Azoth

by zeitgeistic (faire_weather)

Summary

Now that Harry is back at Hogwarts with Hermione for eighth year, he realises that something’s missing from his life, and it either has to do with Ron, his boggart, Snape, or Malfoy. Furthermore, what, exactly, does it mean when one’s life is defined by the desire to simultaneously impress and annoy a portrait? Harry has no idea; he’s too busy trying not to be in love with Malfoy to care.

Notes

Warnings: Super strong language, graphic sex scenes, a few scary situations

Content/Enticements: 8th year +. Side pairings: Hermione/Millicent; Ron/Lavender. Questionable career choices, fantasy Quidditch, apprenticeships, bromance, Alchemy, Animagi, pining, a snarky portrait, boggarts, and Harry as a hot mess. There is a surplus of cats in this story. It wasn’t planned, but when are cats ever?

Author's Notes: Dear Isinuyasha: You said ‘chemistry’ and I ran with it. I hope you like this take on what I’m sure was meant to be a throwaway comment. I’m pretty sure I got almost all of your requests in here. (Also, I love your art!!) Original prompt: here. Thank you one zillion times to the most amazing beta in the entire world, E. I am honestly astounded by how amazing she is. I can’t even put it to words. Thank you also to the mods
who gave me an extra four days when I was freaking out about the ending. You guys are awesome! Happy holidays!

**Beta:** eidheann

**DO NOT REPOST OR ARCHIVE THIS FIC ANYWHERE.** That includes Wattpad, Instagram, translation sites, and literally anywhere that I didn't post it myself. TY (I can't believe I am having to put this notice up again. What happened to fandom etiquette?)

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)
Purgation

Azoth is the essential agent of transformation in alchemy—the name given by ancient alchemists to mercury, the animating spirit hidden in all matter that makes transmutation possible.

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01. Purgation

The purification or cleansing of someone or something

Christmas, 1998

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It was at Christmas hols that Harry first recognised his platonic marriage to Ron Weasley was in the final, anticlimactic, throes of death. The realisation sent him reeling like a bludger to the face.

Seven years and this is how it ends? he thought. His brow furrowed as he tried to understand what the loss of a best mate would mean to his life. The Weasleys were ignorant of this sudden bout of inner hysteria, and as happy as they could be, short one member. He and Hermione, fresh off a portkey from Australia, sat at one end of the Burrow dinner table and felt distinctly out of place.

“I passed the last character assessment on Friday,” Ron was saying, a fork of Christmas goose poised halfway to his mouth. “Can you believe it? I’m a real Auror trainee now! Just two years to go. The class is pretty small actually, you’d never think so with it being such a brill job, but…”

Hermione leaned into Harry. Her shoulder pressed against his, warm and solid. “No second thoughts?” she whispered.

Harry shook his head a fraction, and made a show of shovelling peas into his mouth before Ron noticed their side conversation. “Not without NEWTs.”

They’d had this conversation before, the first time after Kingsley suggested letting all three of them into the Auror program on their names alone, and Ron had immediately said ‘Brilliant!’ before either Hermione or Harry could get a word in.

He was happy for Ron, happy he would be first of the three of them to be an Auror. The early start would give him a chance to make friends and prove himself without being in Harry’s shadow, which was all to the good in Harry’s opinion. Let Ron have his gushing. It was just that…he’d never been apart from Ron for so long. And Ron was doing well in the program. Really well. Without Harry. Without Hermione, even.

What did that mean?

“And I’ll find out who my training partner is at the new year. I hope it’s not Michael Corner.”

“Michael Corner’s in the Auror program?” Ginny asked, rather too interestingly in Harry’s opinion, but then again, it wasn’t like it was his business anymore. He’d lost that privilege the moment he told her he didn’t want to try again, and she’d frowned at him, and said ‘I figured this would happen.’ He was still trying to figure out what she’d meant by that.
“Unfortunately,” Ron said around a mouthful of mash. “And his mate Goldstein. What a prick.”

“Ronald!” Mrs Weasley said.

“Sorry, Mum. But he really is,” Ron added to Harry and Hermione. As if they’d never met Goldstein before or had classes with him for six years.

“Oh, hey, how’re your parents?”

Hermione froze. Harry reached beneath the table and clenched her hand in what he hoped was a comforting manner. Of course this topic would come up, it was just that neither of them had expected it to come up at the dinner table only thirty minutes after their arrival. In hindsight, they should’ve known better.

The swearing would come any minute now. Harry tensed in anticipation. It had been eight months since the final battle, and eight months since her vocabulary shifted, but he still wasn’t accustomed to hearing swear words from Hermione’s mouth.

“They seemed…fine.” Hermione stared at her plate. The silence around the table was tense enough to make Harry’s skin crawl. Ron didn’t notice. Harry wasn’t sure he’d even noticed the swearing yet, actually.

“When are they coming home?”

“Ron…” Mr Weasley said, picking up on clues his son had not.

“They aren’t, as it happens.” Hermione’s voice had risen slightly in pitch, but she still didn’t look up from her food. She took a sip of water and avoided looking at anyone.

“So, who else is in the Auror program?” Harry asked desperately.

Anything to get them off the subject of Hermione’s parents. It had taken her six months just to find them, and then with being back at Hogwarts, she hadn’t had a chance to go fix their memories until Christmas hols. Ron might’ve known this already, but he’d had Auror training and couldn’t take the time off to come with.

“Why not?” Auror training that apparently didn’t extend to perception training.

Hermione slammed her glass down, spilling water all along the frayed tablecloth. George winced, but said nothing. “Because they don’t remember me, you oblivious git!”

There it was, the swearing.

She shoved back from the table and ran from the house, so quickly that she’d almost made it to the door before her chair finally hit the floor. A rush of cold wind whirled past them as the door slammed shut. For a beat, silence. Then Ginny ran after, and the cold air sailed over them a second time. Harry tipped his head back, and wondered if he believed in God, and if so, would God give him the strength to bear the things he could not change et cetera et cetera.

He looked back to find every assembled Weasley staring at him. He sighed. “It didn’t work, Ron. That’s why she’s here.” And not, you know, home with her Mum and Dad. “We couldn’t reverse the spell, and then the Wilkinses called the police on us.”

“The what?”
“The Aurors,” Harry bit out, and shoved his own chair back from the table. It remained upright. “May I be excused,” he said to Mrs Weasley, but it wasn’t really a question. The door slammed behind him as he left.

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Ron did manage to see them to the station on the day they were to return to Hogwarts. He’d apologized, and felt ruddy awful about hurting Hermione’s feelings, and she’d accepted it, as she always did.

Things were fine, if stilted, between them. But ‘fine’ was a long way off from before, and the change in their relationship was something Harry still wasn’t sure how to deal with. Was he allowed to be sad if the dissolution was such a slow, quiet thing? It wasn’t yet at the point of no return, was it? Could he save it, somehow?

He didn’t think so. He didn’t know how such a change in their relationship could have happened without anyone seeing it. Or maybe someone had. Maybe Hermione had, and just hadn’t said. She’d starting doing that sort of thing after she and Ron broke up, when the three of them didn’t have anything but the past cementing them together anymore.

On the train, they took a cabin with Susan, Neville, and Millicent, who Hermione had—bizarrely—befriended after McGonagall roomed them together back in September. Harry had never been more pleased to room with Neville, as the only other boys who’d returned for eighth year were Malfoy, Goyle, Zabini, and that overly-happy Ravenclaw, Boot.

It wasn’t that Harry didn’t want to room with Slytherins…it was just that he didn’t want to room with them. This year, the whole lot of them had been cordial and polite, and when Malfoy did that sort of thing, it made Harry think of how shit it would have been to have accidentally killed him in sixth year. And the expression he’d worn when Harry returned his wand. And what his sweat smelled like when brought forth by the heat of Fiendfyre and terror.

Sometimes he replayed that moment in his head, and tried to figure out if the ghost memories of Malfoy’s fingertips pressing against his sides were real or imagined. It felt like everything between them had lead to that one moment, that their entire history was distilled into the sound of Malfoy panicking against Harry’s neck.

When he compared that feeling to the thought of his tired, fading best-mateness with Ron, he wasn’t sure if the changes originated in himself or in Ron and Malfoy.

While he and Hermione had only grown closer in their belated seventh year, Ron now seemed like an entirely different person. Maybe he was a different person. Was this what he would have been like all along if he hadn’t been friends with Harry? Confident and self-assured and happy?

The thought disturbed him. Beside him, Hermione and Millicent took up a heated debate that included basilisk-quick repartees and repetitive utterances of Euclid and Elements and, once the volume of their argument had risen: Twelve-fucking-fold Way and Set Theory and Asymptotic Arithmantic Analysis for Merlin’s sake.

Neville and Susan, pointedly ignoring the discussion, were sharing a letter from Hannah Abbott, which made Harry nauseous just to look at. He couldn’t even think of reading on the train without getting motion sick. No help from that corner then.
Thus adrift, he leaned against the window, and determinedly did not think of whether his friendship with Ron had been detrimental to Ron’s life.

Or whether he could define the entirety of his acquaintance with Draco Malfoy with a single broom ride.

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“Eighth years,” said McGonagall that evening, “will be meeting monthly with their former Heads of House for a final career preparation session. As Professor Switch is only Acting Head of Gryffindor, I will see to you three myself.”

She eyed the three Gryffindors and there was a warning in there somewhere. Probably to be prepared and not make her life difficult by having no idea what they wanted to do with their lives. Hermione was practically falling off the couch in her excitement. She was good at compartmentalizing in a way that Harry truly envied. He was still miffed about the Ron-events over hols, and she was already throwing herself into Life Beyond Permanently Erasing Yourself From Your Parents’ Memories.

If only he could do that. Then maybe he’d be able to look at Malfoy without wondering if he’d really not recognized him that night at Malfoy Manor, or if Harry had just made that up on the witness stand because his subconscious wanted to believe that the world wasn’t black and white.

“We did career prep in fifth year,” Susan said. She was the only Hufflepuff, the others having been proactive and Hufflepuff enough to secure apprenticeships or positions last year. While there was a war on.

McGonagall pursed her lips. “I’d not forgotten Ms Bones. Thank you. Remember that you will be competing with the entirety of the seventh year class for positions. As your circumstances are somewhat different from other students, we’ve decided that in addition to NEWTs studies, extra help would not go amiss.”

“I heard Professor Slughorn was going to host networking parties,” said Daphne. “Even for students who weren’t in the Slug Club. Is that true?”

“Quite true,” McGonagall said. Daphne and Pansy grinned at one another. And there went Boot being happy about something.

“I’ve already been asked by Ms Granger, so I will remind you that Hogwarts’ Masters do take on apprentices but we generally require that prospectives engage in a gap year between Hogwarts and apprenticeship, to ensure that students are knowledgeable of worldly affairs.”

She paused, eyed them shrewdly. “I suspect that you all have enough knowledge of worldly affairs to be going on with. Therefore, the Board has agreed to relax the requirements for eighth years. Any of you who wishes to apply for apprenticeship at Hogwarts must submit your proposal in writing by no later than 1 May.”

“As if there will be any apprenticeships left open for us,” Zabini muttered, but the room was quiet enough that McGonagall heard it.

“Things change, Mr Zabini,” she said. “I would remind you to remember that. Now, I’ll say goodnight.”
The portrait creaked as it closed behind her. Then it was just the twelve of them, alone in the common room together, as if they’d never been in four different houses—or, in Harry and Malfoy’s case, never tried to both kill and rescue each other.

Neville scooted in, his mouth stretched with a grin. “Do you think Professor Sprout’d take me on?”

“Obviously,” Malfoy drawled.

Hermione and Neville turned to him, mouths parted. And, too surprised by the veiled compliment to remember he didn’t do so well looking at Malfoy, Harry followed. Next to him, Zabini had his head leant back against the bricks, an expression of exasperation on his face. Harry could well understand that. He was waiting for the punch line himself. It didn’t come.

“Really?” Neville said, probably before he could catch himself.

“Really, Longbottom,” Millicent said, brusquely, not looking up from her Arithmancy book. “Honestly. One would think you didn’t slay a twenty foot snake with a sodding mythical sword.”

Neville smirked as he picked himself up from the couch. “True. Well—I’m off to the greenhouses. Ta.”

With no Ron to distract him with more entertaining pursuits, Harry worked steadily through his Charms homework. Yet McGonagall’s pronouncement about additional career counselling nagged at him. She would ask him if he was still on track to be an Auror, and he would talk about his improved marks in Potions, especially now that he was under his second year with Slughorn. And then there would be an awkward silence where she expected the meeting was over, and Harry refused to leave because he was bursting to scream, ‘I don’t want to be an Auror!’ but was too chickenshit to actually say it.

The common room had cleared save for the Slytherins still huddled together in their protective formation by the fire. They seemed to negotiate homework help like prize Abraxans, and tonight was no different. Millicent was driving a hard bargain with Goyle that involved things Harry’d rather not think on.

They were far enough away that Harry could voice his thoughts to Hermione and not worry about sniggers from them at least. He watched her calculating out some horrific-looking mathematical expression and tried to decide whether or not to bother her. He was sure it was a stupid question, but it just wouldn’t leave him.

“What sort of career do you think I might’ve done? If there hadn’t been Voldemort?” he finally asked.

It was a credit to Hermione that it didn’t even faze her enough to look up from the Arithmancy.

“I don’t know, Harry. So much of you—” She broke off, looking horrified.

“What?”

The Slytherins started cackling across the room, and Harry’s face turned red, even though he knew they couldn’t hear him. That meant maybe it was Hermione’s reaction that was causing it—he had no idea why she’d stopped talking, but the look on her face told him that she’d just realised something horrid. Something where he was found wanting.

Hermione shook her head, set her parchment aside. “What did you love before Hogwarts?”
He shifted uncomfortably. “I don’t know. Not much. Going to the play park. Science. Maths, a bit. There was a spider I quite liked.”

The expression on Hermione’s face remained pained. She said, carefully, “You are very…altered by your experiences with Voldemort. You were so young. And you didn’t have a lot of stimuli before Hogwarts.”

There was a pregnant silence. It took him a moment to parse the treacly words and find the meaning beneath. “So you’re saying that none of me is me. That I’m just what Voldemort made me.”

Hermione pulled her legs up beneath her bum. It was her *we’ll be here a while* pose. She shook her head a fraction. “I don’t know, Harry. Do you think you had a proper chance to learn to love different aspects of magic? You’ve always had to judge magic on how valuable it could be to you in a fight, not how much you liked doing it. But there’s so much more to magic than Defence. So many more amazing, transcending aspects to it…things you’d never get a chance to study without devoting years of your life to them. And you didn’t have that chance. You could only learn what you needed to learn. I don’t know what you might’ve liked if you’d had the chance. I don’t think you know, either.”

He frowned, staring down at a growing splotch of green ink on his Charms essay. “What kind of magic do you think is best?”

“All of it,” she said, with a wry grin. He supposed he should’ve guessed that. He gave her a tentative smile back and she added, “Arithmancy, I suppose. You can do so many brilliant things with it. Spell creation, curse breaking, ward setting…amazing, unlimited magic.”

Harry frowned. “I’m not particularly good at any one branch of magic.”

“You haven’t had time to get good at any.”

Seven years and no time. It seemed ludicrous. Of course he’d had time, it was just that he’d always placed more value on other things—on the war, on *Ron*. He couldn’t say that it had been a bad choice. Their friendship was fading now, but for seven years, it had been the brightest thing in Harry’s life. Now it was soft and worn, but where the knowledge of it had once made Harry warm, it now left him with a clammy, resigned feeling like he was developing a cold.

Maybe he could get good at one field of magic this year, one that would fill the hollow Ron’s presence had eroded into him. He still had a term left. Then he could decide what he wanted to do. It was never too late, and all that rot.

The door to Hermione and Millicent’s room swung open and Millicent’s white cat sped out, yowling. It had something red wrapped all around its face. Hermione made a pained noise.

“Are those your knickers, Mill?” Pansy asked, cackling.

Millicent had already jumped up and was trying to corner the cat. “No, they’re Granger’s.”

Hermione swore under her breath. Harry was, frankly, impressed with the variety of words and combinations thereof that Hermione could come up with when she put her mind to it. However Hermione wanted to *deal*, Harry was on board.

“How does Mill know what your knickers look like, Granger?” Zabini called.

“Peep!” Millicent bellowed. The cat dashed through her legs and tore out of the portrait hole as
Neville was coming in, nearly knocking him flat on his bum.

“Someone’s knickers are on that cat,” Nev said, cocking a thumb over his shoulder as the portrait shut behind him. “Red ones.”

Hermione made that pained noise again. She jumped up. “I think I left my Arithmancy notes in the library.”

“Coming with,” Harry said quickly. The twelve of them did all right on their own, even considering their different houses, but he didn’t think it was looking good for the rest of the night.

“How bloody humiliating,” she said when they were out of the common room. “No doubt some enterprising Slytherin will find them on the Quidditch pitch in the morning. A Sticking Spell later and everyone will know my bum size.”

“We could check the map for Peep.” Merlin, what a stupid name.

Hermione snorted, but shook her head. The cat was long gone by now, probably in Slytherin territory. “I hate that bloody cat. He leaves white fur all over my robes and he’s afraid of everything. This morning, my wand alarm buzzed and he tore down one of the hangings from Millicent’s bed trying to escape. Crookshanks loves him, no idea why. I think they might be—well.”

“Friends?” Harry suggested hopefully.

She shrugged. “Crookshanks is an adult, and however he likes to spend his time is his concern.”

They trundled down the stairs, both skipping the trick stair out of hard-learned habit. Harry wasn't sure where they were heading, but he wasn’t in a hurry to get back. He liked the change of pace from always having something that needed his attention. Hermione wasn’t un-tensing though, so he supposed he was going to have to broach the forbidden subject, if only to get it out of the way.

“Was that an owl from Ron I saw waiting when we got in?”

She pursed her lips, then gave it up and sighed instead. “You know it was, Harry.”

“What’s going on with…that?”

She gave him a wry grin, then made an abrupt change in their direction, down the corridor that led to the north wing and the disused Necromancy classroom. Peeves refused to go near it, which made it altogether more appealing to the upper years who weren’t afraid of residual haunting.

“Nothing, as usual. Another apology for being a berk at Christmas, an impassioned treatise on the value of hit wizards—no doubt a result of Alastor Gumboil’s brill target classes—and a closing reminder that he’s sorry we didn’t work out and he’s glad we’re still friends.”

Harry snorted. To say that Ron and Hermione didn’t work out was like saying Crookshanks and merpeople got on well enough. Somehow, despite their never-ending arguments while dating—and sometimes, Harry cringed to remember the particular nights at Grimmauld Place: during sex—their breakup had been swift, clean, and with minimal crying (all on Ron’s part).

