven't met him yet."

"When you do, don't discuss my education."

"We can agree on something else."

"Good."

"Plants."

Hélène narrowed her eyes. Neville picked up his glass before she could reply.

✦ ✦ ✦

The food arrived. Neville had ordered a sandwich and received something tall enough to require planning. He stared at his plate. Hélène picked up her soup spoon.

"You look worried."

"The photograph didn't show how tall it was."

He tried to get hold of the sandwich. A lettuce leaf slipped out and fell onto the plate. Hélène lowered her eyes to her soup. Neville put the lettuce back and tried again. Another leaf fell out.

"You could use the cutlery," she suggested.

"It's a matter of principle now."

Hélène knew that phrase very well. She waited Nwhile eville managed to lift the sandwich and take a bite, but had to put it straight back on the plate. He chewed carefully. Swallowed.

"Good," he declared.

Hélène laughed. He pointed at her.

"You thought that was funny."

"You didn't make a joke."

"Even better. Less work."

Hélène was halfway through her soup before she realised Neville was eating more slowly so they could keep talking. She spoke about a patient who had asked an unexpected question, leaving out anything that could identify her. He told her about a presentation during which he had spent several minutes explaining the wrong graph before discovering that everyone was looking at the next slide.

"Nobody told you?" she asked.

"One person tried."

"And you?"

Neville grimaced.

"I asked them to wait until I'd finished."

Hélène put down her spoon.

"No."

"Unfortunately."

She started laughing. So did Neville, though he still seemed to feel something at the memory.

"I was very well prepared," he explained.

"For the previous graph."

"Exactly."

The soup was finished. So was the sandwich. Hélène checked her watch. She could still stay. Neville collected the lettuce that had escaped during the battle.

"Dessert?"

She looked at the display.

"The tart looks good."

"We could share."

Hélène examined the portions.

"We could order two."

Neville followed her gaze.

"Good point."

✦ ✦ ✦

The tart wasn't as good as it looked. Hélène tasted it, paused and tried it again. Neville waited.

"Well?"

"The pastry's good."

He looked at the filling.

"A diplomatic answer."

"I'm trying."

Neville took another bite.

"I think it's good."

Hélène stared at him.

"You like it?"

"I do."

She pushed her plate towards him. Neville looked from the tart to her face.

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

He drew the plate closer.

"You could order something else."

"I'm not starting an investigation."

Neville lowered his eyes to the tart. Hélène noticed his smile.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Longbottom."

He looked up.

"You could tell the pastry chef he can't make a decent tart. It worked on you."

Hélène was still for a moment. Then she started laughing. Neville smiled, pleased.

"That was a good one," he said.

She pointed her fork at him.

"Don't spoil it."

He nodded and ate the tart.

✦ ✦ ✦

Outside, Hélène had to wrap her scarf twice around her neck against the wind. Neville waited beside her. He was wearing his jacket and holding his folded coat over one arm.

"Aren't you going to put that on?" she asked.

He looked at the coat.

"Yes."

He put it on. Hélène adjusted the bag on her shoulder. For a few seconds, they stood outside the café, though both already knew which way they needed to go.

"I enjoyed the meeting," Neville said.

"So did I."

"I think we found a good question."

"We did."

He nodded. Hélène waited. Neville looked at the café window, then at her.

"I enjoyed lunch too."

She smiled.

"Despite the tart?"

"I liked the tart."

"Yes. I must remember that when you recommend anything."

Neville laughed. Someone passed between them and the window. They moved a little closer to the wall.

"Would you like to have dinner with me?" he asked.

Hélène looked at his face. There was no open folder, no diary, no question about criteria.

"I would."

His smile came before his reply.

"Good."

"But I'm choosing dessert."

"I can live with that."

She took her phone out of her bag. They agreed on a day. Neville had to check a commitment, and Hélène found she already had the evening free. She put her phone away.

"Settled, then."

"Settled."

He looked about to add something. Hélène raised an eyebrow. Neville smiled.

"It wasn't about roots."

"Good."

She began walking. She had taken three steps when she heard:

"But you laughed."

She turned. Neville was still outside the café.

"Twice," she said.

He raised two fingers, acknowledging the number. Hélène walked on. By the corner, she was smiling.

Chapter 5: Earl Grey

Harry found Draco standing in the middle of the sitting room, staring at a chair.

"What's wrong?"

"I have a conference call at ten."

Harry checked the clock.

"That's still an hour away."

"I know."

"And the chair?"

Draco indicated the open computer on the table.

"I need somewhere suitable."

Harry looked at the table, which had room for the computer, a folder, the phone and the cup Draco had arranged.

"That looks fine."

"The bookcase is directly in front of me."

"Yes."

Draco waited. So did Harry.

"Potter, there is a photograph of you holding a fish."

Harry looked at the bookcase.

"Ron caught it."

"It looks very pleased with the situation."

"Take it down, then."

Draco went to the bookcase and removed the frame. Behind it was a small medal. Draco looked at Harry.

"That can stay," Harry said.

"I wasn't proposing to dismantle the bookcase."

Harry folded his arms. Draco returned to the computer. He sat down, examined the screen and stood again.

"The chair's too low."

"I can get one from the kitchen."

"That would be better."

Harry went to fetch it. When he returned, Draco had moved the computer.

"No reflection from the window now," Harry observed.

"That was the intention."

They positioned the chair. Draco sat. Harry watched him for a few seconds.

"Now it looks like a meeting."

"It is a meeting."

"I know. Before, it looked like you were investigating the chair."

Draco opened the folder.

"I need quiet between ten and eleven."

"All right."

"It may run a little past eleven."

"All right."

Harry went to the bookcase and replaced the photograph facing the wall. Draco looked up.

"You could put it away."

"You're talking on the phone. The fish won't even hear."

✦ ✦ ✦

At ten fifteen, Harry went into the kitchen for water. The door to the sitting room was almost closed. Draco was speaking on the phone, the proposal open on his computer, a pen in his other hand.

"Exclusivity on those terms is of no interest to us."

Harry opened the fridge. He waited until Draco finished a sentence before closing it. There was a pause. Then:

"We're discussing a partnership, not handing every commercial decision over to you."

Harry took a glass. He knew that voice, but had never heard it applied to anything that entirely justified its seriousness. Draco listened to someone's reply.

"We can review the term. The territory needs to remain as set out in the proposal."

Harry filled the glass and left by the hall. When he returned, approaching half past eleven, Draco was still at the computer, but no longer speaking. The phone was back in its cradle. Draco had a hand against his forehead. Harry stopped at the door. Draco lowered his hand.

"Finished?"

"Finished."

"Did it go well?"

Draco closed a window on the screen.

"We made progress."

Harry came in.

"It sounded like it."

"You heard?"

"When I got water. I wasn't listening in."

Draco nodded. Harry picked up a magazine from the sofa.

"I liked the part about the partnership."

Draco looked at him.

"Which part?"

"When you said they wanted to decide everything."

"They did."

"You explained it without sounding like you were trying to start an argument."

Draco leaned back.

"I don't try to start arguments."

Harry looked at the turned photograph. Draco followed his gaze.

"The photograph was a separate matter."

Harry smiled.

"You were very good."

Draco straightened the folder on the table.

"You heard less than a minute."

"I liked that minute."

It took him some time to find the pen beside the computer. Harry sat on the sofa and opened the magazine.

✦ ✦ ✦

Hélène arrived at four twenty. Draco opened the door and checked his watch. She raised a finger.

"No."

"I haven't said anything."

"Your face has."

She came in, took off her coat and draped it over his arm.

"Don't crease it."

Draco stared at her. Hélène was already heading for the sitting room. Harry appeared in the hall.

"Hi."

She greeted him and pointed towards the kitchen.

"Is there tea?"

"I'm making some."

Draco hung up the coat.

"Which one?"

Harry turned.

"Yours."

"How long—"

"I'm timing it."

Hélène looked between them.

"You've managed to establish a protocol?"

"It was necessary," Draco replied.

"It was a long conversation," Harry said.

She left her bag beside the sofa.

"I can imagine."

When Harry returned with the tray, Hélène was examining the table.

"Were you working here?"

"I had a meeting."

"And the renovations?"

"They continue to exist."

She picked up a cup.

"A worrying answer."

Draco poured the tea. Hélène tasted it.

"That's good."

Harry looked at Draco. He denied him the satisfaction of an immediate reply.

"It's better," he said at last.

Harry smiled and sat down. Hélène drank a little more.

"I'm having dinner with Neville on Friday."

Draco set down the pot. Harry looked up. She looked at them both.

"What?"

"Nothing," Draco said.

"You put that down as though I'd announced an acquisition."

"I'm trying to establish whether there will be slides."

Hélène crossed her legs.

"No."

"So it's dinner," Harry said.

"That's what I said."

Draco picked up his own cup.

"Did he choose the place?"

"We're still deciding."

"You rejected the first option?"

Hélène looked at him. Harry began to smile.

"I didn't reject it."

"You suggested another."

"It's a joint decision."

"After you explained why the first one was wrong."

She drank her tea. Draco nodded, satisfied.

"Where did you have lunch?"

Hélène told him.

"The tart wasn't good," she added.

"Did he choose the tart?" Harry asked.

"I did."

Draco raised his eyebrows. Hélène pointed her cup at him.

"Appearances were deceptive."

"Naturally."

"He ate mine."

Harry seemed to find this pleasant information. Draco seemed to find more material.

"At least you've established a division of labour."

"He liked it."

"You should have told him he couldn't eat two portions," Draco suggested. "He might have decided to take a course."

Hélène laughed. Then stopped.

"Neville made a similar joke."

Draco went still. Harry looked at him.

"That must be a compliment."

"For one of us," Draco replied.

✦ ✦ ✦

Hélène stayed for a second cup. She spoke more about the meeting, complained about a form and asked Harry about something he had promised to sort out. Harry said he already had. She looked doubtful. He took out his phone and showed her. Hélène examined the screen.

"Good."

"You could look less surprised."

"I can try next time."

As she left, she refused Draco's help with her coat, then asked him to free the hair caught beneath the collar. He did.

"Don't turn it into an interview when you meet Neville," she said.

"I haven't asked anything inappropriate."

"You asked whether there would be slides at dinner."

"A legitimate possibility."

Hélène adjusted her scarf. Harry opened the door. She said goodbye to both and went down. Draco waited until she reached the street. When he closed the door, Harry was still in the hall.

"Want to go out for dinner?"

Draco looked at him.

"Today?"

"Today."

"Had you already planned something?"

"I have now."

Harry smiled. Draco examined his shirtsleeve.

"I could change."

"So could I."

✦ ✦ ✦

Harry had chosen a restaurant Draco had never visited. It was small, the tables were well spaced, and there was enough light to read the menu without resorting to a phone. Draco considered that a promising start. A waiter took their coats. Harry waited for him to sit.

"How did you find this place?"

"I came once. Thought you'd like it."

Draco looked at the table.

"Why?"

Harry picked up the menu.

"It's quiet. The food's good. And you seem to like places where things belong somewhere."

Draco examined the cutlery.

"That's a perfectly reasonable preference."

"I know."

He wasn't sure he liked being so easy to observe. They chose their food. Harry asked the waiter for a recommendation and accepted it. Draco asked two questions before deciding. Once they were alone, Harry rested his forearms on the table.

"You do that at work too."

"What?"

"Ask something, listen, then ask something much more specific."

"That's how one obtains information."

"Yes. I generally find out afterwards that I should have asked the second question."

Draco smiled. Harry noticed. This time he didn't comment. They talked about a trip Harry had taken, a restaurant Hélène recommended despite never managing to find it, and the company. Draco explained part of that morning's negotiation. Harry asked questions. Some were simple. One made him pause before answering.

"That's the issue," Draco said.

Harry seemed pleased to have found the issue. The food arrived. It was good. Draco said so. Harry smiled as though he had helped prepare it.