“I just get the feeling that he’s apologizing for something he hasn’t done yet. It makes me twitchy.”

They were well past the old Necromancy classroom and very near the Merlin portrait gallery when Harry got the courage to bring up something Ron had told him over hols, in that dark silent time
when they were both trying to fall asleep but couldn’t yet. Due, on Harry’s part, because the Chudley Cannons posters spellotaped to the ceiling were covered in Lumos-in-the-dark quaffles that zipped around in bright orange relief.

“Did you know Lavender applied for the Auror program?”

Hermione stopped. Her footsteps echoed a bit longer, probably due to the residual Necromancy classroom hauntings. “No.”

“I suppose you definitely didn’t know she was accepted then,” he added.

“No,” she said again, quieter this time. Her brow furrowed, as if she were taking this in and trying to process it. She exhaled heavily. “She fought really well in the final battle.”

“She took down that werewolf that—” He broke off, unsure of how to say it. Mauled her neck and half her face didn’t seem appropriate, nor did turned her. It was so bland as to be offensive because what the werewolf had really done was destroyed everything she’d ever valued. But then Lavender had got up and decided to value something different. If Ron saw something fierce and attractive in that, Harry couldn’t very well blame him. He saw it, too. He just didn’t want to sleep with her.

“Ron will be an exceptional Auror,” Hermione decided. “He’s very good at constant vigilance.”

Harry choked. “Hermione!” he said, but he was laughing.

She shrugged one shoulder, unrepentant, and they pressed their lips tightly together as they passed a glaring portrait of the Lady of the Lake. And then another, and by the time they’d cleared the gallery, he was pretty sure they were both back to wishing Ron was with them, even though they both knew he was better off with the Aurors.

Sometimes, it was just so unnatural to be without him. Like they’d all been made from the same molecules, and even when he was far away, they could sense him in the way that they were incomplete themselves.

“I don’t want to be an Auror,” Hermione said sometime later, and Harry knew it wasn’t because of Lavender or Ron or anything like that. Hermione was just tired of fighting all the time, and Harry could understand that. “I never did.”

“I know,” he said.

A scuffling sound caught their attention, and they jumped as if they were still third years, out with the Map and no common sense. Hermione giggled, and slapped her hand over her mouth, eyes wide. Why did things have to change? Harry wondered. In moments like this, he remembered the magic and novelty of Hogwarts, and how it had always felt like home. The only place that had felt like home.

He could close his eyes and hear Hermione giggle and it would be first year all over again. Or he could close them and see Malfoy’s wide, frightened eyes, and feel his knees digging into the outsides of Harry’s thighs as if he were the one controlling the broom, not Harry.

The scuffling came closer, followed by a harassed meow and just for the hell of it, Harry lifted an eyebrow at her, questioning. She nodded and they took off running as if Mrs Norris could actually get them in trouble these days.

They rushed down the back stairs, took lefts and rights without thought, no care whatsoever where they ended up, but enjoying the game of losing Mrs Norris. Up ahead there was a classroom door
ajar, with a faint blue light seeping out into the hallway. He grabbed Hermione’s hand and tugged her in. They fell against the door, breathless, laughing.

She turned her head to him, a little smirk on her lips. “You silly bugger.”

He laughed. It came out breathy and exhausted and happy. If he didn’t look on his other side, he wouldn’t notice that it was just the two of them. “You followed.”

He remembered the blue light as he regained his breathing. Hermione was already looking around for the source of it.

“Oh! This is where they used to teach Sympathetic Magic. Look there—the little wax dolls on that shelf over there. It hasn’t been taught in two hundred years, after some unfortunate incidents with muggles. I read about it in Hogwarts—Merlin’s beard, what is that?”

“A wardrobe.”

Hermione huffed. “The mirror, you twit.” It was reflecting the blue light from the wardrobe, making the whole room light up in a soft, eerie glow.

He followed her gaze and immediately recognised it. “Oh for fuck’s sake. This bloody mirror!”

“You recognise it? What does it do?” But she was already walking towards it.

Before he could pull her back, Hermione was in front of it, squinting up at the letters along the top. “I show not the truth but…what in the world?” She peered into it, and then took an involuntary step back, eyes wide. Her mouth trembled, and then she forced herself to look away.

Harry rushed over and enveloped her in a hug. “You saw them?” he asked.

He felt her head shake against his chest. “No. No, that’s what’s so awful. I just saw myself as a Master Arithmancer with a book deal. And I had a, a partner. And Crookshanks. And you were there, and Ron, too. I didn’t see them at all.”

“But they’re safe,” Harry reminded her. “You saved them. You love them enough for that. Just because they aren’t in one glimpse of your heart’s desire doesn’t mean you’re a bad daughter.”

“They don’t have a sodding daughter,” she muttered. He half-wished she would cry. She hadn’t done even once. But maybe she really didn’t need to. Wars changed people, as Hermione’s vocabulary would attest. “What do you see?”

He looked over her shoulder, stared in confusion. Hermione felt him stiffen, and pulled away to look, as if she would be able to see the same thing he was seeing. “Erm.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t think it’s working for me. I—don’t see anything.”

“Anything at all? It’s blank?”

“I just see…me. Right now. Like looking in a normal mirror.”

She elbowed his ribs a bit. “Something you’d like to share with the class, Mr Potter?”

Behind them, the wardrobe shook violently, and for the second time that night, Harry was startled by a ruddy creepy noise. He was a **grown man**, and he’d defeated Voldemort for Merlin’s sake. A rat in a wardrobe should not make him jump a foot in the air.

The wardrobe rattled again, and this time he could tell that it was definitely not a rat. “What do you suppose that is?” Hermione asked. She was already reaching for her wand up her sleeve.

“Hermione, really…” he said.

They were getting a bit old for this **fools rush in** sort of thing.

Although he couldn’t deny that he didn’t also have an **Alohomora** on his lips. Nothing like a good mystery. Hermione’s wand twitched, and the wardrobe door swung open. Something slumped onto the floor, and Hermione screamed, then slammed a hand over her mouth to dull it. The Grangers were on the floor, bloody and half-decayed. He gagged at the smell, covered his mouth, and pulled Hermione away.

“Boggart,” he gasped out. “Just a boggart.”

“At least they’re still my greatest fear, if not my heart’s desire,” she muttered, but she wouldn’t look back at the corpses even to dismiss it. He nudged her aside, and approached the boggart. But then it morphed and—

“Fucking hell.”

Hermione turned at his exclamation, but she was far enough away now that the boggart didn’t notice her attention. He heard her gasp. “Harry,” she whispered.

“Yeah.” That was pretty much the sum of it. Because his boggart was himself. Right now. Like looking in a normal mirror.

He stood there, frozen, heart pounding. His boggart self stared back.

“**Riddikulus!**” said Hermione.

The boggart transformed into Harry and Malfoy snogging, and Hermione sniggered.

It should have been funny, Harry thought. It really should have. It was just that it sort of gave him a bit of an erection instead.

He was so wrong-footed by the unexpected reaction that it took him a moment longer to comprehend the enormity of what’d just happened. His heart’s desire and his greatest fear—

He swallowed. “What does that even mean?”

Hermione hesitated, swished her wand and dismissed the boggart Harry-Malfoy altogether. “I don’t know. The mirror and the boggart can show deep thoughts, but they can’t put them into context. Only you really know how to parse the images.”

“Right,” he said, nodding. “But how can I be both my own greatest fear and heart’s desire?”

She didn’t have an answer for that.
Sublimation

02. Sublimation

*A change directly from the solid to the gaseous state without becoming liquid*

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“If not an Auror, then how about a Healer?”

Two-and-half hours into their career prep session, and McGonagall was exasperated.

“No,” Harry said. “I don’t want to watch people die.”

He kept hoping to see Dumbledore, but both the frames behind her desk were empty, and there was no white beard or purple robes hidden in any of the other Headmaster portraits. He’d checked—like some magical *Where’s Dumbledore* game where the Headmaster would have been hidden at a tea party wearing a red wizard hat and striped robes.

“Perhaps you’ve a creative streak you’d like to express? There’s a respectable market for magical art and fiction.”

“No creative streak, unfortunately.” Unless one counted the disturbing Malfoyish scenarios he’d entertained since seeing Hermione’s *Riddikulus*. He’d been unable to stop replaying the details of every interaction they’d ever had. Right back to the moment Harry met him in Madame Malkins’. Right up to that infinite moment in the Room of Requirement, when he’d thought he was dying right then and that he’d live forever.

*Tandem broom rides and heat and breath and adrenaline and hands around his waist and—*

“Mr Potter,” McGonagall said. “With your history you could, quite frankly, do whatever you like, so long as you apply yourself to it. You must, however, first *apply yourself*. And how will you do that if you can’t decide what you want to do?”

He shuddered. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“I don’t follow.”

“I don’t want to be hired just because I’m *me*.”

McGonagall looked a little sad at that. She opened her mouth, hesitated. Then a house-elf popped in, breaking both of them from the uncomfortable situation, and wailed, “Headmistress must come right away! Naughty Peeves! Naughty students!”

“Oh, for heavens’ sake. Mr Potter, stay here. I will return and we will have you sorted before you leave my office today.” It was more a command than a motivational speech, but he nodded just the same.

The office hadn’t changed much in that it was still three storeys, circular, and had windows facing the Quidditch Pitch. In every other regard, it was McGonagall’s office in the Transfigurations wing transported, right down to the little wool-and-catnip niffler and jingly ball placed tidily in a cat bed by the desk.
“I admit this has been the most pathetically amusing of the Gryffindor career preparation meetings. Granger and Longbottom at least had some idea what they wanted to do. I find myself unsurprised that you do not.”

Harry snapped to attention. He’d almost forgotten what that voice sounded like. “Professor Snape.”

The portrait sneered, and Harry was pleased to see that the artist had captured that remarkably well. Perhaps the colour chosen for his skin had been overly flattering, but otherwise, it was spot on.

“You’re looking refreshed.”

“Spare me,” Snape said. He crossed his arms over his chest, stared at Harry for a moment past good manners, and then crossed to the stool at his painted potions laboratory work table. “You don’t have the patience to be a Healer, Potter. Nor for artistic endeavours, or rather, anything at all. I do wonder—will you manage to contribute to society at all?”

Harry’s fists clenched, but he kept them by his side and out of Snape’s oily gaze. “Easy for you to talk about patience when you’re dead.” It was either that or hex the bloody portrait. He’d already contributed to society.

Snape waved a hand, dismissing the argument and probably Harry’s existence, as well. “And yet I somehow managed to develop and maintain a vocation prior to it. How very Potter-esque of you to make every effort at becoming a man of leisure. Your father will be proud, of course.”

“I think I deserve some leisure after last year.”

“Oh yes, of course. How silly of me. I’d forgotten you were the only wizard to suffer from the war. Grow up, Potter. And in the mean time, get a job.”

“I plan to,” Harry bit out.

“Praise Merlin. Perhaps Rosmerta’s hiring, since we appear to be without any nascent dark lords and you have no other marketable skills.”

Harry scowled. “I’m done with that. I want to do something unexpected.” It wasn’t until he said it that he realized how true it really was—and then, he paused, mouth parting slightly in understanding. That must be what his boggart meant; he was afraid of staying the same.

But—his heart’s desire? What was that? Snape was sneering vitriol at him, but he ignored it. What could he both fear and desire at once? Even as he asked himself the question, the answer came to him. And really, he should have known it all along: he just wanted to be himself.

No Boy Who Lived rubbish, no Voldemort, no Death Eaters, no prophecies. Just Harry. But who was Harry Potter, really? It—wasn’t who he was right now. He was still living the life that wizarding Britain carved out for him. He was getting his NEWTs, then he’d probably end up at the Aurory whether he really wanted to or not, just because it was expected of him and that’s where Ron was. Then he’d marry Ginny, and they’d recreate that tragic, idyllic family immortalized in marble down in Godric’s Hollow.

He cringed. She did really look rather like his mum. But it was expected of him. And he was terrified of living his life like that.

What wasn’t expected of him? That’s what he wanted.
The door opened. The sounds of Hogwarts drifted in behind the taps of McGonagall’s boots. “I do apologize, Mr Potter. We seem to have a boggart infestation in the north wing. They must’ve got in before we patched that side up.”

He looked up at her, nodded vaguely. Snape was still leering at him, nasty as ever and just as disgusted. “Unexpected, my ruddy arse,” Harry heard him mutter things under his breath that he was almost certain included the word ‘Dumbledore’. McGonagall’s nostrils flared but she otherwise ignored the portrait Snape.

“Oh perhaps broom-making,” McGonagall said, picking up right where they left off. “Or, professional Quidditch? You’ve the skill for reserve, and with a few years practicing, I’ve no doubt you’d make starting. Montrose Magpies, if you don’t mind…”

“Potions,” Harry said, staring straight into Snape’s abyssal eyes. “I want to be a Potions Master.”

The office went quiet. Even the dozing headmasters stopped snoring. McGonagall blinked at him. “I’m sorry, Mr Potter, I think I may have misheard you. I thought you said—”

“Potions,” he repeated. “Yes.”

“You can’t be serious,” Snape said, affecting boredom, but he’d left the oil-based stool and was now pressed against the front of the portrait, staring down at them both from his better vantage point. He craned his neck towards the portrait next, as if Dumbledore were hiding just beyond the frame and would pop out and tell Harry how much madness this was, but Dumbledore didn’t come and probably would have been well amused at this turn of events anyway.

“I am,” said Harry. “It’s what I want.”

No one would ever expect that. And then he’d show Snape, and he’d still be alive. It was hard to be the better Potions Master when one was dead, Harry suspected, and he was damned if he’d let Snape make him feel inferior when he was rotting.

“Mr Potter, I do commend you for your—ah, determination. But apprenticeships in Potions are incredibly hard to come by. There are so few Masters left in Britain, and Professor Slughorn won’t be taking anyone on. He’s retiring.”

“I don’t want Slughorn. I want Professor Snape.”

McGonagall paused. She looked at him like he might truly be losing it. “Mr Potter…Professor Snape is dead.”

“I am right here.” The both turned to look at the portrait.

He was at the front of his frame again, glaring down at them through beady Perylene Black eyes. The artist hadn’t even bothered to mix the colour with another, just let it fade out where the painted green light from the wall sconces hit his eyes.

“He’s still a Master,” Harry said. “He doesn’t forget everything when he dies, does he?” He turned to Professor Snape, smirking. “You didn’t forget, did you?”

“Of course not.”

Harry turned back to the Headmistress. “I want to be a Potions Master,” he repeated. “That’s my choice.”
She sighed, cut a furious look towards the portrait behind her, who seemed to now realize how neatly Harry had corralled him into nearly agreeing to something he’d no doubt hate. Good. She returned Harry’s gaze with a weary one of her own. “You seem quite adamant.”

“Yes.”

“It will require an O on your Potions NEWT. Do you think you can learn seven years’ worth of material in five months?”

No. “Yes.”

Snape snorted. McGonagall’s expression was pained. “Mr Potter, perhaps you might prepare a contingency plan in the event that, well.”

They looked at one another for a long moment, neither speaking the thought that it was very likely his contingency plan, if any, would indeed come into play come June. That he could be a Potions Master was laughable at best. That he would end up being an Auror instead was…horrifying. He hadn’t really considered it so thoroughly until now, but now that he did, he knew he wanted no part of it. He had to be good at something besides Defence.

“I’ll go into PR,” he said, shrugging. “People like listening to me talk, apparently.”

“I thought you didn’t want a career in the public eye.”

She was right. He really, really didn’t. “More motivation to succeed. Can I apprentice with Professor Snape?”

“That will be up to Professor Snape,” she said, blinking quickly.

They both turned to the portrait, who was staring back at Harry with an unfathomable look. The silence spanned longer than living people felt comfortable with, but which was probably nothing special for a portrait.

Finally, Snape said: “If Mr Potter is, by the grace of Merlin and perhaps God, able to secure an O on his NEWT, then I shall accept him for apprenticeship, if for nothing else, than the entertainment value. After all, as you say, Mr Potter, I have quite a lot of time on my hands.”

But you won’t, remained unspoken. Harry beamed at him, trying to remember if this had been his idea or if he’d been Confunded. At least he wouldn’t have to be an Auror. Even being forced to spend time with Snape’s portrait sounded better than that. After all, he could wash his hands of Snape after three years, but he’d be an Auror forever.

What would Ron say when Harry and Hermione both confessed they had no intentions of joining him at the Ministry? Would he be sad? Relieved?

“This is rather unprecedented,” McGonagall was saying, but she looked too frazzled by his three-hour long career prep session to keep trying to talk him out of it. “But…if Professor Snape agrees, and if you can meet the qualifications for apprenticeship, then…” She shrugged, a wholly uncharacteristic gesture for her.

“He won’t,” Snape said, in case anyone had any doubts about it. “Perhaps Mr Potter should stop by Twilfit’s for a new set of press robes this Hogsmeade.”

Harry glared at him. “Enjoy your barbs now, Professor Snape. They won’t be as funny to you when I’m putting on apprentice robes instead.”
Snape chuckled nastily. “We shall see about that.”

-x-

Harry stepped off the gargoyle staircase and straight into Malfoy. His chest was warm and solid. Their mouths had nearly touched for a moment. Was it weird that he was sort of attracted to Malfoy simply because Malfoy hadn’t turned him in to Voldemort when the Snatchers got them?

Or maybe he’d always been attracted to Malfoy, but he was such a prig that the attraction was sucked away like Malfoy was some kind of attraction-Dementor. Or was it that he hadn’t been attracted to Malfoy at all until that moment when Hermione’s dark sense of humour showed him what could be?

Harry didn’t know. But he wanted to. *Oh*—well, fuck. His brain caught up with itself, and hovered between panicking and lashing out defensively. He was attracted to him. He was *attracted to Malfoy*.

Malfoy shoved him back, and he stumbled against the wall. It took him a moment too long to remember that he didn’t like that, and by then, it would have seemed absurd to make a fuss.

“Watch it, Potter,” Malfoy muttered, but there wasn’t any feeling behind it. He was too preoccupied with craning his neck around Harry to look up the spiral stairs. It annoyed Harry. Merlin, *why* would he care? Probably because Malfoy wasn’t paying attention to him. Old habits returned easily. Malfoy being suspicious wasn’t hard to react to.

“What are you doing here, Malfoy?”

Malfoy returned his attention to Harry. “I have an appointment.”

“You aren’t a Gryffindor.”

“Well spotted, Potter. Next you’ll tell me I’m not a Weasley.”

Harry rolled his eyes. Fucking wanker. They couldn’t even have a bit of British small talk without Malfoy saying things that were not exactly insults, but because they came from Malfoy, were insults.

He pushed past him, and tried to push him from his mind as well. He took the back stairs up to the seventh floor in a bit of a panic. Had he really just said he wanted to be a Potions Master? Wasn’t anyone going to remind him that he was rubbish at Potions?