✦ ✦ ✦

They returned to Fulham later than Draco had expected. Harry switched on a sitting-room lamp and left his keys on the small table. Draco picked up the coat he had left on the sofa. The fish photograph was facing forwards again.

"You put it back."

Harry followed his gaze.

"The meeting's over."

Draco examined the picture. Harry was wet, smiling, holding an unimpressively sized fish. Beside him, a red-haired man looked considerably more pleased.

"Was it an important occasion?"

"For Ron."

"And he asked you to hold it?"

"He wanted a photo."

Draco looked at Harry.

"You were completely soaked."

"I fell in."

"How?"

Harry smiled. Draco sat down.

"Potter."

"I thought I could step from one boat to the other."

Draco closed his eyes. Harry began to laugh.

"You don't need to do that. I know."

"You're a professional swimmer."

"I was dressed."

Draco opened his eyes again.

"That doesn't explain your inability to stay inside a boat."

"Ron said the same thing."

He told the rest of the story and, by the end, Draco was laughing. He tried to stop when he realised Harry was watching him. He couldn't. Harry sat beside him.

"You should have seen his face," he said.

"I can imagine."

Draco still wore a small smile when he turned. Harry was close. He was looking at Draco's eyes with an attention that made Draco wait for the rest of the story. It didn't come.

"What is it?"

Harry took a moment to answer. Grey wasn't usually a colour that excited him. But close up, there was a blue in Draco's eyes he hadn't noticed before, a darker shadow near the edge, something golden that might have come from the lamp. His eyelashes caught the light too. Harry reached out and gently brushed a finger over the lashes of one eye. Draco blinked. Harry looked at his fingertip.

"What?" Draco asked, amused.

Harry looked up and gave a small smile.

"I don't know. I couldn't resist checking whether you've got a hidden pot of gold dust."

"Oh."

Draco touched his own lashes and examined his finger. He grimaced.

"You're right. The gold simply won't come off."

Harry laughed. His hand returned to the sofa, close to Draco's. Neither stood up. After a while, Harry said:

"I liked going out with you."

Draco looked at him. He already knew dinner had been good. He also knew Potter wasn't asking about the restaurant.

"So did I," he replied.

Harry smiled. Draco stayed where he was.

Chapter 6: Jasmine Tea

"Is this an introduction?" Draco asked.

Hélène held the phone between shoulder and ear while trying to open a cupboard.

"It's a drink."

"With Longbottom."

"He drinks too."

"You're being evasive."

"And you're making an invitation rather tiring."

She took out four wine glasses. Looked at them. Put two back and chose others.

"Harry can come," she added.

"I can ask."

"Ask without explaining that it's a board meeting."

"I didn't say that."

"Yet."

Draco was silent for a moment.

"What time?"

Hélène told him.

"I'll be there."

She ended the call, examined the glasses and changed one again.

✦ ✦ ✦

Draco and Harry arrived together, seven minutes early. Hélène opened the door holding scissors. Draco looked at the blade.

"Bad time?"

"Flowers."

She kissed both their cheeks, took their coats and stepped aside. Harry looked around the sitting room.

"It's lovely."

"Thank you."

Draco examined the coffee table. Then the armchair. Then Hélène.

"Where are the clothes?"

"Put away."

"All of them?"

She closed the door.

"Would you like to check?"

Harry looked at the armchair.

"You have a clothes chair too?"

Hélène pointed at him.

"You see?"

Draco took off his gloves.

"I see two people perfectly capable of using a wardrobe who have chosen not to."

"It's not a choice," Harry said. "It just happens."

"Exactly," Hélène agreed.

Draco handed her his gloves.

"Touching."

Harry went to look at the books. Draco approached the flowers, freshly arranged in a vase on the table.

"You've moved these."

"They were in the other room."

"And now they're here."

"A feature of objects that can be carried."

She trimmed the end of a stem and picked it up. Draco smiled.

"Does Longbottom like flowers?"

Hélène put down the scissors.

"Draco."

"A reasonable question, given his profession."

She moved the vase a few inches. Harry looked over a book.

"It looked fine there."

Hélène stopped.

"Did it?"

"It did."

Draco folded his arms. She returned the vase to its previous position.

"If either of you comments, you can leave."

✦ ✦ ✦

Neville arrived on time, carrying a bottle of wine and a smile that appeared as soon as he saw Hélène. She looked at the bottle.

"You didn't have to bring anything."

"I know. But I did."

"Thank you."

She took it and leaned in to greet him. Neville did the same, a little late, and both had to adjust direction. Hélène laughed.

"Come in."

He removed his coat and looked around. Draco stood by the fireplace. Harry closed the book. Hélène introduced them. Neville shook Draco's hand.

"Good to meet you."

"Likewise."

"Hélène's told me a lot..."

She turned her head. Neville noticed.

"About the company," he finished.

Harry smiled. Draco looked at his friend.

"Naturally."

Neville greeted Harry and, for a moment, seemed to reconsider something.

"You're..."

"I am," Harry said.

"Right."

Neville nodded.

"I watched your race at the weekend."

Harry looked pleased. Hélène raised her eyebrows.

"You did?"

"Yes."

"You didn't say."

Neville looked at her.

"You were working there, weren't you?"

"I was."

"I was going to ask how it went, but we ended up discussing the tart."

Draco took a glass from the table.

"The tart seems to have occupied a significant part of the date."

Hélène took the glass back.

"I haven't served anything yet."

✦ ✦ ✦

She offered wine, water and a drink in a small bottle whose label Draco examined before returning it.

"I brought it from France," she explained. "It's excellent."

"What is it?" Harry asked.

Hélène explained. Harry nodded with the politeness of someone still not entirely sure what he would receive. She poured a little into four glasses. Draco tasted it. Harry tasted it. So did Neville. Hélène waited.

"Well?"

Harry looked at his glass.

"Different."

Draco put his down. Neville swallowed.

"It's very..."

Hélène raised her chin.

"Aromatic."

"Yes," Neville agreed. "Very."

She drank some.

"You need to try it again."

Draco looked at her.

"Why?"

"Because the first sip can be a surprise."

"It was."

"Well, that's over now."

Harry took another sip. His face remained almost unchanged. Hélène turned to Neville. He looked at the bottle of wine he had brought.

"I think I'd prefer wine."

She was silent for a moment.

"You've barely tried it."

Neville examined his glass.

"It was enough to have a preference."

Harry coughed. Draco reached for his own glass, but didn't drink. Hélène looked at him.

"You'd prefer wine too."

"I'd prefer not to argue with you before everyone's sat down."

She collected the glasses.

"All right."

Draco settled at one end of the sofa. Harry sat beside him. Neville chose the armchair that had held clothes forty minutes earlier. Hélène opened the wine.

"My mother likes that drink very much," she informed them.

Draco leaned back.

"Does she know you serve it to guests?"

Hélène gave him a look. Harry lowered his head. Neville smiled.

✦ ✦ ✦

The conversation began with work. Draco asked which team Neville belonged to. He answered, mentioned two people and discovered Draco knew one.

"I worked with her on a negotiation last year," Draco said. "Her questions changed a substantial part of the proposal."

Neville nodded.

"She tends to spot things."

"She did."

Hélène brought a platter and set it on the table. Draco waited until she sat before continuing.

"Are you expanding the collection of varieties?"

"We're reorganising part of it first."

"I thought you mainly needed to increase the amount available."

Neville shook his head.

"Quantity doesn't solve everything. We need to be sure which characteristics we're comparing."

Draco picked up his glass.

"But some of the information must already be established."

"Some. Other things seem established until you try to reproduce the result."

Hélène smiled into her wine. Draco noticed.

"That's not an objection to the question," Neville added. "We've been asked that too."

"I didn't take it as one," Draco replied.

Harry took something from the platter.

"He likes people to be specific."

Neville looked at Draco.

"So do I."

Hélène raised her glass.

"I know. I had a meeting with you."

Neville smiled. She turned to Draco.

"I spent a morning narrowing down a perfectly good idea."

"An idea with four questions," Neville said.

"Related questions."

Draco looked interested.

"How much did you narrow it down?"

Hélène looked between them.

"No."

Harry began laughing. She pointed at him.

"And don't you encourage them."

✦ ✦ ✦

Neville leaned forward for a napkin and knocked his knee lightly against the table. The water in Hélène's glass moved. He caught the vase before it needed catching.

"Sorry."

"It's all right," she said.

Neville released the vase and examined the flowers.

"Have you just arranged these?"

Hélène took a moment.

"Yes."

"They're lovely."

Draco looked at her. Hélène avoided his eyes.

"Thank you."

Neville settled back.

"Must be careful not to nip our conversation in the bud."

Harry laughed. Hélène closed her eyes. Neville looked at her with satisfaction.

"He laughed."

"Harry doesn't know the history."

"What history?" Harry asked.

"Don't ask," Hélène said.

Harry turned to Neville.

"What was the first one?"

Neville sat up in the armchair. Draco raised his glass. Hélène put a hand to her forehead.

✦ ✦ ✦

By the end of Neville's repertoire, Harry had laughed twice. Hélène looked personally betrayed.

"Some of those weren't even jokes," she said.

"That assessment wasn't unanimous," Neville replied.

Harry agreed. Draco examined his wine.

"Potter laughs easily."

Harry turned to him.

"You like that when I'm laughing at yours."

Draco went still for a second. Hélène lowered her hand. Neville looked at them both. Harry took another sip. Draco put down his glass.

"Mine generally have a point."

Neville laughed. An open, unexpectedly loud laugh. Draco looked at him and began to smile. Hélène pointed.

"There. You've encouraged him too."

"I'm not responsible for his reaction."

Harry rested his shoulder against Draco's.

"A convenient position."

Draco stayed where he was.

✦ ✦ ✦

The platter emptied. Hélène went to fetch more food. Neville stood.

"Can I help?"

"No need."

He remained by the armchair. Hélène reached the door and glanced back.

"Actually, could you bring the plates?"

Neville began collecting them. Harry picked up the empty glasses. Draco gathered the napkins. Hélène looked at the small procession forming behind her.

"Everyone doesn't need to come."

Harry stopped. Draco handed him the napkins.

"She changes the instructions during execution."

Neville passed them with the plates.

"I noticed."

Hélène heard.

"I can hear you too."

In the kitchen, she opened the fridge. Neville left the plates on the worktop.

"There's a dish you like," he said.

She looked at him.

"I like several."

"I know. But you mentioned at the café that you almost never find a good version here."

Hélène stopped searching.

"You remembered that?"

"I did."

He named the dish. She smiled.

"Yes."

"I found a restaurant that makes it. I haven't tried it, so I can't promise anything."

"After the tart, I appreciate the qualification."

Neville laughed.

"We could look at the menu before deciding."

Hélène took a platter from the fridge.

"We could."

Draco appeared at the door holding the bottle.

"This one's finished."

She took it.

"There's another over there."

He looked at Neville. Then at Hélène. He went to fetch the wine.

✦ ✦ ✦

When they returned, Harry had found a photograph on a shelf.

"Is this you?"

Hélène came closer.

"Yes."

Draco looked over his shoulder.

"Where did you find that?"

Harry indicated the shelf. In the picture, Hélène and Draco were much younger, dressed for an occasion that had clearly required an effort. She was laughing. He was looking at someone outside the frame with an unpleasantly familiar expression. Neville came over.

"What happened?"

"He didn't like the music," Hélène said.

"It wasn't the music," Draco replied.

She smiled.

"That's what you said."

"Because it was a sufficient explanation."

Harry looked at Draco's face in the picture.

"You already did that."

"Did what?"

"That expression."

Hélène took the photograph.

"He was seventeen and had very firm opinions about how everyone else should spend the evening."

"Your opinion was that we could get a lift with someone who couldn't drive."

"He could."

"Not that evening."

Neville laughed. Hélène looked at the picture again.

"We got home safely."

"In a taxi."

"A perfectly satisfactory solution."

Harry smiled. Draco took the frame from her hand and put it back on the shelf.

✦ ✦ ✦

It was later than anyone had expected when Harry checked his watch. Draco noticed.

"You need to leave early tomorrow."

"I do."

Hélène got up for their coats. Harry followed Draco into the hall, still telling a story he had begun in the sitting room. Draco listened, occasionally shaking his head. Neville picked up his glass.

"I should probably..."

Hélène returned with the other two's coats. She looked at him.

"You can stay a little longer, if you like."

Neville put down his glass.

"I'd like to."

Draco heard. He accepted his coat without comment. Hélène recognised the effort.

"Thank you for coming."

Harry kissed her cheek.

"It was lovely."

"Despite the drink?"

He hesitated. Draco put on his coat.

"Don't give her an opening."

Hélène opened the door. Draco leaned in to say goodbye. She smoothed a fold in his collar.

"It wasn't creased," he said.

"A little."

"Goodnight, Draco."

He smiled. Neville said goodbye from the sitting room. Harry and Draco went downstairs together. Hélène closed the door.

✦ ✦ ✦

She listened to their footsteps for a few seconds. Then she returned to the sitting room. Neville had already collected two plates.

"You don't have to tidy up."

He looked at what he was holding.

"I've picked them up now."

Hélène took the plates and left them on the table.

"I can do it later."

Neville nodded. She sat on the sofa and took off her shoes, sighing. He looked at the armchair. Then at the empty place beside her.

"May I?"

Hélène moved a cushion.

"You may."

Neville sat down. The room seemed larger without four people speaking at once. He looked at the photograph on the shelf.

"I liked your friends."

"Even Draco?"

"Especially once I understood he wasn't trying to sack me."

Hélène began to laugh. Neville smiled.

"He wasn't trying to do that."

"Good. I brought wine."

She laughed again. He waited.

"Harry liked the jokes," he added.

Hélène turned towards him.

"You were doing so well."

Neville raised a hand.

"I'm just putting it on record."

She settled more comfortably on the sofa.

"Two people laughing doesn't make a good joke."

"What's the required number?"

"I don't know."

"We could investigate."

Hélène picked up the cushion she had moved and put it between them. Neville looked at it.

"Is that an answer?"

"It's a warning."

He smiled. They were silent for a while. Hélène reached for the bottle.

"More wine?"

Neville raised his glass.

"A little."

She poured. As she set down the bottle, he asked:

"Can I know what that drink was now?"

Hélène looked at him. Neville took a sip of wine. She began explaining.

Chapter 7: Rose Tea

Hélène had chosen the restaurant after examining four menus. Five, if she counted the place she had rejected before finishing. When Neville arrived, she was by the entrance, her coat over her arm. She wore a deep-blue silk dress and small earrings that caught the light when she turned. He stopped before her. Smiled.

"Hi."

"Hi."

Neville went on looking. Hélène raised her eyebrows.

"What?"

"You look beautiful."

She smiled before answering.

"Thank you. So do you."

He looked down at his shirt, as though checking. Hélène reached out to straighten a point of his collar caught beneath his jacket.

"There."

Neville looked at her again.

"Now?"

"Now."

A waiter approached for their coats. Hélène gave the reservation name. Neville followed her to the table. Before they sat, she asked:

"Do you like it?"

He looked around.

"I do."

"It's quieter on this side."

"It seems so."

"And the tables aren't so close together."

Neville pulled out her chair. Hélène sat. He took the seat opposite.

"Have you been before?" he asked.

"Not yet."

Neville smiled.

"So we're finding out together."

Hélène opened the menu.

"I did my research."

✦ ✦ ✦

The dish that had prompted her choice of restaurant was unavailable. Hélène received the information with a brief pause.

"It's unavailable today?"

"We changed the menu this week," the waiter explained.

She looked at the page. Then at him.

"It was still on the website."

"I'll ask them to update it."

The waiter suggested another dish, explained how it was prepared and gave them more time to decide. Hélène read the description. Neville examined his own page.

"Was that the one you wanted?" he asked.

"Yes."

"The other one sounds good."

"It isn't the same."

He looked up.

"No. But it sounds good."

Hélène returned to the menu. There were other options. She knew there were other options. She could read them perfectly well. Still, she had chosen the place for a particular reason and would now have to choose something else. Neville turned a page.

"I think I'll have this."

She looked.

"Do you like that?"

"Yes."

"It's quite heavy."

"I'm hungry."

Hélène closed the menu for a moment. Neville waited.

"Have you decided?" he asked.

"I'm deciding."

He nodded. A waiter passed nearby. Neville made a small gesture to call him. Hélène caught the edge of her menu.

"I haven't finished."

Neville lowered his hand.

"Sorry. I thought you'd closed it because you knew."

"I closed it to think."

He looked at the menu in his hands.

"Right."

Hélène opened hers again. Read two more descriptions. Chose the waiter's first suggestion. When he returned, she ordered. Neville placed his own order and asked how long it would take. Hélène looked at him.

"I'm hungry," he repeated.

She began to smile.

"You mentioned it."

"It's still true."

✦ ✦ ✦

The wine came first. Neville waited until both glasses had been filled before raising his.

"To dinner."

Hélène touched her glass to his.

"Without slides."

He laughed.

"Did Draco ask again?"

"No. But he made it sound a very reasonable possibility."

Neville took a sip.

"Did he like meeting me?"

Hélène studied him.

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"You corrected one of his assumptions and were still welcome to remain in my sitting room. It's a good sign."

Neville smiled.

"I thought he was a bit..."

"He was."

"I haven't said what yet."

"You don't need to."

Hélène drank some wine. Neville leaned back, more at ease.

"Harry seemed to enjoy the jokes."

She put down her glass.

"Don't start."

"I was thinking perhaps—"

"Neville."

He smiled. Hélène tried to keep a stern expression. It was difficult. He wore a dark jacket, his shirt open at the collar. One sleeve had ridden up a little when he reached for his glass. Hélène looked at his hand, then his face. Neville noticed the change.

"What?"

She rested an elbow on the table.

"I'm trying to decide whether you're about to ruin a compliment."

He was quiet for a moment.

"You were going to compliment me?"

"I was."

Neville put down his glass.

"I can be quiet."

Hélène laughed.

"You look very handsome."

His smile appeared slowly.

"Thank you."

"And the shirt's a good choice."

Neville looked at her. This time he didn't need to check the shirt.

"It was a very deliberate decision."

Hélène raised her glass again.

"I'm glad."

✦ ✦ ✦

The conversation no longer required either of them to search for a subject. Neville asked about her family. Hélène explained where they lived, how they divided their time between the two countries and why her mother never accepted a short answer about work.

"Does she ask if you're eating?" he said.

"Yes."

"My gran does too."

"Do you answer?"

"I do."

Hélène waited. Neville smiled.

"Sometimes I send a photo."

"Does that work?"

"Depends on the photo."

She laughed. He explained he had learnt to cook a few things so he wouldn't have to receive instructions over the phone with dinner already on the hob.

"And she trusts you now?"

"With some things."

"Which?"

"Potatoes."

Hélène looked at him.

"That doesn't sound like much."

"It took time to earn."

The food arrived. Neville moved back to let the waiter set down his plate and thanked him with an enthusiasm Hélène considered thoroughly deserved after so many references to hunger. She examined her own dish. Tasted it. Neville waited.

"Good?" he asked.

Hélène nodded. Took another mouthful.

"Very good."

He smiled.

"Good."

She glanced at the menu the waiter was collecting from the next table. Then at Neville.

"I was a little annoyed."

"I noticed."

"I needn't have chosen this place if they didn't have that dish."

Neville cut his food.

"But you like this one now."

"I do."

"And I like mine."

She looked at him. Neville looked up.

"I'm not saying you can't be annoyed."

Hélène put down her fork.

"You just wanted to order."

"Very much."

She began laughing. Neville smiled and returned to his food.

✦ ✦ ✦

At dessert, he recommended a combination Hélène regarded with suspicion.

"Have you tried it?" she asked.

"Yes."

"And liked it?"

"Very much."

She read the description.

"I don't know."

"You should try it."

Hélène looked up. Neville appeared to find nothing worrying in his suggestion. She agreed. When their plates arrived, he watched with an attention that began to amuse her before the first spoonful. Hélène tasted it. Paused. Neville leaned forward a little.

"Well?"

She looked at her plate again.

"I don't like it much."

He looked surprised.

"Did you try both parts together?"

Hélène looked at the spoon.

"Yes."

"Perhaps you didn't have enough of this."

He indicated part of the dessert. She took another spoonful in the suggested proportion. Tasted it. Neville waited. Hélène put down her spoon.

"No."

He examined the dish.

"It's a very good combination."

"For you."

"Yes, but the contrast—"

Hélène began to smile. Neville stopped.

"What?"

"Your expression's reminding me of someone."

He looked at her.

"Who?"

"Me. Serving pastis."

Neville went quiet. Then he lowered his head and laughed. Hélène pushed her plate a few inches towards him.

"You can defend the combination by eating it."

"Would you like something else?"

"Yes."

Neville nodded.

"No recommendations from me."

"At least today."

He pulled the plate closer. When the waiter approached, Hélène ordered a dessert she knew. Neville didn't interfere. She watched him approvingly.

"Very good."

"I'm learning."

✦ ✦ ✦

They stayed after the plates were cleared. Neville had coffee. Hélène ordered tea. The restaurant was beginning to empty, though quiet conversations continued at other tables and staff crossed the room. She rested her face on one hand. Neville told a childhood story about spending an entire afternoon waiting for an experiment to work, refusing to leave it.

"What were you trying to do?"

He explained. Hélène laughed before he finished.

"You thought it would work?"

"I was quite certain."

"And afterwards?"

"I stayed certain for far too long."

She shook her head.

"I can imagine."

Neville smiled. Hélène left her free hand on the table. He looked at it. Then reached out and rested his own over hers. The conversation paused. Hélène looked down at their hands. Neville neither squeezed nor pulled. She turned hers slightly, settling her fingers beneath his. When she looked up, he was smiling.

"You missed the end of the story," he said.

"I think I know."

"It didn't work."

"A surprise."

Neville laughed. His hand stayed over hers.

✦ ✦ ✦

Outside, Hélène put on her coat and let Neville free the hair caught beneath the collar. He did it carefully. She turned to thank him. They were too close to need to speak loudly.

"I enjoyed dinner," Neville said.

"So did I."

"Even the part where I tried to explain your dessert?"

Hélène smiled.

"That was very enlightening."

He grimaced. She touched the jacket sleeve showing beneath his coat. Neville looked at her hand. Then at her. Hélène moved a little closer. So did he. The kiss began carefully. Hélène released his sleeve to rest her hand on his chest, and Neville placed his at her waist. When they drew apart, he was still close. She smiled. Neville opened his mouth. Hélène raised an eyebrow. He stopped.

"What?"

"I'm waiting."

"I was going to say I enjoyed that too."

She laughed softly.

"You can say it."

"I enjoyed that too."

Hélène caught his lapel.

"Good."

She drew him closer. This time, they didn't talk first.

Chapter 8: Peppermint

The builder rang at nine forty-three with good news. Draco was in the kitchen. Harry had just put two slices of toast on a plate and was looking for the jam.

"Friday?" Draco asked.

Harry looked at him. On the line, the man explained what still needed finishing. Draco listened.

"And the kitchen?"

Another explanation.

"And the bathroom?"

Harry found the jam behind the teapot. He sat down.

"Right," Draco said. "I'll come round before then."

The man carried on. Draco looked at the window.

"No. I wanted to see it in person."

By the time he hung up, Harry had finished his first slice.

"Good news?"

Draco put down the phone.

"Apparently."

"When do they finish?"

"By Friday."

Harry looked down at his plate.

"This Friday?"

"That's what he said."

"Great."

Draco opened the tea tin. Harry picked up the second slice.