For him to learn all the concepts in five months was going to be—he swallowed—it was going to be impossible. Even by Gryffindor standards…That is, unless he had a particular book. Harry detoured.

He stopped at the dancing troll portrait, stared at the blank expanse of wall across from him. Would the room even work anymore? He paced. *I need to find the Half-Blood Prince’s book.*

A door appeared. He approached it warily. The air around it was warmer than the rest. He laid his hand over the wood, and it felt hot and dry. The door handle was iron, and too hot to touch. He stepped back, swallowing heavily. He considered this; paced again. *I need a place to learn Potions.*

A new door appeared. He approached it. It was hot, the handle too hot to touch.
He paced. *I need a place, any place.*

A door appeared. The air was hot. The handle too hot to touch.

Damn it. How did one learn Potions without the Half-Blood Prince’s book? He was so buggered.

-x-

In the eighth year common room, Hermione was reading another letter from Ron with a distracted frown on her face. She looked up when he entered, and her expression changed to exasperated. “How does one handle post-relationship friendship with a Weasley?” she asked. “I’m sure I’ve no idea how it’s done.”

Neither did Harry, obviously.

“Don’t blame you.”

They turned to frown at Malfoy, who was now entering the portrait hole, looking entirely too pleased with himself for Harry’s liking. Why couldn’t Harry be pleased with himself, too? He bloody well deserved it by now.

“If it helps, I could get rid of him for you.”

“You are not killing Ron,” Harry said.

Malfoy gave him an inscrutable look. “Funny that that should be where your thoughts first went.” He turned back to Hermione. “If you really want to get rid of him, hint that you’re sleeping with me in one of your many *Prophet* interviews. I’d wager that’ll get you down to a card at Christmas and birthdays.”

To Harry’s annoyance, Hermione’s lips twitched at the corners. “You’re disgusting, Malfoy. What would be in it for you?”

He shrugged, smiling. “Annoying Weasley without having to actually do anything.” He paused, gave Hermione a look. “And I would *not* be doing anything, Granger. I don’t do witches. Don’t fall at my feet.”

Harry perked up, and it annoyed him that he did so. Malfoy swanned through Hogwarts as if his entire family hadn’t just been on the losing side of a war, while Harry spent half his waking moments, and a full third of his sleeping ones, wondering just what the fuck he was doing with his life. “Why are you so happy, Malfoy?”

Malfoy smiled, a slow pull of his lips that exposed a row of brilliant, not-quite-perfect, white teeth and possibly Harry’s heart, too. His canines were pushed a bit too far forward and how had Harry not realized before how erotic that was? His stomach dropped.

*Tandem broom rides, Fiendfyre, panicked breath on his neck, clammy hands clenching around his abdomen...pointy teeth nipping at his earlobes...*

Merlin, he was absolutely batty.

“Because I’m free now.”

*But so am I, and I’m not happy,* Harry thought as Malfoy sauntered off into his and Goyle’s
bedroom. He turned to Hermione. “I’m free, too, right?”

Hermione stared at him. “Oh, Harry…”

Oh. That wasn’t the right response. “What’s Ron have to say?” he asked quickly.

She knew what he was doing, but she let him do it. “Explaining his training partnership with Lavender in great detail. Why does he think I care what pastries she’s best at baking and which days she brings crullers and which days she brings tarts?”

Harry crinkled his nose. “It’s like she was made for him. Gross,” he added, thinking of the sorts of kinks they might share.

Hermione grinned a bit. “How did your session with Professor McGonagall go? Did she talk you into going into Healing?”

“Oh definitely not.” He stared down at his books, cursing himself for being such an idiot. There was nothing wrong with being an Auror. It was the sort of thing he did. He could be good at it. It could be fine.

It would be boring.

It would be exactly what wizarding Britain expected of him, and he didn’t want anything to do with their expectations. “Professor Snape was in his portrait, though.”

Hermione smiled, but she looked confused. “Is he well?”

“About as well as you can be if you’re dead, I suppose. He’s got a lab in his portrait.”

“I was thinking about what you said last week, about how I might be good at something if I had the time to try. And I think I want to do that. I don’t want to be ‘Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived and Was Only Mediocre at Everything Else.’ So, I thought, I might be good at Potions.”

The look on Hermione’s face froze. “But you aren’t.”

“That was McGonagall’s response, too. I think the only person who hasn’t wigged out about it is me, and I’m nearly there. Snape’s insulted that I’d even consider his profession.”

Hermione finally found her voice. “But Harry, you don’t—how are you going to—but Professor Slughorn’s not taking apprentices. He’s retiring.”

Harry smirked. “Professor Snape’s not retiring. He’s well past that.”

Hermione dropped her quill, and purple ink began to drool out onto her notes. She noticed and cast a hasty spell before all her pages were ruined. “Harry—are you out of your mind?”

He considered this. “Maybe. Probably. I just know that I don’t want to be an Auror because everyone expects me to, and I want to know what it’s like to really love magic like you do. I think maybe I could learn to love Potions. My boggart says I’m afraid of being like I am, so maybe what I’d really love is something I never would’ve guessed before. I have to know. I can’t stay the same.”

Hermione frowned. She had that look on her face that she got whenever she read something sad in the paper. “All right, Harry. If this is what you want, you know I’ll support you. And of course I’d
never be upset with my best friend deciding to be an academic. How are you going to catch up
enough to get an O, though?”

He grimaced. “Studying, apparently. I went by the Room to see if the Half-Blood Prince’s book—”

“Harry, you didn’t!” she whispered, leaning in to keep any of the ever-present Slytherins from
hearing their conversation.

He shrugged, feeling defensive. “I didn’t open the door. I think it’s still on fire.”

“Of course it’s still on fire!”

“Well whatever the case, I’ve got to start at the beginning,” he said. “Remedial Potions. I feel like
I’ve come full-circle.”

She grinned at this. “The last time you took Remedial Potions, it was an unmitigated disaster.”

There was that, yes. But he didn’t have to dwell on the past. The future was now and all that rot. “I
can do this, Hermione. I know I can.”

Hermione sighed. “You’ll need to know the theory behind Potion-making if you’re to have any
hope at all, and Snape only assigned that sort of reading in first and second year.”

Harry shuddered. “If I read seven years’ worth of textbooks before NEWTs, will I have a hope?”

“Probably not,” Hermione said, not without an apologetic look. “Potions-making isn’t just a
science, it’s an art. There are rules, but the rules are so vast and detailed and bendy that it would
take a lifetime just to learn the ones involved in a simple Pepper-Up Potion. Potions Masters
understand the theory and use their instincts for the rest.”

“How do people learn this stuff then?” he said. Life was too much sometimes. He flopped back
against the couch cushions and sighed. If he had to be an Auror just because he wasn’t good
enough at Potions, he would probably go Lockhart.

“It’s not a subject that can really be learned on one’s own. You should learn from a Master, or
someone who really understands the theory. Slughorn’s one of the only masters left in Britain, I’m
afraid.”

He scrunched his nose. “A really good tutor maybe?” Slughorn was difficult to digest in large
doses. It was exhausting to be around him.

She bit her lip. “There’re really only two students at Hogwarts who understand the theory well
enough to teach it to someone else. And I’m busy with my own studies.”

Hermione prevaricating was a terrible sign. Great. “Which leaves…”

Hermione’s lips curved; it was definitely a smirk. “Malfoy.”

Extracurricular time with Malfoy was a horrible idea. For one, he’d probably enjoy it. Right up
until Malfoy made some smart remark about Hermione’s parents, which was an even more
forbidden topic than before. Could he stand to be around Malfoy and keep his weird desires under
wraps in the interest of the greater good—or at least, his own greater good? Could he hide his
attraction long enough to learn from him?

It wasn’t a prospect that Harry relished, to be sure, but the longer they sat there, with Hermione
worrying her lip as she scanned his face for reaction, the more obvious it became that this was something he had to do. He was an adult now, and he needed the help if he was going to achieve what he needed.

When the decision came, it was almost freeing, in a way. He was terrified of undertaking a Potions apprenticeship, but it felt…right. He would be defined by this moment, he thought, where he abdicated the part of him that was rubbish at Potions, and became only the part of him that was great.

-x-
Calcination

03. Calcination

_A thermal treatment process in absence of air applied to ores and other solid materials to bring about a thermal decomposition, phase transition, or removal of a volatile fraction_

-x-

For all his determination, he was sort of terrified of actually approaching Malfoy. But he’d Sorted well, and by the end of the week, he’d convinced himself to get it over with. It was a nightmare about being an Auror that finally settled matters. Anything was better than that. Even Potions. Even three years as Snape’s apprentice.

Malfoy tended to grab his dinner and take it back to the common room, which had always been great in Harry’s opinion since he didn’t have to share a table with him, but now he wondered what it would be like to be around him, play Snap with him, talk Quidditch with him. _Be his friend. Be more._

Dangerous thoughts. But then, he’d always got a bit of a high from danger.

Harry waited for him outside the Great Hall doors in the interest of avoiding onlookers. Even while walking, Malfoy’s table manners were flawless. He was tearing off a piece of bread, buttering only that piece with a floating knife and butter.

“Malfoy—wait.”

Malfoy looked back but didn’t stop. He was wearing his reading glasses. Why Harry never noticed whenever he wore them before, he couldn’t say, because they were rather fetching.

“What is it, Potter?”

He fell into step beside him. The little butter knife kept following them, but Malfoy had stopped eating. “…”

Actually, now that he was doing it, he really had no idea whatsoever how to ask Malfoy for help. It wasn’t like they were _mates._

“I need help. From you.”

Malfoy frowned. “How horrible for you.”

Harry closed his eyes, briefly. This was a stupid idea. “I told McGonagall I wanted to be a Potions Master. So now I need to get an O on my Potion NEWT, and Hermione’s busy, and you’re the only other person smart enough to explain Potions theory to me.” He hesitated. The next words were painful to say: “I’m begging you. My future depends on this.”

When had he become so neurotic around Malfoy?

Malfoy stopped here, and the butter knife stopped with him. He unscrewed the cap on a posh glass water bottle and took a sip. He said, “Potter, have you lost your mind? You’re rubbish at Potions.”
Harry pursed his lips. “You aren’t.”

Malfoy shrugged. “True, but I’m preparing for a Transfigurations apprenticeship. I don’t have time to teach you Potions. Nor do I care to.”

So that was what he was seeing McGonagall about. “I’ll pay you.”

Malfoy looked incredulous. “What would I do with more money?”

“I’ll pay you another way.”

This made Malfoy pause, and it was a moment before Harry realised what he’d said, and his face burned. Malfoy looked Harry up and down, like he was a racehorse he was considering purchasing. He smirked, and it wasn’t a nice, amused one like Hermione’s.

“I meant, I could help you with something, too.”

“Are you any good at Transfigurations?” Malfoy asked. He sipped his water again, as if this was the dullest thing that’d ever happened to him.


Reluctantly, he said: “Average.”

Malfoy shook his head. “Not interested. See you, Potter.”

“Wait!”

Malfoy paused, but he didn’t look pleased about it. Harry didn’t care. He still needed to get an O, whether he got to satisfy his morbid curiosity about Malfoy in the interim or not. “Wait—could you just, maybe tell me where I could start then? A book that would explain the foundations to me in… I don’t know, muggleborn terms?”

Malfoy snorted. “Merlin, Potter, you’re as mad as a centaur. But it’ll at least be interesting watching you fail. You do that well enough. Try Dosage by Paracelsus. It explains the importance of balance, measurement, and ingredient preparation. All foundations of brewing. Are you sure you can understand things like centimetres and millilitres?”

He’d already turned the corner when Harry’d parsed out the insults and remembered to yell out, “Thanks, Malfoy!” but ‘Fuck off, Potter,’ came floating back anyway.

-x-

Madam Pince appeared aggrieved when he asked where the Potions section was. She pointed wordlessly, and Harry followed the gesture to the north corner of the library where the wall sconces seemed to be struggling against the shadows.

The wizarding cataloguing system had only helped to stomp out whatever Ravenclaw tendencies he might’ve once had. It took him twenty minutes to find Paracelsus, who was not located near any other P authors, but instead under a sub-category of German and Swiss wizards who wrote on Alchemy, Potions, Poultices, and Transmutation, sorted by year and relevance to modern magic.
When he’d asked for muggleborn terms, he’s meant modern muggleborn terms.

*Dosage* was written in the most obstructive, archaic language Harry had ever had the misfortune of encountering. He took lots of notes as he forced himself through the first few chapters, but he wasn’t sure they helped, and he really had no idea what an Azoth was or why it was so essential to Alchemy.

*Get a plan,* Hermione’d said. *Work backwards from the big potions you’ll need to know for the NEWT, and subcategorise them into details of things you need to relearn…or learn altogether.*

It sounded great in theory.

Hermione’s own research into the matter of NEWTs two years ago confirmed that students were always asked to brew one of six standard potions and answer questions on three of the other five:


He would need to brew one of those, perfectly, without aid of notes. Each of them was so complex, convoluted, arbitrary, and time-consuming, that it would be impossible for anyone to really remember the recipes by heart without actually understanding the way the magic of potions worked.

He wrote each of those at the top of a piece of parchment with lines breaking them down by ingredients, preparation, base, cauldron, brewing style and time, and underlying theories. *Off to a good start,* he thought.

In his notes, he scrawled:

*The first step of brewing a potion is to determine the appropriate base. (How???)*  
*Bases separated into 7 categories:*  
1) **distilled water**  
2) **aqua vitae**  
3) **aqua regia**  
4) **aqua fortis**  
5) **cinnabar** – maybe should be used in nutrient potions since it sounds like it tastes good at least?  
6) **vitriol** – no doubt what Snape made all his potions out of  
7) **sal ammoniac**

Determining the base. Okay. He made a note. He would need to cross-reference that before he left tonight, to find a text more focused on that sort of thing. He was making progress. He was at least learning how far behind he was.

“Well, well, well. Charm me surprised. You’re actually reading.”

Harry tensed. The skin on his shoulders felt warm and tingly. Malfoy was right behind him. He could almost feel the warmth of his skin. He turned. “Malfoy.”

Malfoy inclined his head. “I thought you were having me on, I admit. But here you are, studying Potions.”
“Here I am,” Harry agreed. “Can I help you?”

“No, as we’ve already established.”

Nevertheless, Malfoy moved around the table and pulled the spare chair out. The loss of his body heat in the air around Harry was palpable and aggravating.

Malfoy was like Fiendfyre, probably. It was not good to be near him, even if he did warm Harry up.

Malfoy dropped a copy of *Metamorphosis* on the table, and sat. It was at least five inches thick and therefore unlikely the one by Kafka that Hermione read in third year.

“You’d definitely not want to use cinnabar in a nutrient potion,” Malfoy said offhandedly. He flipped a page. “It’s another name for mercury. Moron.”

“How do you know when to use which base?”

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “How do you know which arm movement to use with a new spell?”

Harry scrunched his nose. “Some movements just feel right.”

Malfoy looked up at this. “Interesting. So you are intuitive. I’d wondered.” Seemingly realising he’d sort of complimented Harry, he concluded: “At least you have that going for you.”

“I’m a Gryffindor, it’s what we do.”

Malfoy muttered something unflattering under his breath. Then: “Intuitive magic user, Potter. *Really.* It’s all in how you direct your magic. About half of all wizards can intuit the right spell movement or the right potion prep or what have you. The other half have to learn each part for everything they do, using a tried and true formula instead of their own innate understanding of magic. They do much worse on their exams, generally.”

The table seemed much smaller all of the sudden. Malfoy’s voice had a way of reverberating softly off the walls and books of the library and coming back to Harry’s skin. He felt warm. He wanted to know what Malfoy was like around his Slytherins, when it was just them and their mythical weekend hedonism fests. Maybe he could trick it out of Millicent.

It became apparent that Malfoy had no intention of speaking to him anymore; he was just after the good lighting at Harry’s table. That wasn’t acceptable.

Harry cleared his throat. “So, Transfigurations.” Malfoy made an agreeable noise, which was a good sign. “Why? I didn’t even know you were good at Transfigurations. I thought you were good at Potions.”

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “I can be good at more than one thing. Just like you can be average at more than one thing.”

“I’m good at Quidditch.”

Malfoy turned a page, didn’t look up. “So go play Quidditch.”

Harry huffed. “I want to do something unexpected. I don’t want to be average—well, I do, but not at magic, just at personality.”

“I assure you, Potter,” said Malfoy, as he jotted down a note in green ink (the same colour ink
Harry liked), “you are average at personality, too.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. Malfoy was just being a twat, which was nothing new. Why Harry supposed Malfoy might have changed was beyond him—or rather, Malfoy had changed, just not in a way that Harry wanted. What he wanted, he could admit in the abyssal corners of his mind, was Malfoy’s attention. And he was making a fool of himself trying to get it.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“You said it.”

“You know what I meant,” said Harry, staring angrily at his own green inkwell. “I don’t want to only be good for dark lord defeating and printing gossipy stories about.”

The silence stretched, but when he looked up again, Malfoy was looking at him, his eyes strangely bright. “I know.”

The intensity of his stare left Harry momentarily breathless. There was just something about Malfoy that made Harry feel volatile, like a potion one Stasis Spell away from explosion.

Malfoy was already back to his book, staring intently at the animated daguerreotype of a witch morphing into a bat and back again. His bottom lip was caught beneath his two crooked canines, and it was, perhaps, the most sensual thing Harry had ever seen.

“You’re trying for your Animagus form?”

Malfoy nodded. His lip remained caught. Harry stared at his mouth, paying only half a mind to the words coming out of his own. “Hermione and I did a bit of that last Christmas. She had a book on it and we were trying to…keep our minds off Ron.”

Malfoy of course had no idea what he was talking about, but it seemed to get his attention anyway. “How far did you get?”

“Indigenisation,” said Harry. It was the third step behind meditation and visualisation and the last step before an initial partial transformation. “We learned our forms and then Ron came back, and we had a lead again, so we stopped.” Because there were more important things to worry about again.

Malfoy pushed his book aside. “What’s your form?”

Harry smirked. “Not saying.”

“Must be stupid, then,” Malfoy said. “Are you fluffy?”

Harry didn’t have any problem with his form anymore, but he’d finally got Malfoy’s attention, and he wasn’t going to relinquish it so quickly. “Tell me yours first.”

Malfoy scowled. “No.”

The way he looked at his inkwell, then his fancy ten galleon quill, then Madam Pince, made it clear. Slowly, Harry grinned. “You can’t do it, can you?”

“Of course I can.”

“You don’t even know what yours is going to be. You can’t visualise it, can you?”
“I only started trying a couple months ago,” Malfoy said hotly. “It’s not as if it’s a weekend floo parlour renovation.”

“I got to the third step in under a month. I bet I know why you can’t do step two,” said Harry.