"You've been waiting for that."

"I still need to check a few things."

"Of course."

Draco put the leaves in the pot. There were several things to check. The bathroom finishes, the cupboard doors, the appliances. He wasn't simply going to accept the keys and discover the problems afterwards. Harry drank some water.

"So you'll move back at the weekend?"

Draco looked at him.

"If everything's ready."

"Right."

The kettle switched off. Draco poured the water. Harry checked the clock.

"We could have dinner before."

"We've already arranged Thursday."

"I know."

He picked up his cup.

"And after you go home?"

Draco stopped with the lid in his hand.

"After?"

"Dinner. We can carry on."

"Obviously."

Harry smiled. Draco put the lid on.

"I don't intend to sever all my relationships because the bathroom works."

"I'm glad I'm one of them."

He looked at Harry. Potter was still smiling. Draco went to fetch another cup.

✦ ✦ ✦

Hélène heard about the renovations during a call that had begun with another subject.

"Friday?" she repeated.

"According to the builder."

"That's good."

Draco swivelled the chair in Harry's study slightly away from the desk.

"There are still details."

"There will always be details."

"That's no reason to ignore them."

"You'll check."

"I intend to."

Hélène was silent for a moment.

"You sound less pleased than I expected."

"I'm waiting for confirmation."

"Draco."

"How was dinner?"

She laughed. He leaned back.

"So it was good."

"It was."

"The restaurant?"

"Good."

"The researcher?"

Hélène took a little longer.

"Him too."

Draco smiled.

"Did he tell any jokes?"

"A few."

"And you stayed?"

"I stayed."

The next silence contained something quite obvious. Draco looked at the open door.

"Hélène Marguerite."

She began laughing.

"What?"

"There's information missing."

"Would you like a report?"

"You offer extensive reports when they aren't needed."

"Neville is very..."

She stopped. Draco waited.

"Very what?"

"Good company."

His smile widened.

"A conservative choice of words."

"Would you like to discuss your move?"

Draco swivelled back to the desk.

"I need to work."

Hélène laughed again.

"Naturally."

✦ ✦ ✦

The visit to Mayfair offered no satisfactory reason to delay his return. Draco found the correct stone, doors that closed easily and a bathroom that no longer required imagination to recognise. He asked questions. The builder answered. He pointed out two small finishing touches. The man made a note.

"It'll all be ready by Friday," he repeated.

Draco looked at the kitchen. It was exactly as it should be. The proportions were right. So was the lighting. Nobody had left a mug beside the sink or a spoon somewhere absurd.

"I'll check again," he said.

The builder nodded with the expression of someone who had expected as much. Draco stayed a few more minutes. Then he returned to Fulham.

✦ ✦ ✦

Harry was in the sitting room when he arrived. Seated on the sofa, an open book in his lap and one leg tucked under him, he looked up.

"Well?"

Draco took off his coat.

"It's almost ready."

"Good."

"There are two finishing touches."

"Important ones?"

Draco hung up the coat.

"Finishing touches don't stop mattering because they're small."

Harry smiled.

"Right."

He returned to the room. The teapot stood on the table, an empty cup beside it.

"I made tea," Harry said.

Draco looked at the lid. It was in place. He sat. Harry closed the book with a finger between the pages.

"Would you like help taking your things back?"

"I didn't bring much."

Harry looked at the bookcase, where three of Draco's books occupied a space previously belonging to a medal. Then at the folder on the side table. Draco followed his gaze.

"That will fit in a bag."

"And the cup."

"The cup will be transported properly."

Harry laughed. Draco poured the tea. The room was quiet. From the kitchen came the faint hum of an appliance. Harry set his book aside and reached for his cup. For a while, neither returned to the subject of moving.

✦ ✦ ✦

After dinner, Draco went upstairs to answer some messages. When he came down, he found the door to the small garden open. Harry was outside, seated in one of two chairs by the wall. His phone rested on the table. He was still smiling at something. Draco stopped in the doorway.

"It's cold."

Harry turned.

"A bit."

He wore a jacket over his T-shirt. Draco looked at the phone.

"Something funny?"

"Ron rang. He found some old photos."

"With fish?"

Harry laughed.

"No fish."

Draco stepped outside and closed the door behind him. He pulled out the other chair.

"What of?"

"A trip we took years ago. There's one of me sitting on the floor, trying to teach something to a plant."

Draco looked at him.

"A plant."

"That's what Ron said. I don't remember that part."

"Were you drunk?"

Harry tilted his head, considering.

"Not exactly."

Draco waited. Harry smiled.

"That was when I tried cannabis."

Draco went quiet. Harry watched his face with evident interest.

"You're very surprised."

"I'm not."

"You stopped asking questions."

Draco settled into the chair.

"I was trying to understand the plant's involvement."

Harry laughed.

"I'll need to see the photo too."

"When was this?"

"Before all the travelling and competing. A long time ago."

Draco nodded slowly. Harry rested his head against the wall.

"It's not something I do now, Draco."

"I didn't ask."

"You were starting to organise the questions."

Draco folded his arms. Harry settled more comfortably.

"You're thinking something."

"I'm always thinking something."

"This looks very specific."

Draco looked at the garden. It was small, but pleasant. Harry had potted plants that appeared to have survived for reasons independent of his attention.

"I wasn't expecting it," he admitted.

"What? That I'd smoked?"

"Among other things."

Harry waited. Draco realised too late that he had offered an opening.

"What other things?"

"You could choose not to question everything I say."

"I could."

Harry kept looking. Draco sighed.

"You seemed very..."

He searched for a word that wouldn't give him away. Failed. Harry smiled.

"Very?"

"Put together."

Potter looked at his T-shirt.

"I wear clothes."

"In interviews."

"There too."

Draco turned towards him.

"You know perfectly well what I mean."

Harry seemed to consider this. Then he smiled differently.

"I think I do."

Draco looked back at the pots.

"I don't know why you're so pleased."

"You watched my interviews."

"They were on television."

"On your television."

Draco tightened his arms around himself. Harry looked at him.

"You're cold."

"I'm fine."

"Let's go in."

Harry picked up his phone, stood and waited. Draco could have remained seated on principle. He didn't.

✦ ✦ ✦

The sitting room felt especially warm after the garden. Harry went to close the kitchen door. Draco sat on the sofa and drew the throw from the back towards him, without yet deciding whether he intended to use it. When Harry returned, he looked at it.

"You can have that."

"I am having it."

Harry sat beside him. The throw settled over Draco's legs. For a few minutes, they discussed something he had said at dinner and a message Harry had received from Ron. Then Harry asked:

"Did you like me better before?"

Draco turned.

"Before what?"

Harry gestured towards the garden.

"The discoveries."

Draco looked at him. Harry seemed amused, but was waiting for an answer.

"I wasn't aware a comparison was under way."

"I'm asking now."

Draco adjusted a fold of the throw. He could think of several complaints. Some he had already made. Others had yet to find the right occasion. Harry continued waiting.

"You were easier to explain before," he said.

Potter began to laugh.

"And now?"

"Now I need more information."

Harry smiled. The distance between them had narrowed without Draco identifying when. He noticed Harry's hand resting on the sofa. The same hand that had touched his lashes a few days before. Harry followed his gaze. Then looked up at him.

"Can I kiss you?"

Draco went very still. Potter wasn't drunk. He wasn't holding a duvet. There was nobody else on the landing, no laughter coming from the bedroom. He was sitting close, waiting.

"Yes," Draco replied.

Harry moved closer. The kiss was more careful than Draco had imagined. He rested a hand on Harry's arm before realising he had raised it. When Potter drew back, he stopped far too close. Draco opened his eyes. Harry was smiling a little.

"All right?"

Draco looked at his mouth.

"You ask too many questions."

Harry began answering. He didn't finish. Draco put a hand behind his neck and drew him back.

✦ ✦ ✦

The throw ended up partly on the floor. Harry moved away just far enough to look at Draco. His hair was worse still. Draco ran his fingers through a lock and moved it to an equally unsuitable position. Harry smiled.

"It doesn't work."

"I noticed."

He left his hand where it was. For a while, they stayed close without seriously attempting to resume their earlier conversation. Then Harry looked at the throw.

"Still cold?"

Draco followed his gaze.

"Less so."

Harry gathered up the fallen end and spread it over them both. Draco watched.

"You'll pull it all to your side."

"I haven't even started."

"I'm anticipating."

Harry laughed. Draco settled a little closer. His phone vibrated on the table. He checked the screen. A message from the builder confirming Friday's appointment. Harry saw. He didn't ask. Draco left the phone where it was.

"Thursday's still on," he said.

Harry turned towards him.

"Dinner?"

"Yes."

"Still on."

Draco straightened the throw.

"And afterwards."

Harry smiled.

"Afterwards too."

He leaned in to kiss him again. Draco met his mouth before Harry had to cover the whole distance.

Chapter 9: Lady Grey

Ron's message arrived while Draco was examining a box. It stood open on the sofa, containing three books, a folder and room for several other things. Draco took out a book, looked at the cover and put it back.

"Ron and Hermione want to come round today," Harry said.

"Here?"

"Yes."

"For dinner?"

Harry read the rest.

"I think so."

Draco checked the clock.

"We can order food."

Harry put his mobile on the table.

"I thought of that."

Draco removed the folder.

"He's the commentator."

"Yes."

"I know who he is."

Harry smiled.

"And she works in public policy."

"You've told me."

"I was just..."

He stopped as Draco put the folder on the side table.

"Isn't that going?"

"I still need it."

Harry looked at the three books.

"Right."

The mobile vibrated again. He read the message, then looked up.

"He's asked me to buy champagne."

Draco went still for a moment.

"We'll get some."

Harry was already smiling.

✦ ✦ ✦

Ron arrived carrying two bags and an expression attempting to look casual. Hermione followed. Harry opened the door, looked at them and immediately glanced down at her hand. Hermione smiled. Ron sighed.

"You could have waited until we were inside."

Harry caught Hermione's arm.

"Finally."

"Harry," Ron said.

He hugged her, then Ron, tightly enough to make him lift the bags.

"Finally," he repeated by his ear.

"I heard you the first time."

Draco stood at the sitting-room entrance. Hermione stepped away from Harry and looked at him.

"You must be Draco."

"And you must be Hermione. Congratulations."

She thanked him, still smiling. Ron held out a bag.

"We brought dessert."

Harry took it and handed the other to Draco before taking their coats. Draco looked inside. Two bottles of wine.

"The champagne's chilled," he informed them.

Ron looked pleased. Hermione turned to him.

"You asked?"

"Thought it would be nice."

"You practically told him before we got here."

Harry hung up her coat.

"After five months, I thought the request probably had something to do with the ring."

Draco looked up. So did Hermione. Ron briefly closed his eyes.

"Five months?" she asked.

Harry stopped. Ron looked at him.

"Excellent start."

✦ ✦ ✦

In the sitting room, Hermione sat and held out her hand for Harry to see the ring. He took it carefully. Looked. Smiled again.

"It looks lovely."

"It does," she agreed.

Ron settled beside her. Draco fetched glasses. When he returned, Hermione was still looking at her hand. Ron watched with a satisfaction that made it quite difficult to reproach him for the delay. Harry managed.

"You bought it in May."

Ron accepted a glass.

"I did."

"It's October."

"I know how calendars work."

Hermione looked at him.

"I didn't know you bought it in May."

"It was a surprise."

"Apparently a very well-kept one."

Draco handed her a glass. Harry opened the champagne. Ron pointed at him.

"I wanted to do it properly."

"You said that in June."

"And I did."

Hermione leaned over and kissed his cheek.

"You did."

Ron smiled. Harry raised the bottle.

"Tell us, then."

✦ ✦ ✦

The proposal had happened the night before. Ron had booked a restaurant, confirmed the time, checked the ring and checked the pocket containing it. Then checked again.

"I thought he'd lost something," Hermione said.