Malfoy sighed, pushed his book to the side. “Potter—”

“No, really,” Harry said. “I had trouble with visualisation, too, until I realised what I was doing wrong. If you help me catch up on Potions, I’ll show you how to transform.”

Malfoy paused. His eyes lifted, met Harry’s. They were cold, mercurial, mutable—like cinnabar. “Fine. Friday. In the spare dungeon classroom. But I warn you—I won’t be your Pocket Potioneer. I’ll give you advice, but you have to do the work.”

Harry turned back to his book and notes, but he couldn’t help the stupid smile crossing his face. “Okay. Good.” Malfoy merely hummed in response, but that was okay, that was good.

Know your base, Dosage said.

Harry understood that passage now—Potions were a bit like him and Malfoy: Volatile ones needed a volatile base. Fortifying ones needed a fortified base. Life-giving ones needed a life-giving base. Cinnabar, Aqua Fortis, Aqua Vitae. Malfoy was probably all those things to Harry.

The more he understood Malfoy, the more he understood Potions.

-x-
Harry was only taking four classes this year—Potions, Transfigurations, Defence, and Charms—but he was buggered if he could remember anything Flitwick or the new Defence teacher said. He couldn’t even remember the Defence teacher’s name.

All of his attention was divided between Potions—where he was becoming more and more fascinated with the vagaries of effect between pewter and gold cauldrons (it was amazing what he’d learned with just two chapters of *Gold Cauldrons: The Ark of the Coveting and Other Potioneering Myths*) and Transfigurations, where he tried valiantly to follow along with Professor Switch’s lecture while not letting Hermione catch him following Malfoy’s wand movements instead.

Malfoy really was graceful at it. And assured. Watching him transfigure clocks into candelabras and those into camels was irritatingly arousing to both mind and body.

Professor Switch dismissed them, and Hermione had to kick Harry under the table before he understood what was happening. He swished all of his things into his bag without even ensuring his ink was capped. Potions was next, and he could always use a siphoning spell.

“Harry, wait!” Hermione said as he sped off. Her legs weren’t quite as long as his and she was glaring at him as he turned around. “Honestly. One would think you were looking forward to Potions.”

“I am.”

She eyed him distrustfully. “Yes, I suppose you are. Oddly.” They fell into step and she took the shortcut through the dingy service passage that came out near Professor Snape’s old office.

“Potter.”

Harry grimaced. They stopped and faced a John William Waterhouse of a nude siren brushing kelp from her hair against a dramatic water break. Snape’s face and manner of dress were incompatible with pre-Raphaelite art, and yet he soldiered on. It was very like Snape to be so determined and so utterly ruinous of an otherwise agreeable scene.

“And Granger, I see. No Weasley? The heavens rejoice.”

“Hello, Professor Snape.” Hermione was the only person he knew who could remain absolutely polite under the most uncomfortable of circumstances. Or no—Malfoy probably could, too.

“Yes, Professor?” said Harry, who could do without the small talk, all things considered.

“I saw your little makeshift laboratory in the spare Potions classroom. Very…quaint.”

Harry clenched his fists. He hated being mocked. “Thanks. It’s really better for fumes, I’ve found. Plus, the stable temperature provided by the windowless, draught-free dungeon climate is ideal for
Snape rolled his eyes. “You think you’re clever now that you’ve done a little background reading. An Acceptable-average first year Hufflepuff could have told you the benefits of dungeons for the brewing process.”

Harry scowled. “I’ll get an O,” he said. “I’ll brew all of them perfectly, and then we’ll see who’s smirking.”

Snape smirked. “I assure you, it will be me. All the Grangers in the world couldn’t prepare you to brew even one of the NEWT potions on your own.”

“Good thing I’ve got Malfoy helping me now, too, then.”

Snape’s eyes narrowed. There was a silence, during which Harry hid how pleased he was that he’d rendered Snape speechless. “Enjoy this game while you can.”

“I will, Professor. For the next three years. Hope you’re as excited as I am.”

With a roll of his eyes, Snape disappeared from the siren’s beach and she looked much relieved by it. Hermione waved to her, ever polite.

“Harry, you really shouldn’t antagonise him so. Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“Hmm?”

“Should you have a backup plan? You know, you could still go into broom-making without a Potions NEWT.”

He tossed his things down on their normal bench and frowned. “No.”

He ignored her sigh. Professor Slughorn was late and still munching on a brandied pineapple when he exited his office into the classroom.

“Cauldrons out, everyone. I hope you all remembered to bring your bronze ones today because we’ll be starting the Suntan Solution. You’ll all thank me for this in June when you’re holidaying in the Mediterranean.”

Harry unshrunk his bronze cauldron and set a low fire burning beneath. Hermione, who’d finished just before him, eyed him as he adjusted the flame height with a scowl. The burner at this desk was emotional, and it didn’t care for Wednesdays. He’d never noticed that before last week.

“What are you doing?”

He bit his lip to hold back a yelp as the flame jumped up and scorched his fingertips. “Fixing my flame.”

“Oh?”

“It’s faulty. It’ll burn my potion if it doesn’t settle down.”

He jabbed the burner with his wand and directed a strongly-worded thought at it; there weren’t particular spells for this sort of thing, only annoyance and magical power. Finally, it settled down into a stable, low burn, although not without resentment.

“How did you know?”
“Studied,” he said. “Haven’t you seen me?” It’d been all he did for days now.

“Well, yes, but I didn’t think you’d retained any of it.”

“You’ll see,” he said. Harry could do more than defeat evil. He could be talented, too. Probably.

“I see you’ve wrangled that burner into submission, Mr Potter. Good show, good show. That desk’s always been finicky on Wednesdays.”

It annoyed him that he’d been sitting at this desk for seven years, and not once had Snape ever mentioned a finicky burner. But then the budding-Potions aficionado in him said that it was Snape’s way of weeding out the ones who didn’t care, or have the talent. After all, it was obvious that this flame bounced around more than the others. Shouldn’t he have noticed it himself before now?

He was defending Snape, and it made him sort of hate himself.

Hermione returned with their basket of ingredients and he set to work finely slicing the herbs per the book’s directions, and chopping the animal bits with less finesse to save time. On his NEWTs, he’d only get a set amount of time to brew his potion. He knew now that he could save time on the fatty bits because of the way fat reacted with other ingredients.

Twenty minutes in, both his and Hermione’s potions were a steady buttercream colour. *Stir thrice widdershins, reverse, stir thrice again.*

He did so. His neck prickled as he set his stirring rod (glass, not wood) down again. When he turned to look, Malfoy was staring right at him with the most intense look Harry’d ever seen on him. The steam rising from his own cauldron made his face flushed and damp. Across the room, someone’s potion hissed warningly, and Malfoy smirked at him before returning to his own.

Harry swallowed. For a moment, all he could think of was that *this was probably what Malfoy looked like during a shag.*

His wand timer chirruped at the forty-five minute mark and he checked the text for the next step. *Decant 1 oz, check scent for ambiguities. If odour vague, lower heat. If odour decided, raise heat.*

What?

He decanted an ounce, sniffed it. It smelled…well, it had a smell. Sort of coconuttty, sort of pineappply. Probably why Slughorn was so excited about this one today. But was it a vague scent or a decided scent?

He looked around the room, and saw that roughly half were upping their heat and another half lowering theirs. Malfoy was lowering his. Hermione was raising hers. Two paths, each equally valid in different circumstances. But what was his path? This was entirely too poetic for his sensibilities.

His wand buzzed once with a 30 second warning. *Up or down?* He sniffed the decanted potion again. He was undecided about the smell. His wand buzzed for 15 seconds. *Up or down, up or down?* Vague, he decided, and quickly lowered the heat.

In another minute, his potion would either turn white and goopy or bronze and creamy. He looked around the room again, watching cauldron after cauldron turn the warm bronze of a well-made Suntan Solution. Pansy Parkinson and Daphne Greengrass were already dabbing some on their hands to test and giggling at the patches of sun-bronzed skin it left behind.
He turned around again. Malfoy was focused on his buttery potion, the steam making his hair fall around his face. An alarm buzzed on his Hawthorn wand, and the potion turned a shimmery bronze. Malfoy looked up at him, the corner of his mouth pulled up in something that wasn’t quite a smirk.

Harry’s wand chirped again. Hermione inhaled sharply. He was afraid to turn around. Would his be the only white, goopy potion in the whole class? Would this be the determinant in his life—this one failed potion that would be on his NEWTs and prevent him from apprenticing?

Malfoy craned his neck to see into Harry’s cauldron. He looked back, expression muted. When their eyes met again, Harry knew. Even without any outward expression—he could read Malfoy, he realised. Better even than he could read Hermione’s gasps.

He turned around. His potion was bronze, creamy, and smelled decidedly of coconut. He closed his eyes and couldn’t stop the relief from washing over his face.

Slughorn called: “I’ll have a decanted sample on my desk before you leave, then a twelve inch essay on the process due a week from today. And don’t forget that you’re all invited to my little party this Saturday evening. Eight pm, come dressed for success and fun!”

-x-
Fixation

05. Fixation

A process by which a previously volatile substance is transformed into a form that is not affected by fire; the separation of a substance before being recombined into another shape at the subatomic level

-x-

Friday may have only been five days away, but those five days took five years to actually pass.

“Harry, you aren’t obsessing over my Riddikulus, are you?”

He stopped short, one hand already pressing against the back of the portrait. “What do you mean?”

Hermione pursed her lips, and craned her neck up to confirm that no one else was lingering near the balustrade at the top of the stairs. “You’ve had that obsessed look about you again, like sixth year all over. And you’ve been looking at Malfoy all week. And now you’re leaving to meet with him—don’t pretend like you’re surprised I figured that out. I was just teasing you. You don’t need to sneak around to see him. I don’t mind that you want to be friends—I know you’re not into him.”

That’s what you think. “He said he’d help.”

Hermione’s look was decidedly sardonic. “In exchange for what?”

Did anyone think he had anything to offer? “He’s stuck trying to get his Animagus.”

It was guaranteed to get Hermione’s mind rolling in another direction, and it worked like a charm. “Oh, we really should finish ours…we were so close.”

“Are you sure you want to finish?” he asked, smirking a bit.

“My form isn’t that bad.” But she was frowning. “It’s very practical.”

Harry smirked. “Brings back memories, I’m sure.” Then: “Do you think it would bring back memories for Bulstrode? She’d probably try to exorcise you if she ever found you in her room.”

Millicent’s first pet, Dark Lady, hadn’t died until the first week back for eighth year. Upon first seeing it in her room that first night back, Hermione had sent Harry a frantic message that required six rotations of the Protean Charm on his galleon.

It’s her cat! Thought it looked familiar in Visualiz. Exactly same markings as Bulstrode’s flng cat. Must have been PJP—somehow changed my DNA when taken. Now thinks actual cat is my Animagus. BOLLOCKS.

Millicent, for her part, was not one to linger, and had replaced Dark Lady with her physical and metaphorical opposite by the weekend. Peep was white, frequently terrified, and annoying as fuck.

“Just go, Harry,” she said, throwing a quill at him in exasperation. “But do try not to obsess over Malfoy this year. He’s almost certainly not up to anything except getting his NEWTs. And even if he is, it’s Ron’s problem now.”
By some miracle, he managed to get to the spare Potions classroom before Malfoy, and even had his practise cauldron set up on the fire, carefully heating to a rumbling simmer. Whatever the fuck that means, Harry once would’ve thought. But now his Potions-making knowledge was coming right along, and he knew the difference between a low simmer, a rumbling simmer, and a boil.

Malfoy came in looking harassed. His hair was disarrayed and his mouth was set in a brooding line. The lines above his nose softened as he noticed Harry at the front desk, and the soothing minty smell steaming up from his cauldron.

“Cold Cure?” he asked.

“Yes. It’s tricky.”

Malfoy frowned. “Tricky’s not the word I’d use.”

He set his things down next to Harry’s cauldron, and they regarded each other for a moment. It was only now that Harry remembered that they were not exactly friends, no matter what his mind might suggest to him at times. If he couldn’t get his mind off Malfoy, did it mean he was obsessing, or did it mean that the world was trying to bring to his attention something wonderful and profound? Something that could maybe be if only they could just distill like one of Harry’s new potions.

“Tip for tip,” Malfoy said. “That’s how we’ll do this. Me first.”

Harry nodded, fought down a smile. Of course Malfoy would want to go first. Malfoy looked as though he expected more argument from Harry and was discomfited when he didn’t receive it, though he recovered soon enough.

“Good. I do fine with the meditation, but when I try to visualise, I don’t get anything. I know I’m doing it right.”

“Nothing?” Harry asked. “Not even a hint?”

Malfoy crossed his arms. “No.”

Harry leaned back against the table behind him, thinking over the desperately lonely Christmas he and Hermione had endured last year. Save for their terrifying run-in with Nagini, they’d been thoroughly alone and trackless. What had it been like when he first saw his form for the first time? Maybe seeing wasn’t the right term for it. It was more that he understood it. Understood it with the same bitter acceptance that he’d understood the meaning of the message on Dumbledore’s snitch the night he walked into the Forest.

But he was past that now, and he could see the value in things he’d have once spurned. Like his Animagus form.

“What do you feel when you reach the end of the meditation stage?”

Malfoy shifted. “Restless.”

Harry stilled. Restless, skittish...death, death, death. He remembered those feelings as if it’d been
just yesterday, and not well over a year ago.

“Anything else?”

Malfoy shrugged. “A need to run.” He looked away. “Meditation isn’t supposed to make you feel like you’re caged.”

“I felt restless, too,” Harry said, and was more sure than ever that he knew the reason Malfoy couldn’t complete his visualisation. “It was part of my animal’s instincts.”

“What’s your animal?”

Harry smirked. “Nope. I’ll show you mine when you show me yours.”

Malfoy frowned. “I can’t even get to the visualisation.”

“You’re overthinking it,” said Harry, who was grateful Malfoy apparently hadn’t caught Harry’s Freudian slip. “It’s probably part of your animal’s temperament. Why don’t you meditate again here, and when you reach the visualisation stage, focus on the feelings of restlessness instead of pulling out of the meditation.”

“The books all said that when I reach the visualisation stage, I’ll be calm and prepared for change.”

“Maybe you are,” said Harry. “Maybe your Occlumency training helped you enough that your meditation works a little differently, and when you try to visualise, you’re so primed for it that you go right into your animal’s mind.”

Malfoy still looked unconvinced. “Just try it and see,” Harry said.

Malfoy sat down on the chair next to Harry; his eyes fell shut. He was so close, and it was so incredibly stimulating. Harry had never noticed how delicate and pink the skin above Malfoy’s eyes was. How tired he looked when they were closed and the redness of his lids was visible. He breathed softly and Harry found himself thinking that if things could change, he would change them so that he could be near Malfoy breathing like that all the time.

He reached out, laid his hand over Malfoy’s arm before he even realised what he was doing. Malfoy’s eyes snapped open, mercurial and fierce and so very close. “What—”

Harry swallowed, felt his face flame like the finicky burner in Slughorn’s class. “You owe me a tip first.”

Malfoy eyed his cauldron. The water in his spare pewter cauldron was simmering now, but Harry hadn’t done anything else to it. “Is that just distilled water?” he asked. Harry nodded. “Set up your lead cauldron with a vitriol base and watch the differences in how they heat.”

“That’s not a tip.”

“Yes it is.” Malfoy closed his eyes again and proceeded to completely ignore Harry while he set about with his meditation.

Annoyed, Harry unshrunk his lead cauldron and dug through his potions kit for the sample bottle of vitriol base that came with every standard kit. It was dusty and still had sealing wax around the cork, but appeared fresh enough when Harry opened it. He tipped it carefully into the cauldron and adjusted the flame beneath it.
Malfoy’s breathing was evening out. He sat very straight, but still managed to look lax and carefree in a way that would’ve made Harry just look slumpy if he’d tried to imitate it. The steam from Harry’s water-filled cauldron was curling the tips of his hair again. That day in Slughorn’s class felt like it’d happened years ago, or maybe seconds ago.

Harry checked on his Cold Cure potion and added in the final ingredients. Merlin, this potion was annoying to brew. He’d started it six times already and he usually ruined it within the first twenty minutes. This was only the second time he’d made it to the third step.

His other two cauldrons should have been simmering now, but the lead one wasn’t. He checked his wand timer. Twelve minutes, still no rumbling simmer. Beneath the cauldron, the flame looked fine. He touched the side of the cauldron, and it felt warm, too.

Suddenly, Malfoy twitched and was nearly out of his chair before his eyes even opened. He saw Harry and froze like a deer, slowly lowered himself back down.

“Wanted to run,” he said quietly. He peered into Harry’s lead cauldron. The vitriol was green and oily and had a terrible smell.

“This really goes in potions people drink?” Harry asked. Malfoy rolled his eyes.

“See how it gets hot but doesn’t boil? How could that be useful?”

Oh. “In potions that need to get really hot to brew without hurting the ingredients, like dragon nutrient potions and flame retardants for brooms.”

Malfoy seemed pleased. “Now siphon a bit and put it in your water cauldron. Just a bit.”

The water hissed and began to evaporate. Malfoy swished his wand lightning-fast and transfigured the pewter of his cauldron into lead. “Vitriol ruins most metals, Potter,” he said tightly. “Lead. Always lead.”

Feeling decidedly stupid, Harry nodded, and together they watched the bit of green acid dry up all the water and then gather at the bottom of his cauldron in a prim little pool of rank-smelling oil. And then Harry understood.

“You can guess what type of potion you’re looking at by the container or cauldron it’s in, and by the way it reacts or doesn’t react with heat and water.”

Malfoy grinned. “Right in one. The best lesson for a Potions Master is knowing what he’s brewed or what he’s looking at. Never drink from a lead cup, never let a servant wearing a tungsten ring serve your food.”

“Who’d drink from a lead cup anyway?”

Malfoy shrugged. “We only use glass goblets for guests at home, or copper if the occasion calls for it. Much more polite than silver or gold, which can hide a number of nasty things.”

Harry nodded, processing this information and sorting it into the newly formed categories in his mind. He recalled previous potions from class and committed their bases’ behaviours to memory. Now that he knew to look for it, the pattern was there all along.

He swished his wand and cleaned up the vitriol, having no wish to accidentally spill any of that on himself or the table. “So, restless again?”
Malfy frowned. “Yes. I feel like I’ve got to leave right now whenever I get to that stage.”

“Would it help if I were doing it with you?”

“How could that possibly help?”

“I don’t know, maybe having another person would anchor you.”

Malfy stood. “I don’t need to be anchored, Potter. I think we’re done for tonight.”

He’d collected his book and left before Harry could even formulate a response. Harry stared at the doorway, and the dark, empty corridor beyond, completely baffled. What had he done to put Malfy so off?

-x-

Extraordinarily, Malfy sat next to him at breakfast the following morning.