"I hadn't."

"You kept patting your coat every five minutes."

Draco drank champagne.

"A discreet way to establish the object's continued presence."

Harry began laughing. Ron looked at them both.

"I was nervous."

Hermione rested a hand on his arm.

"I know."

"And she was late."

"I left work late."

"I know," Ron said, more quickly.

Draco looked at Harry, who seemed familiar with that change of tone.

"There was a meeting," Hermione explained. "We needed to finalise a proposal before submitting—"

Ron turned.

"Is this the version I heard at the restaurant?"

She stopped, then smiled.

"Perhaps."

"Because in that version I won't be proposing for another forty minutes."

Harry laughed so loudly he had to put down his glass. Hermione squeezed Ron's arm.

"Carry on."

He resumed. The restaurant was full. The table was good. So was the food. Ron had planned to wait until dessert.

"Had planned?" Draco asked.

"She started discussing a meeting next week," Ron said.

Hermione looked at him.

"And?"

"I realised if I waited for you to finish every subject, I'd have to renew the booking."

She opened her mouth. Closed it. Harry lowered his head.

"So I asked," Ron concluded.

Hermione began smiling again. The room grew quieter.

"Between the main course and dessert?" Draco asked.

"Between one meeting and another," Ron replied.

She tapped his arm. He took her hand.

"And she said yes."

Harry raised his glass.

"To you both."

Draco joined him. Hermione and Ron touched their glasses to theirs. Ron seemed very pleased to have reached that part of the story at last.

✦ ✦ ✦

The food arrived while Harry was asking about the previous plans. Ron immediately stood.

"I'll help bring it in."

"You never volunteer that quickly," Harry observed.

"I'm becoming more responsible."

Draco followed them into the kitchen. As they opened the containers, Ron looked at the worktop, then the teapot, then the plates laid out.

"Did you buy napkins?"

"I had napkins," Harry replied.

"Cloth ones?"

Draco picked up a serving dish.

"They were in a drawer."

Ron looked at him.

"And you found them."

"They weren't hidden."

Harry handed him another container.

"Draco likes things to be used for their intended purpose."

Ron considered this.

"Right."

Hermione called from the sitting room, asking whether they needed help.

"It's ready," Harry replied.

Ron took the plates. Draco carried the food. Harry followed with cutlery. Hermione stood to make room.

"Where shall we—"

Draco indicated the table. Ron looked at Harry. Harry smiled.

"That was here before too."

✦ ✦ ✦

For the first few minutes, they ate and revisited the proposal. Ron admitted he had considered doing it on a trip. Hermione pointed out that they spent months trying to find dates for a trip. He agreed. Harry revealed a plan involving a walk as well.

"It rained," Ron explained.

"We're in London," Hermione said.

"I know."

Draco poured more water.

"Have you thought about the size of the ceremony?"

Ron stopped with his fork halfway to his mouth. Hermione looked up.

"Not yet."

"There's a considerable difference between choosing a venue for thirty and two hundred."

"Yes," she said. "And first we'd have to decide who—"

Ron looked at Harry. Harry tried not to smile. Hermione was already counting on her fingers. Draco asked a question. She answered. Ron put down his fork.

"I asked yesterday."

They both looked at him.

"Could we finish dinner before choosing the chairs?"

Hermione was quiet for a moment, then picked up her fork.

"We could."

Draco returned to his food too. Harry leaned towards Ron.

"You'll need to repeat that sentence."

"I'm beginning to see that."

✦ ✦ ✦

The subject changed when Hermione explained why she had left work late. There was a proposal to help workers access information about their rights. Part of the team wanted extensive material. The rest wanted something short enough to use. Hermione had belonged to the first group.

"But they cut so much it lost important information," she said.

"Did you show it to anyone who'd need to use it?" Ron asked.

She looked at him.

"Yes."

"And?"

Hermione moved her food around.

"They said it was long."

Ron nodded. Draco looked interested.

"How long?"

She told him. Harry drank water. Ron looked at him.

"But you can't solve everything on one page," Hermione continued.

"Perhaps it isn't meant to solve everything," Draco said. "Perhaps it's meant to tell someone what to do next."

Hermione put down her fork.

"That's what we ended up doing."

"So the same material had two different functions."

"Yes, but some of the information—"

They began discussing what could remain in the main document. Ron leaned back. Harry helped himself to more food. Hermione noticed.

"What?"

"Nothing," Ron said.

She looked at Harry. He shook his head. Draco raised his glass.

"You were saying?"

Hermione continued. Ron leaned towards Harry.

"The chairs were only the beginning."

Harry laughed.

✦ ✦ ✦

After dinner, they returned to the sitting room. Ron opened dessert. Hermione slipped off her shoes and discreetly tucked them under her chair. Draco noticed and chose not to comment. Harry sat beside him on the sofa. There was less space between them than Ron apparently expected. He looked once, then at Hermione, who was examining dessert. Ron began handing out plates.

"How long are you staying?" he asked Draco.

"The work should be finished on Friday."

"Oh. You're renovating?"

Draco confirmed it. Harry took a plate.

"But he'll check first."

"It's necessary," Draco said.

Ron nodded.

"My sister spent three weeks getting them to fix a door that kept opening by itself."

"A cupboard door?" Draco asked.

"Her bedroom."

Draco raised his eyebrows.

"Considerably worse."

Ron seemed pleased to find understanding. Harry rested his plate on his knee.

"We're going out for dinner on Thursday."

Draco looked at him. Ron followed the movement.

"Right."

Hermione took a fork.

"And after the move?"

Harry and Draco began answering together.

"We'll keep—"

"There's no reason—"

Both stopped. Ron looked at dessert. Hermione nodded.

"Of course."

Harry smiled. Draco decided his dessert plate required more attention.

✦ ✦ ✦

Ron began recalling an old trip. According to him, there was a photograph somewhere nobody should have kept. Hermione insisted it was a good photograph. Harry said he needed to find it. Draco listened as all three disagreed about whose idea it had been to leave their accommodation in the middle of the night.

"Yours," Ron told Hermione.

"I wanted a walk."

"At one in the morning."

"The city was empty."

"So were we," Harry said.

Hermione began laughing. One story led to another. Harry leaned forward, remembering a detail.

"That was when you—"

Hermione pointed her fork.

"Harry."

He smiled. Draco looked between them.

"What?"

Ron was immediately interested. Harry hesitated, then looked at Draco.

"You asked about a few of my discoveries the other day."

Draco went quiet. Harry continued:

"That was the trip when I tried cannabis."

Draco looked at Ron. Ron raised his head.

"Why did you look at me?"

Harry started laughing.

"I didn't say anything," Draco replied.

"You didn't need to. It was a very complete look."

Hermione put down her plate.

"It was my idea."

Draco turned to her. Harry laughed harder. Ron opened a hand in Hermione's direction.

"Thank you."

Draco tried to reorganise the information.

"Yours?"

"Mine."

"I was expecting a different explanation."

Hermione crossed her legs.

"I noticed."

Harry wiped the corners of his eyes.

"She thought she needed to explain everything too."

"I'd done my research," Hermione said.

Ron pointed at her.

"That didn't mean you knew how."

"I didn't claim—"

"You did," both said.

Hermione looked at Ron, then Harry. Draco began smiling. Harry turned to him.

"I told you there was information missing."

✦ ✦ ✦

The evening ended with Ron searching for the coat Harry had hung by the door. Hermione found it first and handed it over. He looked at her hand once more. Smiled. Hermione noticed.

"It's there."

"I know."

"It won't disappear."

"I'm just looking."

Harry hugged them again. This time he didn't say "finally". Ron seemed grateful. Draco came to say goodbye.

"Congratulations again."

Hermione kissed his cheek. Ron shook his hand.

"You'll come to the wedding, won't you?"

Draco looked at Harry, who stood nearby with a hand on the door, smiling.

"If I'm invited," Draco replied.

Ron raised his eyebrows.

"I'm inviting you."

Hermione nodded.

"Details later."

Draco looked at them both.

"Then yes."

Ron smiled.

"Good. Now we just need to choose the chairs."

Hermione gave him a small push towards the stairs.

✦ ✦ ✦

Harry remained at the door until he heard his friends leave the building. When he turned, Draco was still in the hall.

"They liked you," he said.

Draco adjusted his cuff.

"Your friend has very firm opinions."

"I know."

"And Weasley isn't quite what I imagined."

Harry came closer.

"Worse?"

"More observant."

He smiled. So did Harry.

"You're coming with me," he said.

Draco looked at him.

"To the wedding."

"I was invited."

"I heard."

Harry put a hand on his waist. Draco let him. For a moment, Potter's expression grew quieter.

"I'm so happy for them."

"I noticed."

"He'd had that ring for months."

Draco smiled.

"You mentioned it."

Harry lowered his head, laughing. Draco touched his face. Potter looked up.

"What?"

"Nothing."

He kissed him. Harry drew him closer. When they parted, Draco glanced at the sitting room.

"We need to clear up."

"In a minute."

Draco looked back. Harry's hand was still at his waist.

"A dangerously frequent expression in this house."

"You know it by now."

Draco did. He stayed a little longer.

Chapter 10: Chamomile

Harry returned from the pool with damp hair and a paper bag beneath his arm. Draco sat at the kitchen table in a light shirt, sleeves rolled, reading the newspaper. There was a cup before him and another at Harry's place.

"You bought food," he observed over the page.

"Very good observation. I brought a few things for you to practise on."

Harry left the bag on the table and removed his coat. Draco folded the paper.

"From that bakery?"

"Good morning to you too."

"Good morning. From that bakery?"

Harry took out two loaves, a smaller parcel and a box. Draco watched closely.

"Their bread has excessive crust."

"You ate four slices yesterday."

"I was hungry."

Harry opened the box. Inside were two almond croissants. Draco looked at them, then Harry.

"Those are acceptable."

"What a relief."

Harry put one on his plate and fetched a knife. On his return, Draco was carefully removing a flaked almond from his shirtsleeve.

"You haven't started and you're already covered."

"The bakery has an adhesion problem."

Harry sat, smiling. The cup Draco had left for him contained coffee. Milk stood beside it in a small jug Harry didn't remember owning before that week. He helped himself without comment.

"Has Ron called?" Draco asked.

"Not yet."

"He must be reviewing the proposal."

"He's probably asleep."

"Five months with a ring in a drawer. I wouldn't rule out an evaluation meeting."

Harry laughed with his mouth full, and Draco pushed a napkin towards him. The phone rang before Harry reached it. Draco checked his own display.

"Finally."

He answered looking prepared to receive good news and explain why it was late.

"Yes?"

Harry buttered his bread.

"Today?"

The knife paused. Draco leaned back.

"Have all the fittings been checked?"

A pause.

"Including the bathroom?"

Harry looked up.

"The main one," Draco clarified, giving him a stern look although Harry hadn't spoken.

He listened a few more seconds.

"And the finish by the sitting-room window?"

Harry put down his knife.

"Right. Yes. Eleven."

Draco ended the call and set the phone beside his plate. He picked up his cup.

"The flat's ready."

"Great."

"So they say."

"You don't believe them?"

"The construction industry allows remarkably generous interpretations of 'ready'."

Harry checked the kitchen clock.

"Would you like me to come?"

Draco looked up.

"Didn't you have something to do?"

"Later."

"You don't need to."

"I know."

Draco sipped his tea. Harry waited.

"A second person might be useful," Draco conceded. "To check they haven't missed anything."

"You want me to find something wrong with the flat?"

"Potter."

"I can start with the main bathroom."

"Do you know anything about finishes?"

"I know when a wall's there."

Draco looked at him for two seconds. Then pulled his croissant plate a little closer.

✦ ✦ ✦

Hélène arrived at ten twenty, a bag on her shoulder and a small parcel in her hand. Harry opened the door.

"Is he ready?"

"He's choosing a coat."

"So he isn't."