Across from him, Hermione lowered her Prophet and flicked her eyes between the two of them. Harry could see the gears turning and he hated it because he didn’t want to answer questions and he didn’t know how to even if he did. Fortunately, Millicent came in next and shoved in beside Hermione, quickly pulling her into what Harry was beginning to suspect was an Arithmancy-based form of foreplay. Hermione was certainly responding to it.

He turned to Malfy, if only to look away from Hermione’s flushed cheeks and how like Malfy’s they looked when he was leaning over a cauldron.

“Good morning.”

Malfy was poshly buttering his bread again. “Hullo.”

“Did you practise anymore last night?”

Malfy scowled, shoved some toast in his mouth. “Yes.”

Well perhaps a different tact then. “I read an article in this week’s issue of Potions Today that discussed the limited use of sal ammoniac as a base in recent times. It said it was because—”

“Mass-manufactured cauldrons.”

Harry hesitated. “You read it?”

“No,” said Malfy. “I’ve just made a lot of potions in my life. Factory produced cauldrons have always reacted poorly with it. Something about the charms used on them. It brews fine in my stone cauldron at home.”

“You are really good at Potions, aren’t you,” Harry muttered. He stabbed at his banger and felt genuinely bitter about life for a moment. Malfy was ace at Transfigurations and Potions and Harry was just playing along, trying to prove a point to his goddamned boggart.

“You can tell you don’t really like Potions that much,” Malfy added, and Harry hated him all the more for being able to read him so well. Merlin fuck, he was trying to like them. He was even reading the sodding publications. What more did they want from him?
“You’ll never be any good unless you do, which is a shame since you’ve got intuition. You have to love something to do it properly.”

“Which is how you’re so great at Animagus transformations.”

Immediately, he regretted it, but it was too late. Malfoy’s face had already transformed from open and genial to the closed off façade he’d worn all through the war. It was a face Harry hadn’t realised he never wanted to see again until he did, in fact, see it again.

“Animagus transformation is merely one aspect of the school of Transfigurations, Potter. At least I can turn a fish into a bird without asphyxiating it. I haven’t seen you do that or brew a successful potion in recent memory.”

“I just did the Suntan Solution,” Harry said, indignant.

And the Cold Cure had come out useable last night. People were starting to look and he spelled up a Muffliato with an angry flick of his wrist. Malfoy watched the movement, his eyes widening fractionally, but then the sneer returned.

“Yes, that’s why your skin has an orange tint today. Trying to get a head start on your base tan for Majorca?”

“I am not—” Harry looked down at his arm, frowned. “Fine. I’m a bit orange. Amber, really.”

Malfoy hmmed in a decidedly disbelieving manner. “Perhaps it’s a good thing you only took a bit of it.”

Harry was still frowning down at the sort of peach tint to his arm. Bugger, he was going to have to drink lemon juice to counteract it.

When he realised he’d thought of the antidote without really thinking about it, he was supremely pleased with himself. Then he remembered that he’d been pleased when he made the potion, too. “I thought I’d done it perfectly…”

Malfoy smirked. “Works well enough. It made your skin darker. It just makes you a bit salmon at the same time.”

“But it looked just like yours.”

Malfoy shrugged. “It’s an art. You can repaint a Dali by following a template, but it doesn’t matter how perfectly you do it. It still won’t be art unless you’re an artist, too. You have to take a formula and transform it to make in meaningful. That’s the point of Potions.”

Harry sighed. That…made a lot of sense. “I’m sorry for what I said. I still want to work together. You know a lot and you’ve already helped, and I really need help. What if I did my Animagus with you? I’m just a bit ahead. We could transform together and I could give you better advice if I’m doing it at the same time.”

Malfoy regarded him. “All right, fine. But not tonight. I’m going to Sluggy’s.”

“Not gate-crashing this time?”

“This time I was actually invited.”

And when Malfoy smiled at him, it was the worst thing in the world. There was no way Harry
would ever be able to move past this one time, when, for a moment, he’d been the only thing on Malfoy’s mind, and it’d been a good thought.

But then Malfoy stood to leave, breaking the moment and the muffling spell, and leaving Harry stuck half-transformed and wholly undone. His entire life was becoming an Animagus transformation. He just wasn’t sure which he wanted to be—human or animal, present or future, Harry or…someone who liked Malfoy.

-x-

He walked down to Slughorn’s with Hermione, who looked radiant but distracted in her scandalously low-cut green dress. It showed off her scar from Dolohov’s curse, and made her look dangerous and fierce and bloody hot all at once. Ron would be so miffed he missed this.

It was February, and Harry hadn’t written to him since that first letter back after holidays, to let him know they’d made it safely. C’est la dying best-mateness.

If things had been different, Harry thought, if Ron had never had first call on Hermione, he could’ve fallen for her too, maybe. Things would’ve been simpler that way. But things hadn’t been, and Ron had, and Harry’d noticed Malfoy instead. And now, it seemed, Hermione noticed someone else, too. Which was probably for the best since Ron would come closer to being Harry’s soul mate than hers, being as he was largely attracted only to men and androgynous-looking women.

Millicent had always had a tough, brooding sort of look. Tonight she had her heavy hair pulled off her face in thick, wrapped braids, and her dress was black, leather, and scandalously tight. Has Millicent’s waist always been small enough to wrap one arm around? Merlin, it was indecent how she curved. She looked mean and vaguely foreign, and then Harry realised the xenophobia the Dursleys bred into him was showing its arse and he decided she looked striking instead. She was staring at them with a particular look, and it made Harry uncomfortable.

“I have to talk to Millicent about our project with Professor Vector. I’ll see you, Harry.”

Well. Harry hadn’t counted on having to go stag for this thing, but it looked like he wouldn’t get a say in the matter. Which was bollocks, really, because he was not, by nature, a very sociable person. He was more of a dark lord-killing person—a vocation that typically did not leave a great deal of room for being the life of a party.

He sloped off to the refreshments table and hoped that some enterprising student had come by earlier to spike the punch. Upon pouring himself a glass, he found that not to be the case, but positioned himself in a corner to nurse it anyway. Networking was not his thing. It wasn’t long before his peace was interrupted.

“Quaint, isn’t it?” said Malfoy.

“Hmm?”

“Our dates. Dating each other, it seems.”

Harry wrinkled his nose. “No idea what she sees in her.” Although that was a lie, since Millicent was firmly in that second category of people Harry found visually appealing. Maybe it wasn’t so much that Harry liked certain types of men and women over others; maybe it was just that he liked the look of someone who could fight with him and not lose all the time.
Malfoy sneered. “I could say the same.”

Rolling his eyes, Harry finished off his punch. He moved to get another glass, but Malfoy stopped him with a hand on his forearm. “Care for a real drink?” He waved a silver flask at Harry. It gleamed in the candlelight and made Harry think of the mercurial silver of a decent Cold Cure Potion.

Harry hesitated for only half a second. “Yeah, all right.”

He flicked his hand out and summoned two glasses of pumpkin-cranberry punch for them, and Malfoy’s eyes followed the movement as if he’d never seen anything like it. But he and Harry had never been friends before so of course he’d never seen Harry do something nice for him. Unless one counted saving his life. Harry really didn’t. That was just something the old-him did, like a hobby.

Malfoy tipped his flask of firewhisky over the glasses. “Cheers.”

“Cheers,” Harry echoed, and took a swig. It burned. It tasted like fiery cranberry. It was amazing. They settled into an easy camaraderie there in the corner, ragging on the other seventh and eighth years in attendance, and for a while, Harry liked it.

“Why do you suppose,” Malfoy said sometime later, “they’ve become so attached? Every time I look for Mill, she’s off with Granger.”

Harry shrugged, feeling uncomfortable. “Hermione’s been dying for another girl to be friends with for so long, I think she latched onto the first one who shared an interest with her. No one in Gryffindor really…gets her.”

Malfoy hummed thoughtfully. “Probably the same for Mill, then. I guess it’s good. Even if it means the two of us have to spend the evening entertaining one another. What a pathetic pair we are. Dumped even by our platonic dates.”

Harry sipped his spiked juice, keeping the glass high to cover his smile. He could think of worse ways to spend the evening, all things considered. “Speak for yourself. Hermione makes plenty of time for me. I reckon you’re just bad with women.”

“Definitely true,” Malfoy said. Said casually; Malfoy wasn’t even looking at Harry. “But Mill’s great for talking Quidditch, and her fantasy team is the only one that ever gives mine any real difficulty.” He frowned. “She’s not doing it this season—no time, she says. Bollocks, if you ask me. There’s always time for Quidditch, and who am I going to compete with now? Everyone else is rubbish.”

His distress over the lack of his fantasy league buddy was, frankly, endearing. It made Harry feel warm. “You’re in a league? I’ll go in.” Dangerous, Harry, he thought. He didn’t care.

Malfoy raised an eyebrow, but didn’t shoot him down. Which was why it was so easy for Harry to keep running his mouth and making a fool of himself.

“Ron and I always talked about entering a league, but the entry fee is a bit strong for him, and he didn’t like to let me cover him, so we never did.”

Malfoy smirked, but refrained, thank Merlin, from making a comment on Ron’s financial standings. “All right, Potter. You can be my Mill, but I assure you, the entry fee for our league is even stronger than anything run by the Daily Prophet. We’re picking teams down at the Three Broomsticks tomorrow lunch. Galleons up front. Magpies versus Pride on the wireless to follow.”
Harry grinned. “Brill.” And was Malfoy looking pleased, too? Harry thought so.

“Harry! And Draco! What an absolutely outstanding bit of luck,” Slughorn said as he came upon them. He slapped them both heartily on the shoulder and then stepped back to do the same to the companion he’d brought along.

“Two very fine Potions students I’d like to introduce you to, Miguela. Harry, Draco—Miguela Caldeirao. Miguela is Ministra de Poções—that’s Minister of Potions—in Portugal, relied on to brew the Presidente’s own Potions, and a very dear friend of mine. Harry here has elected to pursue a Potions Mastery after Hogwarts, and I have tried to convince Draco of the merits of doing the same, but he is decided on Transfigurations.” Here, Slughorn paused to wink at Miguela. “Perhaps you can convince him otherwise. Well! I’ll leave you to it.”

When he’d wandered off to string together another unsuspecting pair of victims, Harry and Draco were left to entertain Miguela. She had dark, heavy eyes and a watchful expression that reminded Harry, uncomfortably, of Bellatrix Lestrange, but when she spoke, her voice was so low and smooth, and undeniably unlike Bellatrix’s that the feeling passed.

“Transfigurations is a very worthy field to pursue,” she said to Malfoy. “Very like Potions. Perhaps that says something of you, that you excel in both.”

Harry, who’d never thought anything of the like, stared at her incredulously. He remembered his manners, fortunately, before she noticed, and resumed a more natural expression. “How so?” he asked.

Miguela smiled. “Very temperamental, both fields. Mythical, one might say.”

“Do you refer to Merlin’s affinity with both?” Malfoy asked. “Or do you mean that both are imprecise arts?”

“Both, I think,” she said.

She eyed Harry again, and he swallowed despite himself, seeing the resemblance again.

“I have always felt that brewing a potion is like inventing the world. A single potion can be brewed a hundred slightly different ways, by a hundred different brewers, and come out exactly the same, exactly as effective, all one hundred times. There is something deeper in that kind of magic than what we see in Charms, don’t you find, Harry?”

He nodded, only now realising how true it was. Charms was wonderful magic, could do any number of wonderful things. But it was stagnant, precise. A levitation charm wouldn’t work if the first syllable of the incantation was stressed instead of the second syllable. It had been great magic when he was eleven and practically a muggleborn. Now it felt more like technology than magic—like a light switch, it would always work if you applied the power correctly.

“Yes. It’s a…higher magic.”

She smiled at this, something Bellatrix would never have done in quite so sane a way. “And the same for Transfigurations,” she said, turning back to Malfoy again. Harry could see that too—Transfigurations didn’t even usually use incantations. It was a much freer magic than others. “I can see why the two of you are so drawn to these subjects. You have the look about you.”

“What look?” asked Harry.

“You are restless,” she said. “You desire change, maybe chaos…for your lives to be more than
living, for finding some higher magic to life itself. You will not be disappointed in your chosen paths. They are good for those of us who look for something higher than money in our vocations.”

They passed half an hour with Miguela. She engaged them on matters of transmutation and the symbolic similarities therein with both their fields. For a while, Malfoy kept her talking on a potion she was working on to change the blood type in donor blood to match the receiving patient’s.

“I love change,” she said. “Creating change, stopping change, watching change. It is such a beautiful, chaotic thing.”

On that, Harry had to agree. He watched Malfoy’s repressed, excited mannerisms as they talked, and felt a deep longing build inside him. The two of them, they could change, too, he thought. The ingredients were there. Perhaps the foundation was forming. He just didn’t yet know the recipe.

Miguela took out two cauldron-shaped cards and handed one to each of them. “My floo address,” she said. “I would be delighted to keep in touch with both of you as you move through your careers.”

“Thank you,” said Harry, and meant it.

If for nothing else, meeting Miguela had made clear one thing: he could love Potions, in his own way. He wasn’t just doing this to keep himself from self-destructing. There was a magic in it that felt very like the magic in himself sometimes: chaotic, restless, ever-changing.

He thought he could see the same in Malfoy, and as he watched the other man get tangled up in another conversation, this time on Transfigurations with a handsome Asian wizard, he thought they’d already changed. Surely the free way Malfoy smiled now was an alchemy all of its own. It was certainly the reactive agent in that brewing in Harry’s chest.

He spent the entire night at Malfoy’s side, sometimes listening to conversations Malfoy had with others, sometimes their roles reversed—sometimes, again, just the two of them, pretending to be miffed that Hermione and Millicent were still ignoring them. It felt like adding the wrong ingredient to a potion, and knowing the result would come out right anyway.

A hundred different recipes, he remembered. And still a perfect potion.
06. Dissolution

*The dissolving of the ashes from Calcination in water.*

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Sunday morning he finally got around to writing that letter to Ron, though what to fill it with was still a mystery. He worked on it all through breakfast, adding thoughts here, anecdotes there, but an hour after, it was barely a page long. Hermione took pity on him and suggested he include the Gryffindor Quidditch team line-up, as it would take up space.

He wrinkled his nose. “Never had to find ways to take up space with Ron before.”

She gave him a wry smile. It still managed to look a little sad. “We’re growing up.”

“And apart,” he added.

But he did take her suggestion and left early for Hogsmeade in order to post it. He couldn’t bring himself to go up to the owlery just yet. Hedwig’s death ached sometimes and seeing her old roost would put a damper on his day. Today was not a day for that. It was a day for Malfoy. And Quidditch.

The post office owner rented him an owl for free when he recognised Harry. He put on his public smile and thanked him effusively, but all he could think about was his bloody boggart and that if becoming a Potions Master didn’t change things up for him, he might very well go live as a muggle monk in Tibet just to get away.

He ran into Malfoy as he was exiting the shop, quite literally. “Watch where you’re—oh, it’s you, Potter.”

“Afraid so.”

Malfoy looked him up and down. “Still no owl?”

“No.” Nor would there be.

“Mm,” said Malfoy. “Wait here.”

He disappeared inside the post office, and Harry waited, not sure if he was being a good mate or ridiculous. It was Malfoy, after all. The bell jangled as Malfoy came out again, and he still had that pensive look about him.

“You should get a cat,” Malfoy said. “Pets make people happy, I’m reliably informed.”

“I’m happy,” Harry insisted. Sort of, anyway. He was maybe a little restless, but it was to be expected, probably.

Malfoy detoured them by the pet shop on their way to the Three Broomsticks. He grabbed hold of Harry’s arm to stop him in front of the window. “See—look at that cat there. It sort of looks like you.”
Harry frowned. The kitten was grey with round black spots encircling its green eyes. “I should get new glasses,” he decided.

Malfoy looked at him as if he were mad, which was, all things considered, probably close to true. “You should get a cat,” he said. “It’s an animal.”

“What am I going to do with a cat?”

“I don’t know,” said Malfoy, shrugging. “Feed it, pet it, cuddle it, give it a stupid Gryffindor name like Bertie or Jollies.”

Harry snorted. “Cuddle it?”

“It’s a cat, Potter,” Malfoy said, rolling his eyes. He walked off, making Harry rush to catch up to him. “That’s what you do with them. Merlin, you’d think you’ve never been alive the way you go around.”

“Do you have a pet?”

Malfoy wrinkled his nose. “Merlin, no. I have an owl, but lately he’s refused to work at the weekend.”

He pushed open the door to the pub and noise poured out. There was already a decent crowd in the Three Broomsticks, most of them gathered around the large table Rosmerta had transfigured the usual ones into. A wireless was on at the bar, with Quidditch commentators talking utter rubbish about the Ballycastle Bats.

Malfoy secured them two seats around the table while Harry went to the bar with strict instructions to, under no circumstance, get Malfoy anything other than a butterbeer pulled into an ale glass.

“Never drink when financial decisions are being made, Potter, but always make your enemy think you’re drinking,” he’d said.

Which Harry thought, also, was rubbish, but he asked for two of them anyway and Rosmerta winked knowingly as she discreetly poured the bottled butterbeers into glasses. Malfoy gave him a distracted, sort-of-grateful smile when he set the butterbeer down in front of his ever-present glass water bottle, and took the seat next.

There were perhaps twenty people altogether, most of whom were older and that he’d never met. As his eyes travelled around the table, he was surprised and dismayed to see Happy Terry Boot there, with a girl perhaps three or four years their senior. The sandy hair and beatific grin on her face gave her away as another Boot. Terry gave him a grin and an exuberant wave, and Harry forced one in return.

“Alright, ladies and gentleman,” said a black-haired man two down on Malfoy’s left. “For those of you new to our little league, we run an auction starter. One hundred galleons gets you in the league and a thousand points to bid with. We run a standard team, with three substitutes allowed. Three galleons for each additional player purchased from the pot. Trading may commence a week hence, once official rankings are up for the first round of games. Any questions?”

Harry had some—such as who the bloody hell threw around a hundred galleons on a fantasy league? He could pay rent on a decent Diagon Alley flat for two months with that kind of money. The league he and Ron had been looking at was only a ten galleon entrance.

And yet—what the hell did he care? He had gobs of gold, and there was something exhilarating in
playing for such high stakes. He pulled his coin purse from his robes and slid it to the witch next to Malfoy, who was checking each purse for accuracy and logging names of entering members.

Malfoy looked downright beside himself with excitement. “I love this bit here,” he whispered. “You can always tell who’s going to be your best competition. Look how that fellow over there is setting his mouth. He’s trying not to show how much a hundred galleons means to him. Then—there, her. Gina Whitecauldron. She’s not even bothering to look as she floats her gold over; doesn’t care a whit where it goes. She goes big on players, and sometimes it works for her, sometimes it doesn’t.”

Harry took all this in. He made mental notes of who he’d be more likely to negotiate solid trades with, and who’d do their best to cheat him, per Malfoy’s experience with the league’s regulars and his own intuition.

“And your style is more like Greg Brown’s,” Harry said, remembering the man who’d so dearly felt the loss of a hundred galleons, but felt participating in the league worth it. “Which is weird as fuck, really, considering how much gold your family has.”

“Don’t be crass, Potter,” said Malfoy. “I don’t talk money in public.”

Harry gamely ignored the fact that Malfoy had been talking of other people’s money for ten minutes now.

“But yes—it’s a Malfoy trait. We are unfailingly good at making business decisions. I’ve been in this league since third year, and I haven’t failed to place top three once.”

“First time for everything,” Harry said. “Now I’m here, I hope you won’t be distraught when you’re pushed out.”

“I don’t dwell on impossibilities,” Malfoy said. Then, “Who do you like for seeker?”

“Nope,” said Harry. “You’ll find out when I bid. I won’t give away my strategy just yet.”

Malfoy scowled, but there wasn’t any heat behind it. “Well just so you know, I’m taking Hermes Kilgore for chaser this year and I will fight you for her. I will even fight you like a muggle, if I have to.”

“My, you are serious, aren’t you?”

Malfoy grinned, his eyes sparkling only for Harry. Or at least, that’s what Harry pretended. “Quidditch is a very serious thing.”

On that, Harry had to agree. Then Vic, the league leader, brought up the first auction. Harry listened to the sounds in the Broomsticks sour as Gina threw down three hundred points for Mykonos Young, and the conversation heated up. Harry settled in next to Malfoy, sipping his secret butterbeer, and was utterly content for the first time in ages. He didn’t think of Ron once.

-X-

“Merlin, look at you,” Hermione said blandly when he returned. She re-inked her quill, tapped off the extra purple ink, and lifted one dark eyebrow at him. “You’d think you just spent the afternoon conducting an illicit affair, not sitting round a table full of sweaty, manly men and buying Quidditch players with fake money.”
“I’ve really no compunctions about sweaty, manly men,” said Harry. He paused. “And anyway, there were women there, too.”

“Ah,” said Hermione. “That explains it then.” She capped her ink and smirked up at him. “If I looked at your roster, would it be full of only the most fetching players? I imagine you have both Hermes Kilgore and Dexter Loupe.”

“No, Malfoy got Hermes,” he said, not without some annoyance. Hermes was rather fit. “But I concede on Dexter. He’s my second chaser.” At Hermione’s smirk, he felt his face flush a little. And further, how did Hermione even know those names? He’d been sure she always tuned them out when he and Ron were talking Quidditch.

“Millicent said she was planning on taking those two, but she didn’t have time to play, what with her extra Arithmancy projects. I take it your Malfoy’s Millicent now?”

Harry scowled. “I’m not anyone’s Millicent. I’m Malfoy’s Harry.”

Hermione’s lips quirked. “As you say.” He scowled again, and very definitely did not think of how he hadn’t protested at all when Malfoy called him his Millicent.

-x-

Now that they were in a fantasy league together, Boot thought he and Harry were mates. This assumption was incorrect. Yet he took the seat next to Harry at dinner that Malfoy had been occupying of late, and that was just not on.

“Dexter Loupe! Good show on that one, Harry. He’s already racked you, what?—Forty points just this afternoon’s game, wasn’t it?”

“Yep,” said Harry, pleased. Malfoy came in and took the seat next to Millicent. Harry grinned at him. “I’m already in first place. I’d say the season’s starting well for me.”

Malfoy narrowed his eyes, but didn’t say anything as he poured himself a glass of water and set about buttering a roll. Malfoy’s seeker had also played today, and he’d let the snitch fly past his face while he straightened a couple twigs on his broom.

“We’ll see how long that lasts,” Malfoy said primly.

“Potter beating you, is he?” Millicent said. “You’d really be in for a buggering if I were playing, too, wouldn’t you?”

“No,” Malfoy said sourly. “Potter picked an almost identical team to the one you would’ve taken. With all the player competition, you would have diluted teams, and I’d easily be in the lead.”

“Don’t be sad, Draco,” said Boot. “There’s always trading.”

“Yes, that’s true, Terry,” said Malfoy. “If only Potter could trade his face, and then we’d all be happy. But then—maybe he likes looking like cats more than he professes.”

Boot looked confused, but Harry wasn’t, and he kicked Malfoy under the table. Millicent scowled at him, and he suspected he’d missed his target. He was going to Madam Pomfrey first thing in the morning, Harry decided. Under no circumstances would he suffer Malfoy comparing him to a kitten he wanted to name Jollies.
Quickly recovered, Boot moved onto his next topic: “By the way, did anyone see that pair of knickers on the goal posts? Hooch was up there this morning trying to get them down, but they were stuck pretty good.”

Harry smirked. Hermione put her head in her hands and groaned.

-x-

Malfoy smirked at Harry upon seeing his new wire-framed glasses in Transfigurations on Tuesday. Harry pretended not to notice, but it was sort of nice to be able to see and he wondered how many little smirks he might’ve missed before, just because his glasses were shit. He’d never realised that life looked so sharp before. Snape even deigned to comment on his ‘less than revolting choice in eyewear’ during their lesson that afternoon.

Then on Wednesday in Slughorn’s, Harry’s Cold Cure came out bloody perfect, and when he looked back at Malfoy to share his excitement, Malfoy smiled at him, and it was such a soft, familiar sort of look that Harry had to turn back around before he lost himself in it.

Now that the professional Quidditch season had started in earnest, he, Malfoy, and (unfortunately) Boot, listened to the games on the wireless at night. Harry yipped and yelled every time one of his players brought in more points, and he was surprised and delighted at how animated Malfoy was with his own excitement.

At one point, after Malfoy’s keeper—Oliver Wood—made a magnificent save, he’d twirled Millicent around the common room. Harry and Hermione, working together on their Potions essays, had both narrowed their eyes at this little display. Then Harry’s seeker, Fille Dagwood, missed the snitch and the game was over, with Boot coming out on top for the night, which was just bloody perfect.

“Merlin Jesus!” Harry swore, and Boot clapped him on the back in a super friendly manner, which only made it worse.

Fuck, he was jealous. Of Millicent Bulstrode.

She and Draco were incredibly close. He’d never known it before this year, but it must’ve been there all along, as comfortable as they were with one another. Slytherins were discreet like that.

And the more time he spent with Malfoy in their Friday night tip-for-tip meetings, the more that jealousy was both diffused and strengthened. He and Malfoy were becoming friends. And it was really, really great because Malfoy was really, really great, and fun and smart and didn’t support a Quidditch team whose colours kept Harry awake at night. Their increasing closeness made him confident in their friendship, and it also made him want to be the only person Malfoy was this close to.

One night in early March, Dexter Loupe made an impossible play, and Harry, who’d been on the edge of his seat listening to the play-by-play, screamed in surprise and excitement, much to the girls’ annoyances. Then Malfoy threw a toy quaffle at his face, and Harry caught it, and then he twirled Malfoy around, and it was wonderful because Malfoy went with it and was smiling like it was a perfectly reasonable action.

He’d never had a friend like Malfoy before, Harry realised.

The Gryffindors never listened to the professional matches like this before, not even Ron. He’d
never had someone who could call his fantasy team shit one minute and then smile proudly at him in Potions the next. He’d never noticed what he was missing out on until now, and the confusing feelings inside him made it both wonderful and terrifying.

And the fact that he’d got a little stiff as he danced Malfoy around hadn’t helped to sort things out at all.

He loved Fridays most of all, because it was just the two of them. While Malfoy still jumped out of his chair whenever he got to the visualisation stage, Harry was making fine progress on understanding the different classes of ingredients and how their uses changed with different agents.

“You’re reacting as your animal,” Harry told him, exasperated. “Just prepare yourself for feeling restless and when it comes, take a deep breath and let it happen.” For Merlin’s sake, you basketcase, he added silently, fondly. It’s okay to feel restless; it doesn’t mean you’re in a cage.

Harry started practising with him; they’d sit against the wall next to one another with their shoulders just brushing, and Harry would match the rhythm of his breathing to Malfoy’s as he meditated. Everything would go quiet and still. Harry would forget the world and his boggart, and know nothing but the solid planes of Malfoy’s biceps. He’d fall deep into it, and then, just as he was starting to feel his Animagus emerge from his core, Malfoy would jerk, already half up from the floor.

March passed thus, and Harry and Malfoy fought for first and second place in their fantasy league all through the month. He and Malfoy spent so much time together that Greengrass and Parkinson came to Harry’s room when they were looking for Malfoy, and all the other eighth years knew to leave a spot next to Harry in the Great Hall. It was like having a best mate again, and it was brilliant. He’d never known just how much like him Malfoy thought, or acted when he was with friends, or complained about Charms homework.

“Potter,” Malfoy said one night. He was lying on Neville’s bed, hands braced behind his head as he stared up at the navy blue canopy.

Harry turned a page in his potions notebook, looking for a reference to Panacea that he was sure he’d noted down last week. “Mm?”

Malfoy didn’t reply right away. Harry heard him sigh. “Do you think McGonagall will take me on if I can’t get the Animagus transformation?”

Harry stared down at the notes on Wolfsbane potion, mind blank. It was so rare that Malfoy displayed his uncertainties. And now he was doing it in front of Harry.

Merlin—Malfoy was his best mate.

He shoved his notebook away and rolled onto his side to look across the small room. Malfoy curled over onto his own side, and they stared at each other, lying down, in beds, blinking in the low light. It could’ve been like this the whole time, Harry thought suddenly. He could’ve taken Malfoy’s hand, and not been put off by Slytherin house, and maybe they would’ve spent every night like this, whispering in the dark, as best mates were wont to do.

The years of possibility flashed before his eyes, just as life had not done when he died in the forest. Draco Malfoy could have so easily been his friend from the beginning. Could have more than adequately taken Ron’s place all the times Harry had needed him. Draco Malfoy would never have abandoned Harry for the Tri-Wizard Tournament; would never have left him and Hermione alone in the woods in winter. Draco Malfoy would never have worried that he was second best to the
“Don’t be daft, Malfoy. You’re so good, she and Dumbledore’s portrait are probably up in her office right now, rubbing their hands together like evil villains and cackling over getting your Transfig talent in their clutches.”

Malfoy breathed a startled little laugh. It sent Harry’s heart pounding. “You’re the daft one, Potter.”

“I know,” said Harry. “I like hanging out with you, after all.”

Malfoy’s smile turned soft for a tiny moment. Candlelight was reflecting little bright sparks in his eyes. “Dumbledore was a Transfiguration Master, too.”

“Yeah.”

Draco nodded, but all it served to do was muss his hair against Neville’s pillow. “He was going to give me a chance. Before the war started. But I got him killed instead.”

“I know,” said Harry. “I was there, beneath my cloak. But you didn’t get him killed. I’d already done that, and so had he, and so had Snape. They’d planned it all along because he was dying, and I’d had to force-feed him poison not an hour before you disarmed him. He wouldn’t have lasted the night. And he’d still give you a chance.”

Malfoy pursed his lips; Harry could see the thoughts running through his mind like Hermione’s Arithmancy equations. At last, once he’d assimilated this new piece of information, he found Harry’s eyes again. “That’s why I chose Transfigurations, Potter, instead of Potions. Because Dumbledore was going to give me a chance. I’d still choose it now, even knowing this.”

“Yeah, me too,” said Harry. Bugger if they weren’t a pair, with all these sappy, pathos-ridden reasons for choosing subjects that were never their first choice. “But I’d choose you, now, too.”

He didn’t have to elaborate on what he meant. Draco—and he was Draco, really—focused on him so intently that Harry wondered for a moment if he was being *Legilimentised*. Draco shifted and then he was stretching his arm across the brief expanse of floor separating the beds. “Then choose me, Potter,” he said.

Harry reached across, took his hand in his own. They shook once, but Harry didn’t let go for far too long.

-x-

By the end of April, just as the panic of NEWTs was really mounting, Harry’s potion work was further along than even he could have hoped, but Draco’s Animagus was still elusive. He had to be something twitchy, like a fox. Merlin, Harry hoped it wasn’t a ferret. If it was, maybe Draco was blocking it out, out of shame.

He hated that Draco wasn’t making any progress, felt like he was getting a raw deal, what with all the help he’d given Harry since January. Then Harry came up with a new idea, and like most of Harry’s ideas, it was stupidly dangerous.

“What if,” Harry said carefully, “you watched me do it?”
“I already have,” said Draco. “You just look bored.”

Harry looked away, took a deep breath. “No. I mean, what if I let you inside my mind, and you watched from there?”

Draco inhaled sharply. “That’s incredibly…intimate.”

Harry set his shoulders, and refused to show how scared the offer made him. “I want you to transform. It wouldn’t be fair that you’ve helped me so much and I haven’t helped you at all. The gain is worth the cost.”

Draco shifted restlessly. “Are you sure?”

Harry nodded. No. “Yes.” He got comfortable against the wall, forced himself to relax. “Just cast *Legilimency* before I go under, and then when I move into visualisation, feel how it feels for me. But for Merlin’s sake, don’t run off because mine feels restless, too. You might take my mind with you.”

Draco nodded, took a deep breath. “All right.”

He pulled out his wand, moved to sit across from Harry. Their eyes locked, and Harry was sure that this was more intimate than anything else could ever be, but then he remembered that he was about to let Malfoy into his thoughts. Harry nodded once.

“*Legimens.*”

It didn’t feel anything like when Snape or Voldemort did it. It felt—soft, unsure. Draco’s presence in his mind was warm and incredibly uncomfortable for reasons he refused to consider while he was, in fact, in Harry’s mind.

He forced himself to think about the Forbidden Forest—his preferred method of meditating. The trees grew up Perylene Black all around him. It was dark, but there was enough starlight to see the forest floor. He began to walk, and the leaves crakled beneath his feet. It was soothing and quiet, and he could almost forget about the presence of Draco, following carefully behind him.

The scenery never changed. He just kept walking, and walking. It was a familiar scene. A scene he’d walked before, in real life, only months after he’d started using it as a meditation device. Had his subconscious known he would walk the forest to his death? Had it known how quiet it would be when he did?

He would never know, and Hermione would think it gruesome that he still used the Forest to meditate, but she couldn’t understand how much he appreciated having it that night, when it had come time for him to walk it for real. That night, during the battle, it’d felt like he was only meditating, and calmness had settled over the explosive terror, and he’d been able to walk to his death, one foot in front of the other.

Finally, the feeling came. *Restlessness and skittishness and death around every tree trunk.*

That was the only part of his form he hated, but he’d long ago learned to live with things he hated. He looked down, and now he was sitting on a tree branch, and there were spirits of animals crawling along the forest floor. He watched them with a detached eye, and then pulled himself away and stared back at his body. He heard Draco gasp in his mind, and he knew that this time it’d finally worked. Draco would understand. He took flight, and the Forest shattered all around them.

When he opened his eyes, Draco grinned. “A crow,” he said. “Messenger for the dead. No wonder
you wouldn’t say.”

Harry looked away, exhaling slowly to steady himself. “I hated it, for a while. Before the final battle. Then I—then I died. I’ve made my peace with crows now.”

Their eyes held again, then Draco moved to lean against the wall by Harry. Their shoulders brushed, and Harry was becoming quite used to the feeling. Between this and sitting too close at Sunday fantasy Quidditch meet-ups, and twirls around the common room when one of their players was magnificent, Harry was becoming quite accustomed to the heat of Malfoy’s body next to his own.

“I think I have it now, just—keep me steady,” Draco directed. “If I tense, don’t let me go.”

That was definitely something Harry could do.

Draco settled back into his meditation, and Harry leaned his head back against the wall and felt sort of amazed that Malfoy was letting him do this. Minutes passed, and then Draco’s arm began to tense. Without thinking, Harry leaned around him and held him—carefully—still. Draco didn’t immediately relax, but he didn’t jump up, either, and when another five minutes had passed in this manner, Draco finally, slowly, untensed. Harry lifted his head from Draco’s shoulder, and found him looking back, grey eyes intense and only inches away.

Slowly, Harry unwound. “Did it work?”

Draco nodded. “Yeah.” His voice caught on the word.

“And?”

Draco smiled a little, and they were back on safer ground. “White, grey speckles. Very sleek and classy.”

“A sleek and classy what, you ponce.”

Draco shook his head. “You’ll see.”

“I showed you mine!” said Harry, indignant. Of course Draco would cheat, the slimy Slytherin. But then Draco’s lips quirked and Harry narrowed his eyes because he hated it when Draco’s jokes worked on him.

“A greyhound,” said Draco, preening a bit.

Harry rolled his eyes. “You are so fucking posh it’s embarrassing.”

Draco smirked. “For you, maybe.”

That, Harry thought, was nowhere near true. He’d never be embarrassed to be around Draco.

Which was embarrassing for himself.

-x-
On Sunday, Hermione and Millicent followed them to the Broomsticks for Fantasy Quidditch because they were, as Hermione put it, bored. It was Draco’s turn to buy drinks—finally. He returned to their table and passed drinks around, but when Harry sipped his, his eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“I know,” Draco said, leaning back, one arm slung around the banquette behind Millicent’s shoulders. Harry very determinedly did not stare at it. “I’m a constant wonder.”

“Oh for Merlin’s sake,” Millicent said, upon tasting her own drink, which, like Harry’s, was not a faux beer, but a real beer. She gave Harry a direct look. “He’s in one of his moods, to be sure. Never drinks at Quidditch otherwise.”

“What sort of mood is that?” Hermione asked.

“The sort where I know my team’s about to cream Potter’s, and I’m being a gentleman by getting him drunk first to soften the blow.”

“How kind of you,” Hermione observed.

Harry narrowed his eyes. “You subbed in Yaxley, didn’t you?”

Draco smiled. “Might’ve.”

“Bollocks,” Harry decided. “I thought for sure you’d have Meriwether fly instead. I kept Peregrine on.”

“I know,” said Draco, quite pleased with himself.

Millicent snorted. “Looks like you’re back to second place, Potter.”

He could only scowl in reply. The game started shortly after, and the Three Broomsticks was soon filled with the constant, exhilarating hum of drunken cheers and jeers. Hermione took to asking Draco about his progress with the Animagus transformation, which, judging by Draco’s scowl, he liked not at all.

“But once you’ve got to visualisation, you’re set,” she said, brows scrunched in confusion. “You know your animal?”

“Yes,” said Draco, and neatly ignored the part where Hermione had been angling for him to tell her what it was without her having to ask. Harry hid a smirk behind his not-faux beer. He liked the way Draco’s eyes slid to the side a bit when he was especially pleased with something he’d done; he liked the way the grey of them reflected light from an angle. He liked pretty much everything.