She came in, kissed Harry's cheek and handed him the parcel.

"Your bowl."

Harry opened a corner of the paper. It was the bowl in which he had taken something to dinner at her flat.

"You didn't need to bring it."

"I did. It spent three days in my car. Yesterday it started making me feel dishonest."

Draco appeared in the hall. Hélène looked at his coat.

"That one."

Draco stopped.

"I didn't ask for an opinion."

"I've saved fifteen minutes."

She wore dark-blue trousers and a plum wool jumper. Her hair was carelessly pinned, a long strand loose beside her face. As she removed her scarf, an earring caught in it.

"Shit."

Harry reached out, but Draco was already beside her.

"Keep still."

"I am."

"You're pulling."

"Because I'm being strangled by an accessory."

Draco freed the earring, unwound the scarf and returned it.

"There."

Hélène touched her ear.

"Thank you. You could have done that without looking like a disappointed surgeon."

"You could have dressed without having an accident."

She smiled and went to the kitchen. Harry followed them.

"Coffee?"

"Yes."

"She hasn't time," Draco said.

Hélène sat in the chair he had just vacated.

"I have time for coffee."

Draco checked the clock. So did she.

"It's ten twenty-three."

"We need to be in Mayfair at eleven."

"Your flat isn't going anywhere."

Harry fetched a third cup. Hélène found the box on the table and lifted the lid. Half a croissant remained.

"Whose?"

"Mine," Draco said.

She broke off a piece.

"Ours now."

"Hélène Marguerite."

"Oh, no. The full name over three almonds."

Harry turned towards the cupboard. Draco saw his shoulders move.

"Laugh away, Potter. She'll steal your lunch when she's finished my breakfast."

"I returned a bowl," Hélène protested. "I came on a mission of restitution."

Harry set her coffee down. Hélène looked at Draco's cup, the milk jug, the two plates.

"You had breakfast together?"

"We're in the same house," Draco replied.

"An extraordinary geographical coincidence."

Harry sat on the worktop.

"The flat's ready."

"I know. I received a six-minute phone call about it."

Draco straightened his sleeve.

"Four."

"It felt like six."

Hélène sipped the coffee and grimaced. Harry reached for her cup.

"Is it bad?"

"Hot."

"You just watched me pour it."

"I was busy."

Draco pushed the rest of the croissant towards her. Hélène took another piece without asking. For a moment, all three remained in the kitchen: Harry against the worktop, Draco standing by the table, Hélène blowing on her coffee with the determination of someone expecting to defeat temperature. Her phone vibrated in her bag. She found it after removing a diary, a pencil case and a crumpled receipt. She read the message. Her smile arrived before she finished. Draco tilted his head.

"Longbottom?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"Nothing."

He held out his hand. Hélène moved the phone away.

"Have you lost your mind?"

"I asked what happened."

"And I answered."

Harry took the empty box to the bin. Hélène typed with both thumbs, deleted it and began again. Draco watched.

"For someone with time for coffee, you're very busy."

"I'm confirming a time."

"With such complex punctuation?"

She looked up.

"Draco, eat an almond."

Harry laughed. Hélène finished the message and put her phone away.

"I'm having lunch with him afterwards."

"Research?" Harry asked.

"That too."

Draco looked at her. She drank more coffee.

"Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

"As though you've just discovered an irregularity in an acquisition."

"I was only going to ask whether you'd chosen somewhere with chairs."

Hélène narrowed her eyes. Harry was immediately interested.

"Why?"

"Neville suggested a walk through a garden before lunch," she explained.

"And she rang to complain," Draco added.

"I didn't complain. I asked what shoes I should wear."

"For nine minutes."

Hélène put down her cup.

"You pay a lot of attention to the length of my calls."

"I've been suffering through them for years."

She took the last piece of croissant and stood. Passing Draco, she smoothed a fold in his coat collar, a quick gesture that didn't interrupt her speech.

"Let's see your marble, then. I need to be free by noon."

Draco looked at the collar she had adjusted.

"You need to cross the city by then."

"So you have an hour to suffer."

✦ ✦ ✦

The Mayfair flat was immaculate. From the start, this was an obstacle. The man overseeing the work opened the door and led them through the sitting room. Light entered through tall windows; the furniture was back in place; the surfaces were free of dust. Draco ran a hand along a shelf. His finger came away clean. Harry stayed near the window, looking at the street. Hélène left her bag on an armchair and surveyed the room.

"It looks lovely."

"Thank you," the man said before Draco could answer.

They inspected the bathroom. The tap worked. The water drained. There was no fault in the finish by the window. Harry crouched to examine a joint Draco had indicated.

"The wall's still there."

Hélène turned away very quickly. Draco waited for her to recover.

"I'd like to check the hot water."

The man turned on the tap. Shortly afterwards, Draco put his fingers in the stream. It was hot. Hélène rested a shoulder against the doorframe.

"My condolences."

Draco gave her a look. The man pretended not to hear. Once they finished, he explained the final details, handed over documents and left. The door closed behind him. Hélène crossed the room, picked up her bag and checked her wristwatch.

"I have to go."

"You've only just arrived," Draco said.

"I arrived forty minutes ago."

Harry looked at her.

"Where are you meeting Neville?"

Hélène named the garden and added:

"If it rains, I'll make him appreciate plants from inside a restaurant."

"Sounds fair."

She adjusted her bag and looked around once more.

"It really is beautiful, Draco."

He followed her gaze.

"Yes."

Hélène came close, briefly touched his arm and lowered her voice.

"You don't need to decide everything today."

Draco looked at her.

"I know."

"Good."

She moved away before he had to add anything. At the door, she kissed Harry's cheek.

"Look after him. He's suffering from a successful renovation."

"Is it serious?"

"For the patient, very."

"I am here," Draco said.

"I know, darling. That's what makes it so convenient."

✦ ✦ ✦

Neville stood by the garden entrance when Hélène arrived. His dark coat was open despite the wind. Seeing her, he slipped something into his pocket and smiled. She kissed him on the mouth. Neville kept a hand at her waist for a moment.

"The flat?"

"Ready."

"Did he like it?"

"He's still looking for a way not to."

Neville laughed. Hélène looked at the pocket where he had put the object.

"What was that?"

"The map."

"You've studied the route already?"

"A little."

She held out her hand. Neville passed it over. There were two pen marks and an arrow. Hélène looked up.

"You planned a walk."

"You said you needed to be back early."

She looked at the map again.

"That's very thoughtful."

Neville looked pleased.

"I also wanted to avoid passing the same flowerbed three times."

Hélène folded the paper and returned it.

"You nearly managed to accept the compliment."

"I can try again."

"It's artificial now."

He took her hand. They walked a few yards before Neville said:

"I thought of something about the samples."

Hélène turned, interested. He began explaining. She asked a question, then another, and interrupted his answer to disagree. Neville stopped beside a flowerbed.

"That isn't what I said."

"It was almost what you said."

"The 'almost' is doing quite a lot of work in that sentence."

Hélène opened her mouth, closed it and looked at him. Neville waited.

"All right," she conceded. "Explain it again."

He did. This time, Hélène listened to the end, then squeezed his fingers.

"Yes. That could work."

Neville smiled.

"Are you surprised?"

"Don't spoil it."

He drew her a little closer as they walked. Hélène didn't check her watch.

✦ ✦ ✦

Draco stood in the middle of the sitting room when Harry returned from the kitchen.

"Your fridge is switched off."

"I know."

"I thought you might want water."

Draco looked at the windows. A faint sound reached them from the street, muffled by the glass. Everything else was silent. Harry came closer.

"Will you bring your things today?"

"Perhaps some."

"I can help."

Draco surveyed the room.

"There aren't many."

Harry knew the two suitcases, coats, shoes and objects that had gradually appeared in Fulham.

"Right."

Draco looked at him.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You made a face."

"I'm trying to work out whether I can carry a suitcase that's light because it only contains essentials."

Draco took another step closer.

"You're very funny today."

Harry smiled.

"So are you."

Draco's gaze dropped to his mouth. Harry kissed him before he found an answer. It didn't last long. Draco caught the front of his coat, and Harry's hand remained behind his neck even after they parted.

"Dinner with me tomorrow?" he asked.

Draco raised an eyebrow.

"We've been having dinner together."

"I want to take you to dinner."

Draco went quiet. Harry gave him time to understand.

"Out," he added, simply for the pleasure of his reaction.

"I'm familiar with the concept of a restaurant, Potter."

"Good. So?"

"Where?"

Harry laughed.

"You can say yes first."

Draco straightened Harry's collar, though nothing was wrong with it.

"Yes."

Harry's smile made dignity harder to maintain. Draco released the fabric.

"But I would like to know where."

"I'm choosing."

"You've only just invited me and you're already being difficult."

"Tomorrow at eight."

"Harry."

"I'll pick you up."

Draco looked around, then back at him.

"That would be rather laborious."

"Why?"

"I'll still be in Fulham."

Harry made no attempt to disguise his smile.

"Then we'll leave together."

Draco picked up the documents and went to the door.

"And you can tell me the name on the way."

Harry followed.

"I can."

Draco stopped with his hand on the handle.

"Can, or will?"

Harry kissed him again. The folder was trapped between them. Draco made a small protesting noise, switched it to his other hand and pulled Harry back when he tried to move away.

Chapter 11: Vanilla Black Tea

By twenty to six, Draco was dressed. By ten to six, he no longer was. Hélène, settled in an armchair in the Mayfair sitting room, heard a door open and close for the third time. She went on leafing through the magazine she had found on the table. When he reappeared, she looked over the page.

"I preferred the other one."

Draco stopped.

"You haven't even seen the other one."

"I saw it when I went to the bathroom."

"You said you were in a hurry."

"I am. You're the one who asked me to wait."

He glanced at the clock. Dinner was still two hours away. Hélène followed his gaze and smiled. Draco adjusted a cuff.

"This shirt was hanging in the wrong wardrobe."

"What a terrible experience."

"They haven't put everything back in order yet."

"I'd sue someone."

He ignored her and went to the mirror above the fireplace. Hélène turned a page. She had dropped in to return a folder Draco had left at her flat and give an opinion on the position of two armchairs. The armchairs were still where they had been. Draco, meanwhile, seemed determined to change everything else.

"Do you know the restaurant?" he asked.

Hélène looked up.

"Which one?"

Draco told her.

"I do."

"And?"

"They serve food."

He turned.

"Hélène."

"Good food, Draco. You'll survive."

She returned to the magazine. Draco stayed in front of the mirror for a few more seconds.

"I'm not worried."

"Good."

"I only asked whether you knew it."

"And I answered."

He ran his fingers through his hair. Hélène slowly lowered the magazine.

"Touch it any more and you'll have to wash it again."

Draco took his hand away.

"Don't you have somewhere to be?"

"Yes. Which is why I'm waiting for you to give me my earring back."

He looked at the table beside the mirror. On it lay two small earrings, a box and the scarf she had taken off when she arrived. Draco picked up one of the earrings.

"This one."

"It took you fifteen minutes to decide?"

"I was doing other things."

Hélène got up to collect it. She wore a dark green dress beneath her open coat, with boots reaching just below her knees. Her hair hung loose over her shoulders. Draco looked at her more closely.

"Where are you going?"

"His place."

He raised an eyebrow. Hélène fastened the first earring.

"You can lower that."

"I haven't said anything."

"Your face has no discretion whatsoever."

She tilted her head to put on the other one. Draco studied the dress.

"Is it new?"

"No."

"I haven't seen it."

"You don't keep an inventory of my clothes."

He opened his mouth. Hélène pointed at him.

"Don't answer that."

Draco smiled. She checked her earrings in the mirror, picked up her bag and looked at his shirt again.

"That one's good."

"I know."

Hélène smoothed the lapel of the coat he had left on a chair.

"Harry will think so too."

Draco took the coat from her hands.

"You're very sure of yourself."

"I'm hungry. There's a difference."