Hermione leaned forward. “So why haven’t you completed the indigenisation, then? It’s easy.”
“If it’s so easy, why haven’t you finished it?”

Hermione scowled, and Harry let out a little huff of laughter. Hermione’s eyes slid to his. They were dark with the promise of murder if he brought up her own Animagus troubles.

“Well, I didn’t like to.”

“Bollocks.”

She narrowed her eyes, and Draco leaned back, arms crossed over his chest, smirking. His legs stretched out beneath the table and tangled with Harry’s.

Harry tensed. He didn’t move them; they stayed like that—warm and connected with Harry’s body, and he imagined a different situation when their legs might be tangled, only without the woollen trousers between them. He shifted, suddenly uncomfortable. Draco’s legs remained, the toe of his shoe pressed against the back of Harry’s calf. Tingles ran up his skin, and he allowed himself a moment to close his eyes and feel it.

“I bet I can get my form before you can,” she said.

“What’s your form?” asked Millicent.

Harry cackled. Hermione kicked him, and it made Draco move his legs back, which was the opposite of what Harry wanted. Suddenly bereft and feeling sort of cold about the leg area, he thought now would be a good time to pay Hermione back for that time when he’d been enjoying the feel of Draco’s leg against his own, and she’d ruined it. Which was just now. Harry had never been one to sit on an opportunity for revenge.

“Your cat,” said Harry, ignoring Hermione’s indignant squeak. “Not Peep. The less annoying one, before him.”

Millicent was nonplussed. “Dark Lady is your Animagus?”

Draco snorted.


Draco was by this point laughing so uproariously that Madam Rosmerta was beginning to send their table disconcerted looks.

“You’re shitting me,” said Millicent.

“I shit you not,” said Harry, barely containing his laughter. “Same markings and all.”

“Oh, Harry,” Hermione muttered. “Just you wait. Seven years we’ve been friends.”

“And you’d throw it all away to kill me?” he asked with a grin.

“Gladly,” she said, staring murderously at her glass.

Harry erected a muffling charm over their table, and settled in to listen to Millicent question Hermione about her abandoned Animagus form. It was at the point when Hermione was describing the degree of stripe delineation along her form’s right flank that the feeling of warmth returned to Harry’s calf. He stilled, looked up from beneath his lashes. Draco was staring back at him, expression still.
“You never said,” Draco murmured.

Harry swallowed, but tried to hide it. “Never said what?”

“That you were good at anything. When I asked, you said ‘average.’”

“I am average at Transfigurations.”

Draco shrugged. “You’re nearly there, aren’t you? I watched you in the common room the other night. You were indenginising again, relearning. All in the space of a few hours.”

“I figured I might as well finish,” said Harry. He shifted, but carefully, so as not to disturb the press of Draco’s leg against his own. Hermione’s voice was getting loud again, this time with annoyance as Millicent questioned every aspect of her form to determine if it really was that of Dark Lady. “I thought we could—I don’t know.”

Draco’s eyes gleamed, something unidentifiable in them. “A total of two months, spread apart, and you’re nearly there. You’re not average at it. Not at all.”

“Maybe,” said Harry. “That’s two things then. Quidditch and Animagus-learning. I’m good at those.”

“And dark lord-killing,” said Draco. He paused. “And wandless magic.”

Harry wrinkled his nose. “Funny.”

Draco’s pale eyebrows shot up. “I didn’t think modesty was a Gryffindor trait.”

“It isn’t,” Harry said. “But all I can do wandless is a piddly little Lumos. Nothing special.”

“What do you call that muffling charm you just put up then?” Draco asked.

“I used my—”

“Are you quite certain?” Draco said.

Scowling, Harry reached for his wand to prove it with a Priori Incantatem, but it wasn’t on the table before him. It was, in fact, still in the harness in his sleeve. He pulled it out, stared at it dumbly. “I don’t remember putting my wand away.”

“You never took it out, idiot,” said Draco.

Harry frowned. “But I practise wandless magic in my room all the time, and I can never get it to work. Neville laughs when I try.”

Draco sat up straighter. “I’ve seen you do it three times. Not just piddly little Lumoses, either. Decent spells. Complicated spells.”

“Hmm.” Harry focused on Draco’s glass, and thought of Wingardium Leviosa to upend it over his posh blond head, but the glass stayed where it was, didn’t even bother to give a shiver. He looked back at Draco, victorious, and then frowned again because there wasn’t really any victory in not being able to do wandless magic.

“See? Nothing.”

The way Draco’s mouth pursed when he was thinking was something Harry would never get out of
his head. He took another drink, and Harry’s eyes followed the path of his tongue as it licked the foam from his lips.

“The times you’ve done it…” said Draco. “Now that I think of it, you didn’t seem to realise what you were doing. Like it was instinctive to use magic that way. Could be part of your intuitiveness.”

Harry shrugged. Mrs Weasley seemed to do household magic without thinking about it, but he’d always assumed she learned to do the spells wandless first. “Doesn’t really do me much good if I can’t do it when I want to do it.”

“But you do. You do it when you have a need for it. I’ve seen you.”

“So you said, but…what’s the point if I can’t depend on it?”

“If you can do it when you aren’t thinking about it, then you’ll just have to practise it without thinking about it.”

Harry snorted. “Brilliant, Malfoy.”

“Shouldn’t be too difficult for you. It’s how you made it through school so far, isn’t it?”

Harry’s eyes narrowed, but he refused to give Draco the satisfaction of commenting. “How do you suggest I even do that?”

Draco smirked. “A bottle of Rosmerta’s finest, a hot cauldron, and a complicated potion.”

Harry’s mind went in a number of interesting directions at this.

At this point, Hermione and Millicent’s selective hearing selected to hear again. Harry felt the weight of their astounded gazes without even having to turn his head. Surprisingly, it was Millicent who spoke first.

“Are you out of your sodding mind, Draco?” she hissed. “That’s a combination just asking for an explosion. Potter will kill all of us.”

“I’m much better now,” Harry protested. The girls gave him identical looks of annoyed tolerance. “I am! I’ve brewed three of our NEWT potions perfectly and two others satisfactorily!”

“With a recipe,” Hermione reminded him. “You won’t have one of those on NEWTs.”

“Nor will one do you any good if you’re off your face,” Millicent added.

“Oh for Merlin’s sake,” said Draco, who now had a determined glint to his eye that Harry, for one, could appreciate. “Potter’s not a complete idiot.”

Here, Harry grinned triumphantly at Hermione and Millicent, before fully parsing the statement and scowling and Draco instead. Draco ignored him. “And really, I don’t care what you witches think about it, Harry and I are academics, and we’re going to research what happens with this experiment.”

“I’ve got a hypothesis for you, Malfoy,” Millicent muttered.

“And I don’t want to hear it,” Draco replied. “Empirical data only.” He pushed back from the table, stared down at Harry. One blond eyebrow quirked up. “Well? Are you coming or not?”

Harry scrambled to follow. “Absolutely.”
“Harry!” Hermione said, exasperated.

Harry ignored her. Draco was already at the bar, securing a bottle of Rosmerta’s house-brewed firewhisky and apparently placing a considerable sum of money down on the Wasps to win. Harry scowled again, remembering his not-ideal-against-Malfoy’s-tricky-team line-up. He pushed out into the street to wait on the other man, and the chilly April wind caught against his pub-warmed cheeks as he stepped out. It was a shock to his system, one that almost made him gasp. It was a lot like being around Draco in that way.

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“You might as well,” Draco said, as he carefully poured two tumblers of whisky. “You’re going to have to know the Liver Repair Elixir for NEWTs anyway.”

“It just—seems, well.” He gestured to the bottle of golden whisky. His mouth quirked. “I suppose I could think of it as being prepared for all eventualities.”

“Never a better time to fix your liver than right after you’ve destroyed it,” Draco agreed. “And off we go. Drink up, Potter. And don’t fuck up this potion, because I’ll be wanting some as well.”

Harry downed it, scrunching his nose a bit at the hot sensation. “All right. Water in, flame on…” He looked beneath his cauldron to make sure this burner wasn’t emotional on Sundays. It wasn’t.

“Bring to a roiling boil,” he read.

Draco poured him another glass as the water heated up. “Don’t watch it,” he said. “It’ll never boil.”

“That’s an old wives’ tale.” He swallowed his whisky down again, and felt the familiar, happy warmth of impending drunkenness suffuse him.

“For muggles, maybe. Believe me. Don’t watch it.”

Well that wasn’t too hard to do. He’d just watch Draco instead. Draco, who had a rather pink mouth and terribly light lashes that were still somehow evocatively dark against his skin, still somehow very smouldery. He licked his bottom lip again, and Harry followed the movement, again.

“Why’d your parents name you Draco?” he asked suddenly, and then grimaced. Rosmerta’s firewhisky was serious, and he was definitely already feeling the effects if his mouth was running off without him. He refused to apologise for it.

“What else would they name me? They couldn’t just call me ‘Malfoy’ like you do.”

Harry shrugged, peeked at his cauldron quickly before Draco could see him looking. Still not roiling. “Why not Tom or Daniel or…?”

“What horrifically common names,” Draco said. “That you could even suggest…! I suppose you’d like if they’d called me Harry, too, wouldn’t you?”

Harry grinned. “Not a bad name. One of the prince’s is called Harry.”

“Prince of what?” Draco said. “Britain hasn’t been a monarchy since Merlin’s time. Did you even go to History of Magic class?”
Harry paused, opened his mouth to reply, and then very wisely changed his mind on the matter. “Do you have a middle name?”

“It’s like you were raised by wolves…” Draco said, seemingly to himself. “Except there aren’t any in Britain, so it must have been muggles instead.”

To Harry he said: “I have an aristocratic surplus of middle names, Potter. None of which I like, none of which were truly necessary. They're just thrown in to appease important ancestors, so their portraits don’t make a scene when we have company.”

Harry laughed. “Which one’s the worst?” He checked his cauldron again, and finally it was at a roiling boil.

*Test for alkaline/acid balance; once equalised, add two fingers finely crushed astragalus root and simmer for 5 minutes.*

“Zephaniah, maybe,” said Draco. “That was from before we came to England.”

Harry chuckled. “Your name is gobs better than Zephaniah,” he said.

“So pleased you approve,” said Draco, dryly. “My mother chose it.”

“Draco,” Harry said, testing the word aloud. He’d got used to it in his head, but the sound coming from his mouth felt illicit and dangerous. “I think this is only the second time I’ve ever said it. The first being two minutes ago. Draco Draco Draco. That’s five times now.”

He laughed again, but when he looked at Malfoy; he wasn’t smiling. The look in his eyes was altogether baser, more intense, than anything Harry’d ever seen on him. The smile fell from Harry’s face.

“The way you say it…” said Draco. His voice caught, and he shook himself.

Harry swallowed. “Say what?” Even though he knew exactly what word Malfoy meant. “Draco.”

Draco’s eyes sunk closed, and when he opened them again, Harry was sure he’d take a step closer, that he’d reach out—

His wand alarm buzzed, and the moment was lost.

He felt unaccountably bereft. But Draco had already looked away, so Harry turned to his cauldron, found the astragalus root nicely incorporated and the mixture clear and effervescent.

*Steam 4 chicory roots, sliced longwise, in steaming basket above cauldron, to absorb essence of astragalus. When consistency of good pasta, slice into finger widths and add to cauldron. Brew 6 minutes.*

“I hate fucking steaming baskets,” he muttered, scrounging around in his kit for the little copper sieve.

He fished it out; it was a little dented, but the hovering charm was still in place, and it didn’t wobble when he set it floating three inches above the cauldron lip. He set the chicory roots inside and watched them steam, as he didn’t know what he’d do if he watched Malfoy instead. *Draco.* The way his name felt in Harry’s mouth…He could get used to saying it, far too easily.
“Harry,” said Draco, and Harry jumped, caught by the unexpectedness of the sound. When he looked, Draco was smirking at him. “It sounds strange, doesn’t it?”

Harry shook his head. “Sounds…right.”

And then Draco’s eyes cut away, glancing at the floor. His forehead crinkled up in thought for maybe half a minute before he noticed himself doing it and smoothed it out.

“You can keep saying it,” Harry offered.

Draco poured them both another shot instead. “How’s that potion?” he asked, eyeing it from a safe distance. “If you can brew drunk, then we can feel safe in you at least getting your NEWT. Whether you survive three years under Snape’s rule is another story. I’m afraid you might have it even worse than usual. He’ll be incredibly bored now that he’s dead.”

“I’ll be fine,” said Harry, who was quite confident in his ability to withstand Snape’s verbal vitriol. It was the actual, potions-based vitriol that worried him. “He can’t curse me now. Or Imperio me to drink poison,” he added as an afterthought. He hoped he couldn’t, anyway.

He tipped back the shot, failed to withhold a shivery, tongue-showing reaction to the firewhisky, and returned to the text. “Are you even tipsy?” he asked, as an aside.

*Reduce to meandering simmer. Cast 3 stasis charms of increasing power beginning with 14 joules of charm power, and stir in 1 part sulphuric acid. Cover with lid, and release stasis charms. Once sizzling explosion has subsided, remove lid, and add 1 gram of mushed boggart liver. Brew for 2 minutes over medium-high heat.*

“Yeah,” Draco admitted, grinning. “Are you?”

Harry bit his lip as he focused on upping the power on his charms. He wasn’t the best at focusing his magic, preferring to just shove it all out there and hope for the best. It’d served him well enough so far. Potions was too subtle for that, though Snape would never hear Harry admit it.

“Bloody swimming,” he said. “These charms are going up by about 1 joule per, right? They look so wobbly to me.”

“Think so,” said Draco, but he didn’t look convinced. “Pass me that book.”

“Mmhmm,” Harry said, flicking his hand in Draco’s general direction.

“And that extra stirring rod.” Harry complied again. The explosion went off as planned, and Harry found that mushing up boggart liver was more enjoyable by several degrees when intoxicated. It was, in fact, almost fun.

“May I borrow your potions kit?” This time, the voice came from directly behind him. Harry tensed in his mashing, but dutifully sent the kit floating back to Draco.

“What do you want with my potions kit?”

“Nothing.” There was a pause; Draco hadn’t moved away. He was so close Harry could almost feel the heat of his body in the air between them. “I just wanted to see if you’d do wandless magic again.” The statement hung between them, almost like an echo. “Which you did.”

“I did,” Harry said, only now realising it himself. He swallowed. “What now?”
Draco’s hands slid over his sides and held on. Harry jumped. Merlin, it felt like Fiendfyre was running through his veins all of the sudden. “Finish your potion.”

“I don’t think I can.” Surely the hitch in his voice was only his imagination. His wand buzzed again.

“What’s the next step?” Draco’s voice was low and incredibly close. Every muscle in Harry’s body was tensed and ready to spring. He made a gallant effort at steadying his breathing, found the spot in his text:

*Stir 100 times sunwise; brew 1 minute on high heat. Stir 100 times widdershins; brew 2 minutes on medium heat. Stir 100 times variated; brew 3 minutes on low heat. Remove from heat and cast a 28-58 joule cooling charm. Decant and seal with cork and wax.*

“Stir a hundred times.”

The fingers at his waist tightened for a second, released. “Then do so. Don’t lose count.”

Harry nodded, and began to stir. At fifty, Draco’s fingers moved. He only managed to keep count because Draco began counting aloud, ‘Fifty, fifty-one, fifty-two,’ and Harry, voice unsteady, counted with him, electrically aware of his ring finger trailing up Harry’s bottom rib.

At one-hundred, he paused, and attempted to steady his breathing. “What are you doing?” he whispered.

Malfoy leaned in, his mouth barely-not-quite brushing the rim of Harry’s right ear. “Don’t ruin your potion.”

Merlin, he could come from this, probably. Hands shaking, he raised the burner to high. Draco’s fingers continued ghosting over his ribs, barely touching, leaving Harry in shambles. His wand buzzed, and even the tiny vibrations it made against his thigh set his skin afire, as alert as he already was.

He picked up the stirring rod, and began again, stirring anticlockwise. “One,” he whispered, and Draco pressed in further, one arm coming all around to hold his waist, his chest flush against Harry’s back, and he was aroused. Harry’s abdomen clenched tight beneath Draco’s fingers, and he may’ve died (again) when Draco inhaled against his neck and said with him, ‘Two.’

There was no way this potion would be salvageable at the end of this. Harry wasn’t even sure he would be salvageable.

At one hundred, he wordlessly (wandlessly) adjusted the heat, and just hung his head, letting Draco continue to devastate him, unable and unwilling to do anything about it.

“The last time we were like this, it was on a broom,” said Draco.

“You think about it, too,” Harry said.

“Yes.”

Harry swallowed, kept his eyes closed. He had another minute and a half of this before he had to stir again. “Last time,” he said, “We were terrified.”

“Are you terrified now?”
Harry wondered. If things went poorly, their friendship would die violently, unlike the sad, passive affair with his and Ron’s. Could he go back to hating Draco? Could he even get on without having him around? Probably not.

“Yes.”

His wand buzzed. Very carefully, he resumed stirring—clockwise on odd numbers, anticlockwise on evens. Draco’s voice had dropped in pitch and the numbers one through one hundred took on new, erotic connotations in Harry’s mind.

He would never see 14 again without feeling Draco’s arousal pressing against him, only their robes separating the heat of their skin. He would never hear Hermione discuss the 42 Rules of Runes without shuddering at the memory of Draco’s teeth nipping at his earlobe. There were 88 constellations in the night sky, but he would always know the number as the moment Draco’s fingers slid beneath the hem of his shirt and skated over his skin.

“One hundred.” He lowered the heat, set his wand timer, and could not take it any longer.

Harry turned, took hold of Draco’s hands. His eyes scanned Draco’s face, looking for what, he had no idea. “You’ll ruin me,” he murmured.

“Only if you let me.”

Harry kissed him. He’d worried, somewhere buried really deeply, that Draco would shove him away. But he didn’t. He kissed Harry back immediately, mouth hot and slick against Harry’s own, and he moaned a little when Harry began to walk them backwards, towards the wall.

“Your potion,” Draco gasped, breaking away.

Harry made an annoyed sound, flung a cooling charm at it, flung another to decant and seal the potion in a vial. There was a look of complete triumph in Draco’s eyes, and Harry couldn’t help but try to kiss it off of him.

“Fine,” he murmured, between kissing Draco’s neck, unbuttoning the tops of his robes, and continuing down to his clavicle. “I can do wandless magic. You win.”

“Apparently so,” Draco said, arching up against his mouth.

Somehow Harry managed to get all of Draco’s poncy outer robes unbuttoned and flung out around them on the floor and was already beginning on his own when Draco shoved him against the unused table and pushed his hands away. “I’ve been thinking of this for ages. Merlin, Potter, you are so stupidly hot when you’re brewing.”