He walked her to the door. Before leaving, Hélène turned and adjusted a lock of his hair with two fingers. Draco drew his head away.

"You've just told me to stop touching it."

"I know what I'm doing."

"A statement that preceded some of the worst incidents of my adolescence."

She laughed, kissed his cheek and opened the door.

"Have fun."

"You too."

Hélène was already in the corridor when he added:

"And call if you need anything."

She looked back.

"All right."

Then she smiled.

"You too."

✦ ✦ ✦

Harry opened the door in Fulham wearing a dark blue shirt. Draco took a second longer than he would have liked to greet him. Harry noticed that second.

"Hi."

"Hi."

Draco stepped inside and took off his gloves. Harry's coat lay over the arm of the sofa. There was a small pile of post on the table, with a glass of water beside it. Everything else looked excessively tidy. Draco looked towards the kitchen.

"Have you cleaned?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Harry picked up his coat.

"Because it was dirty."

Draco looked at him again. The shirt fitted his shoulders very well.

"You could have told me," Harry said. "I'd have picked you up in Mayfair."

"I had to come and collect a few things."

Harry looked at his empty hands. Draco put his gloves in his pocket.

"Later."

Harry smiled and switched off the sitting-room light.

✦ ✦ ✦

Neville opened the door with a tea towel over his shoulder. Hélène looked at the towel. Then at him.

"Are you cooking?"

"Yes."

"I could have brought something."

"You brought wine."

"Because you told me to."

"It worked very well."

She came in, handed him the bottle and took off her coat. Neville hung it by the door. When he turned back, Hélène caught the front of his shirt and kissed him. The towel fell. Neither of them immediately tried to retrieve it.

"Will dinner burn?" she asked, still close to his mouth.

Neville glanced towards the kitchen.

"Not yet."

"A worrying answer."

He bent to pick up the towel, took her hand and led her in. The flat had full bookshelves, a wooden table by the window and plants in places Hélène would have reserved for other things. Two pans stood on the hob. It smelt good. She stopped in front of the sideboard. On it sat a ceramic frog the size of a small watermelon. It was green and yellow. It was smiling. It wore a crown. Hélène stared. Neville opened a drawer.

"Would you like some water before the wine?"

"I'd like to understand the frog."

He followed her gaze.

"Ah."

"'Ah' doesn't help."

Neville took a corkscrew from the drawer.

"My gran gave it to me."

Hélène looked at the creature again.

"Does she like you?"

Neville laughed.

"Very much."

"All right."

She moved a little closer. Small red stones were glued to the crown.

"He used to be in her garden," Neville explained. "When I moved, she thought I needed something for the house."

"And chose the monarch of the amphibians."

"Exactly."

Hélène touched the crown with one finger. One of the stones was crooked.

"You do know he's hideous."

"Yes."

She turned her head.

"And you've left him here?"

"I like seeing him when I come home."

Hélène looked at him for a moment. Then back at the frog.

"I'm going to need wine."

Neville put two glasses on the table.

"He's frightened other people before."

Hélène turned quickly.

"Which people?"

Neville paused with the corkscrew in his hand. She waited. He began to smile.

"My aunt."

Hélène picked up an empty glass.

"Good. A sensible woman."

✦ ✦ ✦

At the restaurant, Harry gave his name and the maître d' led them to a table by the window. Draco surveyed the room as they walked. The lighting was good. The tables were sufficiently far apart. There was no loud music. Harry pulled out a chair and sat down after him. Draco opened the menu. Harry opened his own. For a few seconds, they read in silence. Draco looked up. Harry was already watching him.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Are you waiting for an assessment?"

Harry rested his menu on the table.

"Maybe."

Draco looked round once more.

"You chose well."

Harry smiled. Draco returned to his menu before the smile caused him any further difficulty. When the waiter arrived, Harry ordered the wine. When the bottle was presented, he checked the label carefully and tasted the small amount poured into his glass. Draco watched it all. Harry nodded to the waiter. Then, when they were alone, he let out a breath. Draco put down his menu.

"Were you nervous?"

"A bit."

"About the wine?"

Harry ran his thumb along the stem of his glass.

"About you watching the wine."

Draco blinked. Then laughed. So did Harry.

"I wasn't going to set you an exam."

"You asked about the finish on my bread this morning."

"The crust is an objective matter."

"Of course."

Draco took a sip. It was good. This was becoming an irritating habit. They ordered their food. Harry talked about training, about a teammate who had forgotten his goggles and tried to blame three different people, including one who wasn't in the country. Draco wanted to know which of the three defences had been most convincing.

"The man in Australia."

"A commonplace alibi, but effective."

Harry laughed and began another story. Draco listened. Harry talked with his hands more than he had noticed before. When he grew enthusiastic, he leaned closer to the table; sometimes he interrupted himself to remember a name, screwing up his whole face with the effort. At one point, he took a piece of bread while still talking and dropped a crumb on his own sleeve. Draco brushed it off. Harry looked at his fingers.

"Thank you."

"You need supervision."

"Apparently."

Draco left his hand near Harry's for a moment before drawing it back. When the food arrived, Harry waited for his first reaction. Draco tasted it. Harry watched his expression.

"It's good," Draco said.

"You sound surprised."

"I'm beginning to think you prepared for this."

Harry lowered his eyes to his plate.

"I asked a few things."

Draco put down his cutlery.

"Who?"

Harry hesitated. Draco stared at him.

"Hélène?"

"She's known you longer."

"What did you ask?"

"Whether there was anything you didn't eat."

Draco waited. Harry smiled.

"She said, 'In a restaurant? Very little. In your kitchen, he'll say everything.'"

Draco closed his eyes for a second.

"I'm going to ring her."

"Now?"

He picked up his glass.

"Tomorrow."

Harry went back to eating, still smiling.

✦ ✦ ✦

Hélène found the plates without opening more than two cupboards. Neville, at the hob, glanced over his shoulder.

"You can leave those. I'll get them."

"I've got them already."

"Then the cutlery's in the first drawer."

She opened it. The cutlery was sorted into small compartments. Hélène looked at the worktop. A set of kitchen scales stood beside a bowl, and there were three containers of prepared ingredients.

"Do you cook the way you work?"

Neville stirred the pan.

"What do you mean?"

"You look as though you're going to record the results."

"Only if it turns out very badly."

She took two knives.

"I'd have started before weighing everything."

"I thought you might."

Hélène looked up.

"Why?"

Neville turned off one of the burners.

"You'd have decided an amount looked sufficient."

"It often is."

"Often."

She carried the plates to the table. Neville followed with the serving dish and stood beside her as she moved a small plant pot to make room.

"That can go on the windowsill."

Hélène picked it up. Neville held out a hand.

"Careful. It's wet underneath."

Too late. She looked at the small stain on her palm. Neville offered her the towel. Hélène wiped her hand.

"You could have warned me sooner."

"You could have waited for me to finish the sentence."

She stared at him. Neville held her gaze, smiling a little. Hélène handed back the towel.

"Your frog's watching."

"He agrees with me."

"Naturally. An authoritarian regime."

Neville laughed and pulled out her chair. Dinner was good. Hélène said so twice, the second time towards the end. Neville looked pleased on both occasions. When he got up to clear the plates, she caught his wrist.

"Leave them a minute."

He looked at her hand. Then at her. He sat down again. Hélène ran her thumb along the inside of his wrist.

"Were you going to ask what I wanted for dessert?"

"I was."

"Good."

Neville leaned towards her. She kissed him before he could ask.

✦ ✦ ✦

Harry and Draco shared a dessert because Draco had said he didn't want one. The sharing was unequal. Harry made no comment until he lost the last piece. Draco put down his spoon.

"You could have said you wanted some."

"I ordered it."

"I thought you were taking the initiative on behalf of the table."

Harry laughed. The waiter took the plate away. Draco finished his wine, and Harry ordered coffee. When they were alone again, Harry leaned back and looked at him.

"Was it good?"

Draco tilted his head.

"Dinner?"

"Yes."

"Yes."

Harry nodded, satisfied. Draco ran a finger round the foot of his glass. There was an easier answer. He could comment on the dessert, make an observation about the service, ask where Harry had learnt to choose wine. Harry looked towards the window. Draco spoke before he turned back.

"I've been looking forward to this."

Harry looked at him again.

"To dinner?"

Draco paused briefly.

"That too."

Harry didn't smile immediately. He watched him with an attention that made Draco miss the menu, the waiter and any object behind which he might occupy himself for five seconds. Then Harry put his hand on the table, near Draco's.

"So have I."

Draco looked at the hand. He touched two fingers to Harry's. Harry held them. The coffee arrived, and they both had to move back a little to make room for the cup. Draco thanked the waiter with impeccable seriousness. Harry waited until he had gone.

"Want to share?"

Draco looked at the cup.

"The coffee?"

"I'm trying to establish that beforehand."

Draco laughed. This time, Harry looked rather proud of himself.

✦ ✦ ✦

When Hélène got up from the sofa to fetch some water, she noticed that Neville hadn't finished opening his post. The envelopes lay on a tray beside the frog. She looked at the crown. Then at the bookcase.

"Have you never thought of putting that somewhere else?"

Neville, still on the sofa, followed her gaze.

"I have."

"And?"

"He looks good here."

Hélène picked up the glass.

"We have very different criteria for that expression."

Neville held out his hand when she returned. She took it and sat down close to him.

"You're keeping the frog."

"Yes."

Hélène sighed. Neville put his arm round her shoulders.

"You don't have to look at him."

She tucked her legs up on the sofa.

"From here, he's looking at me."

Neville looked. The frog did, in fact, seem to be watching the entire room. He got up, crossed to the sideboard and turned it a quarter turn. Hélène began to laugh. Neville came back to the sofa.

"Better?"

She put her glass on the table and pulled him towards her by his shirt.

"Much."

✦ ✦ ✦

Harry opened the door in Fulham a little after eleven. Draco went in first and took off his coat. Harry switched on the hall light. The suitcases were still in the spare room. Draco's book lay on the arm of the sofa, a piece of paper marking his page. In the kitchen, the milk jug was still beside the sink. Harry hung up his coat and turned. Draco was still near the door.

"What is it?"

Draco looked down the hall.

"Nothing."

Harry came closer.

"You look as though you're thinking about something."

"It's a habit of mine."

"I've noticed."

Draco caught his shirtsleeve. Harry stopped close enough for their shoes to touch.

"I enjoyed tonight," he said.

"So did I."

Harry smiled. Draco tugged gently at his sleeve. The kiss began slowly. Harry rested a hand against his face; Draco spread his fingers over Harry's arm and brought him closer. When they drew apart, Harry kept his forehead against Draco's.

"Have you left anything in Mayfair?"

Draco thought of the silent sitting room, the tall windows, the unplugged fridge.

"Nothing I need right now."

Harry ran his thumb over his cheek. Draco kissed him again.

Chapter 12: Christmas Tea

In the first week of December, Harry found one of Draco's gloves in his own coat pocket. He didn't remember putting it there. Nor did he remember buying the tea that now occupied a considerable portion of the kitchen cupboard, but he knew how it had arrived. Draco had turned up one Thursday with three boxes and an opinion about the available space. The suitcases had gone back to Mayfair in October. Other things remained in Fulham. Harry took the glove out of his pocket and left it on the table beside a red envelope that had arrived that morning.

When Draco came in twenty minutes later, it was the first thing he saw.

"I've been looking for that."

"In my coat?"

Draco picked up the glove.

"I hadn't realised you were collecting them."

Harry kissed him before he could take off his scarf. The glove fell back onto the table.

"It's cold," Draco said when Harry drew away.

"Come in, then."

"I'm already in."

Harry smiled and closed the door. In the kitchen, Draco took off his coat and put it over the back of a chair. He looked at the envelope.

"Festive correspondence?"

"From Molly."

"Ron's mother?"

Harry nodded, stirring something in a pan. Draco opened the card after Harry gestured permission. There was a drawing of a tree on the front. Inside, slanting handwriting filled almost all the space. Draco read in silence. Then read one line again.

"She's telling you to bring a serving dish?"

"She's telling me to return a serving dish."

"How long have you had it?"

Harry thought.

"I don't know."

Draco looked up.

"Potter."

"I'm going to give it back."

"Is this a lending network? Hélène returns your bowls, you retain the Weasleys' serving dishes..."

Harry turned off the hob.

"You've had one of my books for six weeks."

"I'm reading it."

"It's a hundred and eighty pages long."

Draco put the card on the table.

"You shouldn't rush literature."

Harry laughed and took out two plates. Draco stayed by the table, looking at the tree on the front.

"What about you?" he asked. "What do you do for Christmas?"

"I usually go to theirs. Ron and Hermione arrive on Christmas Eve. She wants to leave work early this year, but he says he'll believe it when he sees it."

"Sensible."

Harry served the food.

"And you?"

Draco pulled out a chair.

"I go to my parents'."

"On the day?"

"Before. My mother likes me to be there for dinner on the twenty-fourth."

"And you stay?"

"Until the twenty-sixth."

Harry sat down opposite him.

"Sounds very organised."

"It is very organised. My mother sends a timetable."

Harry looked up from his plate. Draco met his eyes.

"I'm not joking."

"A timetable?"

"Times, guests, what's being served. Some years, notes on clothing."

Harry began to smile.

"You get instructions on what to wear?"

"So does Ron. The difference is that my mother puts hers in writing."

Harry laughed. Draco tasted the food and reached for the salt. Harry watched him.

"Do you like going?"

Draco paused with the salt cellar in his hand.

"To my parents'?"

Harry nodded. He put it down on the table.

"I like seeing my mother. She insists on opening presents after breakfast, and it takes two hours because she wants to see everyone open every single one."

"That sounds nice."

"It is. My father pretends to think it's excessive, but he sits there until the end."

Harry smiled. Draco went back to eating.

"Then people who've known me since childhood turn up and ask things they could have asked over the telephone."

"What things?"

"Whether I'm working too hard. Whether I'm working enough. Whether I intend to take on more responsibility. Whether I intend to take a holiday."

"You could say yes to all of them."

Draco looked at him.

"Perhaps I will."

Harry passed the bread. Draco took a piece.

"And do you like going to the Weasleys'?" he asked.

"Yes."

The answer came without hesitation. Harry looked at the card.

"Molly always keeps a place for me. Even when I don't know yet whether I'll make it in time."

Draco followed his gaze.

"She seems to like you."

"She says I eat without complaining."

Draco lowered his eyes to his plate. Harry began to laugh before he could reply.

✦ ✦ ✦

Hélène arrived in Mayfair on Saturday with a box too large to have been carried without complaint. Draco opened the door and immediately tried to take it.

"Careful," she said.

He stopped.

"Is there glass in it?"

"No."

"Then?"

"I wrapped it."

Draco looked at the uneven folds in the paper.

"That's evident."

Hélène handed him the box, took off her gloves and came in.

"You're particularly unpleasant today."

"You're particularly early."

"I have things to do."

He took the box into the sitting room. Hélène followed and dropped her bag into an armchair. Her hair was caught under her coat collar; when she freed it, several strands stood on end. Draco looked. She ran a hand over her head.

"No."

"I haven't said anything."

"You breathed like that."

He put the box on the table. The label, in firm handwriting, read:

For Draco. Open with me.

The tradition had begun at school, after he discovered Hélène would be spending the holidays in France and gave her her present two days before she left, with instructions not to open it in the car. She had opened it in the car. The following year, he had insisted on witnessing it. Ever since, they had exchanged presents before each went off to their own Christmas. Draco examined the wrapping.

"It's only the eighth."

"I know."

"When are you leaving?"

"The twenty-second."

He looked up.

"Wasn't it the nineteenth?"

Hélène began taking off her coat.

"I changed it."

Draco held out his hand for it. She handed it over. He hung it up and came back slowly.

"For any particular reason?"

Hélène sat down.

"There was a flight."

"I imagine there was also one on the nineteenth, given that you had a ticket."

She crossed her legs. Draco waited. Hélène looked at the box.

"Aren't you going to open it?"

"Is Neville working until the twenty-first?"

She lifted her head.

"You're very well informed."

"You're very predictable."

Hélène tried to keep a stern expression, but smiled. Draco sat down opposite her.

"I'm having dinner with him before I go," she said. "His grandmother will be there too."

"Ah."

"Don't do that 'ah'."

"It was a polite 'ah'."

Hélène picked up a cushion.

"You have three kinds of 'ah'. I know all of them."

Draco leaned back.

"And how is Trevor?"

She closed her eyes.

"He's bought a hat."

Draco went still.

"For the frog?"

Hélène nodded. He began to laugh.

"A Christmas hat," she added bitterly.

Draco tried to speak and couldn't. Hélène threw the cushion. He caught it against his chest.

"Sorry."

"You're not forgiven."

"Where does one buy a hat for a ceramic frog?"

"I didn't ask. I was afraid of the answer."

Draco laughed again. Hélène waited, watching him with an expression of very limited tolerance. When he finally recovered, he picked up the box.

"May I?"

"You should."

Inside was something in dark grey wool, folded more carefully than the paper suggested. Draco lifted it out. A jumper. He ran his fingers over the fabric.

"You liked that one," Hélène said.

He remembered. They had seen it in a shop window a few weeks earlier. Draco had commented on the cut and kept walking because they were late.

"I did."

Hélène rested her chin on her hand. Draco looked up at her.

"Thank you."

"You can try it on."

"Now?"

"I carried a box across London. Give me something."

He smiled and got up. When he returned, Hélène gestured for him to turn. Draco complied with conspicuous resignation.

"It looks good," she said.

"You sound surprised."

"I'm appreciating my excellent taste."

He went to fetch her present from a drawer. Hélène sat up in the armchair. The box was small. She slipped off the ribbon without undoing the bow and lifted the lid. For a moment, she said nothing. Inside lay an antique brooch in the shape of a branch, with small pearls among the leaves.

"It's..."

"It isn't your grandmother's," Draco said. "But I thought it looked similar."

Hélène touched one of the leaves. At school, she had spent a few weeks wearing a brooch borrowed from her grandmother. She had lost it on a trip and spent an entire afternoon searching suitcases, pockets and his room, although Draco hadn't been on the trip.

"You remember that?"

"You made me look under a bed."

She laughed, still looking at the box. Then she got up and hugged him. Draco put his arms round her. Hélène stayed a little longer than she did when greeting him. When she drew away, she ran a hand over the shoulder of the jumper, smoothing the wool.

"It really does look good."

Draco looked at the brooch.

"You can wear it to dinner."

She looked up.

"With Neville."

"I know who the dinner is with, Hélène."

She smiled. Draco took the empty box from her hands and put it on the table.

"You like him."

Hélène rested her hip on the arm of the chair.

"I do."

He nodded. She watched his face.

"A lot," she added.

Draco was quiet for a moment. Then he smiled.

"Despite the frog."

Hélène laughed and lowered her head.

"Despite the frog."

✦ ✦ ✦

Harry rang on Sunday evening. Draco was reading the hundred-and-eighty-page book.

"Have you got Hélène's number there?" Harry asked.

Draco took off his reading glasses.

"Yes."

"Can you give it to me?"

"Has something happened?"

"No. I want to ask her something."

Draco waited. So did Harry.

"About what?"

A small laugh came from the other end.

"A present."

Draco leaned back.

"For her?"

"For you."

He looked at the book.

"You're asking me to help?"

"Just the number."

Draco dictated it. Harry repeated it to check.

"Thank you."

"She'll make absurd suggestions."

"I'll bear that in mind."

"And tell you things that have nothing to do with the question."

"I'll bear that in mind too."

Draco closed the book.

"Harry."

"Yeah?"

He ran his fingers over the spine.

"You don't have to buy me anything."

There was a brief pause.

"I know," Harry said. "I want to."

Draco looked towards the window. The lights in the building opposite were on.

"All right."

"All right."

Neither of them hung up. Then Harry said:

"I've been thinking about Christmas."

Draco sat up a little.

"Yes?"

"Would you like to spend some of it with me?"

Draco stared at the closed book.

"Which part?"

"Whatever we can manage."

"You're going to the Weasleys'."

"Yes. You could come too."

"Harry..."

"Molly's already asked whether I'm bringing someone."

Draco raised his eyebrows.

"She asked?"

"Ron must have said something."

"A bold hypothesis."

Harry laughed. Draco heard the clink of crockery.

"Are you in the kitchen?"

"Yes."

"Cooking?"

"Washing up."

"You shouldn't use the telephone near water."

"I'm a respectful distance from the sink."

Draco got up with the phone in his hand. He went to the window.

"My mother will want me there on Christmas Eve."

"Right."

"And on Christmas morning."

"Right."

"The Weasleys' house is..."

He stopped. Harry waited. Draco rested his hand on the windowsill.

"I could leave after lunch."

"You could."

"We'd have to arrange the times."

"We can do that."

"And I need to talk to my mother."

"Yes."

Draco fell silent. At the other end, Harry put something down.

"Do you want to?"

He lowered his eyes.

"Yes."

Harry smiled. Draco could hear it in his voice when he answered.

"Then we'll work it out."

✦ ✦ ✦

Working it out took three days. On Tuesday, Narcissa sent the timetable. On Wednesday, Molly asked Harry to find out whether Draco had any dietary requirements. Harry replied that he ate everything, but had comments. Molly rang.

"Comments about what?"

"Depends on the day."

She was silent for a moment.

"Does he like potatoes?"

"Yes."

"Then he'll be fine."

On Thursday, Draco arrived in Fulham with a folded sheet of paper in his coat pocket. Harry was sitting on the sofa, sorting cards. Draco sat down beside him and unfolded the sheet.

"I can get there at four."

Harry looked at it. There were two addresses, times and a note about traffic.

"You've written it all down?"

"It was easier."

Harry took the paper.

"You've put my name."

"It's your house, Potter."

Beside the twenty-sixth, it read:

Fulham.

Harry ran his thumb over the word.

"Are you staying?"

Draco looked at the cards on the sofa.

"If you want me to."

Harry left the sheet on the table.

"I do."

Draco nodded. Harry moved closer and kissed him. When he drew away, Draco still had a hand on his knee.

"And you?" he asked.

"What about me?"

"Would you like to come to my parents'?"

Harry blinked. Draco watched him carefully.

"Not on Christmas Eve, if you've already arranged something else. We could go before. Or after."

Harry thought for a few seconds.

"Do you want me to?"

"Yes."

The answer came more quickly than Draco expected. Harry smiled.

"Then I'll come."

Draco looked at the sheet on the table.

"I'll have to redo this."

"I think you'll cope."

Harry picked up one of the cards and put it on top of the paper. It was Molly's. At the end of the message, beneath the request for her serving dish, she had added two more lines. Draco read them.

Harry, dear, tell Draco he'll be very welcome. Ron says he's polite and that you've been very happy.

Draco looked at the handwriting for a few moments.

"Weasley talks too much."

"He does."

Harry rested his shoulder against Draco's. Draco put his arm along the back of the sofa.

"Do you really want to spend all that time with me?" he asked.

Harry turned his head.

"Yes."

"Even with the timetable?"

"We can bring it."

Draco smiled. Harry watched him.

"Where do you want to be?" Draco asked.

Harry rested his hand over Draco's.

"With you. We'll work out the rest."

Draco looked down at their interlaced fingers. Then picked up the sheet from the table. Harry began to laugh.

"What?"

"Are you going to write that down?"

Draco found the pen in his inside coat pocket.

"I'm correcting the times."

Harry settled beside him and watched him work. When Draco finished, he folded the sheet carefully. Harry took his hand again. The paper stayed on the table.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!