“Good,” Harry said, through a gasp. He threw his head back and shuddered. Draco’s mouth was on his neck, following his fingers down as he loosened each button, kissing the exposed skin left behind.

He gasped. Acute sensory overload. Draco flicked his eyes up at the sound, and there was something in them, some look, that Harry couldn’t endure. It was drunk and confident and amused and triumphant and—soft, all at once. It was everything Draco was, plus that one extra thing he could be, but usually chose not to.

It occurred to Harry then that he…was probably in love. And that was a very dangerous place to be.
He shuddered, curled his fingers more tightly in Draco’s hair. He wasn’t sure if he was trying to keep himself up or keep Draco from running, but he knew he had to hold on somehow. Every nerve in his body was on fire, every breath he took felt like—

"Boys, I hate to interrupt..."

They sprang apart, horrified, and swung to face the single portrait in the room, positioned above the desk Harry used for brewing. Dumbledore was beaming at them, and where on earth had he come from? How many times had he watched them working together in this room, how many—

“It’s just that you forgot to turn off your burner, Harry, and I fear that the potion will soon begin producing those pesky deadly fumes that Liver Repair Elixirs are wont to do when burnt. As much as I’d enjoy your company in my frame, I’m sure you both have a bit more living to get on with.”

Here, he winked at them. Harry’s stomach plummeted through the floor, along with his ability to ever have an erection again, probably.

But his cauldron was indeed beginning to smoke. They rushed to it, knocking shoulders in their attempt to douse the fire and vanish the smoke. In the process, they managed to vanish Harry’s good cauldron as well, but Hogsmeade sold more, and he’d live.

He and Draco stared at each other, suddenly awkward. The drunken kiss hung between them, and Harry wondered if he’d ever be allowed to kiss Draco again after what a clusterfuck tonight had been. Maybe he should try again with Ginny since it appeared that she was the only person he was able to kiss without disaster.

As if, he thought. His body was on fire with want for Draco, even after their uncomfortable interruption. He’d never be able to kiss anyone else again after this. He was utterly ruined.

“That went well,” Harry remarked. He moved closer to him, unable to keep away, even as thoroughly embarrassed as he was. Merlin, but he still wanted Draco something fierce. There was always tomorrow—and preferably near a bed next time.


“Come on then, Potter,” said Draco. “I don’t think I can stand another minute in this room, wondering if that dotty old headmaster is just beyond the frame listening. Do you hear that, Headmaster?” he called. “I know what you’re about!”

They listened for shuffling robes, but there weren’t any. Harry took Draco’s hand in his, and Draco let it happen. They were definitely still drunk, he decided. “Come on then,” said Harry, gathering up all his things with a wandless flick of his wrist. “It’s getting late anyway.”

Draco yawned. “Bugger. I was going to start studying for NEWTs tonight.”

“Boring,” Harry decided. “I think I’ll go to bed instead.” Although Harry seriously doubted he’d get a wink of sleep tonight. He could still taste Draco in his mouth, and it was so much better than treacle tart.

-X-
08. Putrefaction

*The process of decay or rotting in a body or other organic matter in sulphur, disintegration by spontaneous decomposition; decay by artificial means*

-x-

“It must’ve been a success,” Hermione said dubiously when they stumbled in. Crookshanks was curled up in her lap, serving as a desk for the notes she was reading. “Malfoy’s looking entirely too pleased with himself.”

“Ah—Yeah,” Harry said. “Rather.”

Draco followed him in, cool as ever, despite his less-than-coordinated steps. “Granger.”

She quirked an eyebrow. “Malfoy.” Then, “Well—which potion was it?”

Belatedly, Harry remembered what they’d actually left to accomplish. He fished out a vial. Navy blue potion sloshed around in it. “Liver Repair. Draco said it’s perfect. Have a look.”

Hermione dutifully took the vial, held it up to the light to examine the viscosity. She uncapped it, sniffed from several different angles, and then delicately touched her littlest finger to the potion. She dabbed her tongue. “It’s—wow, Harry.”

“It’s good, isn’t it?” he said, grinning. It was possible he was still a little—rather a lot—drunk. And the kissing certainly hadn’t helped his mental faculties. “Perfect.”

“Perfect,” she agreed.

The door to Hermione’s room opened and Millicent strolled out, glanced disinterestedly in their direction, and then noticed the potion. “Liver, is it?” she said, sounding very much as if she couldn’t care less.

“I told you he could do it,” Draco said smugly.

“Hmm,” said Millicent, and continued on out the door. Peep followed dutifully, ignoring the narrow-eyed look Hermione was giving him. The portrait hole shut behind them, and Hermione’s gaze returned to the two of them. Malfoy said he was off to bed, and then it was just Harry under her bemused look.

“Is something the matter, Harry?”

“Nope.” How could anything ever be the matter ever again? He smiled at her, guilelessly.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “You’re drunk. Go to bed, and be grateful I’m not Head Girl.”

Harry didn’t need to be told twice.
Harry was practically chirping the next morning, and all of the week following. His potion in class was ‘Outstanding! Marvellous!’—per Slughorn. In Transfigurations, Switch told him his gas-to-liquid was ‘Quite satisfactory indeed;’ and in his check-in meeting with McGonagall regarding the state of his career aspirations, she said, ‘I am not quite at the point of despair for your future and livelihood, Mr Potter. Carry on.’ Which was high praise indeed.

Harry floated through the whole week. Draco sat with him in class and at meals, and gave him secret, seductive little grins when no one was looking. Terry danced him around the common room when Fille Dagwood caught the snitch and racked Harry 150 league points, and Harry wasn’t even annoyed. He wrote Ron two letters. He went down to have tea with Hagrid and ate a rock cake. Snape had nothing derogatory to say about the colour or consistency of his drunkenly-brewed Liver Repair Elixir. On Thursday, Hermione asked him what a Dirty Snitches was, and he explained it happily, and in detail, without blushing, even as Hermione’s eyes became progressively wider. He didn’t even falter when she took out quill and diary to make notes.

In short, everything was great. Except for the part where they’d both been so busy this week that the understood reconvening of Friday’s outlandish attempt at sex had yet to manifest. He’d pushed Draco into an alcove after lunch on Wednesday, but they’d barely had a chance to start snogging before a passel of first year girls came by talking loudly of hair charms.

As they stood there, stock still, Harry pressing his body as close to Draco’s and the wall as he could get, he suffered through the entirely over-erogenous experience of Draco panting against his neck, and tried very hard not to die from it. He wanted to rip all of Draco’s clothes off right there in that sketchy little alcove and have him against the wall. Or even the other way round. Harry didn’t care. They just could not get a Merlin-fucking break.

Well, there was still Friday, Harry thought happily.

Friday came, and Harry entered their appropriated classroom to find Draco already there. He was lying across one of the worktables, eyes closed, obviously indigenising. Those erections Harry’d feared might never return never had a problem doing so around Draco. Especially when he was spread out like an offering on the table by Harry’s rookie potions lab. One eye cracked open as Harry began setting up his cauldron on the adjacent table.

“I’m stuck again,” Draco groused. He pushed himself up on his elbows and stared dourly at the water pouring into the cauldron from Harry’s wand. “And bugger if I can figure out why! Have you done it yet?”

“The transformation?” asked Harry.

“Yeah.”

“No.” He flicked on the burner and turned to face Draco directly. “Just hybridisation. I’ve done a beak and feathers.”

“Why not?”

“I was waiting on you to catch up, moron.”

Draco flopped back down on the table. Harry moved closer, thinking of all the ways he could occupy himself while his water began to boil.

“What does it feel like to hybridise? I’ve got indigenisation down, I think, but whenever I try to
grow my snout or tail, I...just can’t.” He sighed. “McGonagall will never take me on if I can’t
transform. *Fuck*, I have to do this before NEWTs or I’ll be stuck tending Father’s business accounts
for the rest of my life.” He slammed a hand against the table in frustration. Harry sighed, and
turned his burner back off. Definitely didn’t want any repeats of last week.

“It feels...weird,” Harry finally said. He shrugged, and hated it because he really had no idea how
to describe becoming part animal.

Draco’s brow crumpled tragically. “Why can’t I do this?” he whispered.

Harry sat on the edge of the table, worrying the hem of his sleeves and feeling wretched on
Draco’s behalf. “Do you want to use *Legilimency* again?” he asked.

Draco sighed. “Potter, you really shouldn’t offer me *carte blanche* with your bloody head.”

Harry shrugged. “Better you than Ron.” There was way too much in there he never wanted Ron to
see.

This finally got a smile out of Draco. He sat up again. “Fine. Yes. I do. Can I?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Obviously.”

Draco’s nose scrunched. “You really need to stop spending your free period with Snape’s portrait.
You’re starting to sound like him.”

“He’s insulting me into greatness,” Harry protested. “Yesterday, I learned why bezoars neutralise
poison when he was on a rant about the state of my hair. Did you know they’re not really stones,
but hairballs?”

“Shut up, Potter,” Draco said, exasperated. Harry grinned at him.

They settled into position. Harry took a deep breath and cleared his head of all the happy, lovelorn
thoughts that’d filled it since Sunday. There would be a time to tell Draco how he really felt, but it
probably wasn’t five days after their first kiss and a failed shag. Harry suspected there was a
protocol for this sort of thing, which required at least one month between a relationship beginning
and declaration of devoted and undying love.

Were they even in a relationship? Harry bit his lip. It hadn’t occurred to him before that they might
not be, but—there’d been no word either way. There would be time to figure that out later. He
pushed everything aside and met Draco’s eyes, smiling. “Go on.”

“*Legilimency.*”

Having been at practise for some time now, Harry zoomed right through meditation and
visualisation. He slowed down at indigenisation to make sure he did a proper job of it. Speeding
through that step could lead to unfortunate results when one got to the next bit. He felt himself take
on the aspects of the crow. He felt light, hollow. He felt small. Flying would be so simple. The
prospect of eating decaying flesh was enticing rather than stomach-churning. Slowly, his mind
remembered what it meant to be a crow. He felt the spirits of the world all around him, and knew
that he could take them to the other side if he wanted to.

Draco was like a warm, uncomfortable addition to his mind. Warm because Harry felt warmly
towards him. Uncomfortable because...he felt warmly towards him. He was exposed like this. The
crow in him didn’t like exposure. It was skittish, and it cawed warningly at Harry whenever
Draco’s presence crept nearer to get a better look at the proceedings. Finally, some minutes later,
Feathers sprouted over his skin. His nose and jaw hardened and lengthened. His hearing became acute. There was a mouse in the room, hidden beneath one of the desks. It would probably be pretty delicious. It wouldn’t take much to transform all the way and find out. He’d waited for Draco to finish first, yes, but it was almost more difficult to stay at this step than it was to move forward into full form actualisation. Harry’d been this crow for a long time, even if he’d never actually flown as one.

He tried his best to broadcast the feeling of sprouting feathers and growing a beak to Draco, hoping that he would be able to translate that into fur and tail.

‘You’re nearly there. Just do it,’ Harry heard in his mind, and nearly jumped at the sound. He could practically feel Draco’s grey eyes rolling.

‘You first,’ Harry sent back.

He felt Draco shake his head. ‘I want to feel what it’s like to transform.’

He might as well. He gathered all his magic to him, let his consciousness retreat from everything but the here-and-now of his first transformation. Draco became a distant, forgotten attendance as he pushed himself over that final hurdle. He told himself to shrink, told his body to change. For many minutes, nothing happened.

And then, he understood it, understood the last part as he’d come to understand the four steps before it. The crow was Harry and Harry was the crow, and he did shrink, and did change. It took ten minutes at least, but he’d done it now, and he knew it would be instantaneous next time.

He stared up at Draco from much further away than he’d started, and felt elation and cockiness and fucking love.

He’d transformed for the first time, and the person he loved had been in his head the whole time and witnessed the entire incredible experience with him—

Draco pulled roughly from his mind.

Harry fluttered around in the air, pleased but clumsy with his wings. He half-glided, half-fell back to the ground, closed his eyes, and focused on transforming back into himself.

When he did, he grinned. “It’s brilliant” he said. “Really brilliant. Now you just have to do it and we can go out around the grounds in our forms and chase things and—”

“I don’t think so.”


Draco stood, dusted his trousers off and grabbed up his book bag. “Thanks, Potter. I think this’ll do for our lessons. See you around.”

Harry scrambled to his feet. “What—Draco, what’s wrong?”

Draco spun to him, his face a mask of fury. “What’s wrong?” he hissed. “Your bloody Gryffindor emotions are what’s wrong. Is there no one who doesn’t want to own or imprison me?”

He turned to leave again, and Harry’s face drained of blood. He’d broadcasted all of that. Harry
grabbed his wrist, a quick, flashing movement that stopped Draco’s whole body and brought his cheek close to Harry’s face. Close enough that he could see the way his hair moved when Harry exhaled.

“Don’t.”

Draco breathed. In, out, in. “Don’t what, Potter?”

“Don’t leave.”

Draco shook his head. “I won’t do this to myself.”

“You’re attracted to me, too. I know you are. You wanted me last week.”

It was Harry’s imagination that his voice sounded that panicked. There was no reason to panic, surely. Everything was pretty perfect in Harry’s life right now. How could anything bad be happening?

“I wanted your body. I thought I’d be safe to…try, with you. I thought you’d never want to keep me.”

Harry shook his head; somehow the entire thing felt like a dream. He wasn’t even sure it was happening. Try what with him? He opened his mouth, but couldn’t think of anything to say. Draco wrenched free, and took several seconds with the pretence of straightening the buttons on his robe sleeve.

“I don’t want what you want.”

Harry swallowed, but kept his chin lifted stoically. He would not go down like this. “What do I want?”

Draco finally looked at him, and his eyes were so grey and solid that Harry would’ve sworn he didn’t reflect light at all. There was no hint of the green wall sconces in them, no hint of anything save for decisiveness. “Love. A boyfriend.”

“Yeah, so?” He shifted uncomfortably. Draco hadn’t dropped his gaze, hadn’t wavered at all. He stepped away, towards the door, and Harry added quickly, desperately, “Everyone likes love.”

“Love is a cage,” said Draco, “and I will be free.”

This time, he really did leave.

-x-

“Morning, Potter.”

Harry stiffened. He looked around the Great Hall to see if anything looked amiss, anything that would signal that this was a dream. Everything looked normal. Hesitantly, he lifted his eyes to the person now sitting next to him, poshly buttering toast.

“Draco,” Harry said.

Draco ignored the catch in his voice. He said, “Shame Cadwallader fumbled that quaffle last night. Looks like I’m in the lead again.”
“Draco, can we—”

“No,” Draco hissed, finally turning to look at him. He did a quick glance up and down the table to ensure none of the other eighth years were listening in, and said, “Potter, we will not talk about last night. We will go back to how things were last week, when neither of us had taken leave of our senses.”

Then he turned away, took a sip of water from his ever-present bottle, and made every effort of continuing on with his breakfast.

Harry swallowed. “I don’t think I can.”

Draco’s eyes narrowed. He snapped his wand and a privacy spell flew up around them. “You can and you will, or we’ll end this friendship right now. I won’t be owned by anyone, Golden Boy, not even you.”

“But could we just—I’ll stop,” Harry promised. “I won’t be…in love with you anymore. You were fine with it before, when I just wanted to shag you. Look, I’m already not in love with you. See? It’s me, Harry, not in love. It was just a momentary thing, because I was excited. It won’t happen again.”

Draco didn’t blink. “You can’t just make yourself stop, Potter.”

“I can do anything I want.”

Draco snorted, but it wasn’t the amused-sounding one he used to use when Harry made a crack about Hermione and Millicent ‘studying’ together. “Not even you can do that.”

“I just want to be able to touch you again,” Harry said, desperate.

Draco’s mouth flattened in an angry line. “You’ve heard my terms. Take them or leave them. What will it be?”

Harry clenched his fists. “I’ll be your friend.”

Draco was all smiles again. “Good!” he said. “Would you pass me the pumpkin juice? I wanted to get your opinion on the assignment Slughorn gave us. Did you notice anything peculiar about it?”

Harry forced himself to relax, drink his juice, pretend everything was normal. His hands were shaking and his insides probably were, too. Oh my God, he thought hysterically, It’s only been five minutes and he expects me to keep this up for the rest of my life.

“It was—peculiar,” he agreed, lamely. “It seemed really simple compared to everything else he’s given us.”

“My thoughts exactly,” said Draco. “I thought maybe he just wanted easy marking since he’s got his last Slug Club party coming up next weekend.”

“Right, yeah,” said Harry. “Probably.”

Draco’s eyes narrowed. “Are you going to be able to do this, Potter?” He set his silverware aside and turned to face Harry more fully on the bench. “Or should we end this now?”

“Yes—I can definitely do it. Obviously.” Harry’s fingers clenched in his robes again as he was reminded of Draco teasing him about the way and frequency he said ‘obviously’ now.
His heart lurched. Fuck.

“No,” he said, swallowing. “I can’t do it. I know what’s missing now.”

Harry stood, scooped his rucksack up in one hand, and walked around Draco. He forced whatever tiny Occlumency walls he could muster to come up and shield him enough to put one foot in front of the other without losing his mind.

“I’m sorry. I have to do this, for myself.” And then he was gone.

-x-

By the end of May, the empty space at Harry’s side that Draco had only just begun to fill was already changing into something new, but somehow more volatile and maddening than the same empty space that existed before Malfoy.

He learned to live without Draco in the same way one might learn to live without a hand. He knew it was missing—he couldn’t not know—but life still existed without that hand, and so, therefore, must he. But if he chose to avoid Slug Clubs in the meantime, well, that was his perogative.

And Malfoy was wrong. Harry didn’t want love and a boyfriend. Not if wanting that led to this. What he wanted, was his best mate back. And he hoped to Merlin that Ron never learned Legilimency because all that confidence he’d gained with the Aurors would be shot to shit if he found out ‘best mate’ meant ‘Malfoy’ not ‘Ron’.

It was just that he could no longer separate ‘best mate’ and ‘love’ in his mind. How had he bollocksed this up quite so royally? He should’ve never given Malfoy up. And yet the thought of talking to him again, and knowing nothing would ever come of it felt like standing in Fiendfyre.

“One week,” Hermione said at dinner, near the end of May. “One week, one week, one week.” It was like a battle chant for her.

Harry had made it three weeks without Draco, without a battle chant.

“I don’t know why everyone always got so bothered about NEWTs, said Happy-Fucking-Terry-Boot. “Just another set of exams. When we finish them, we’ll officially be wizards, even if we only get Trolls across the board. Won’t that be grand, Harry?”

Harry made an effort to be engaged. This was his life after all. “Finishing school or getting all Trolls?”

Boot laughed as if this were a great joke. Harry, upon reflecting on his life, supposed it was. “Finishing school of course! Say—are you really planning to stay on as Professor Snape’s apprentice? I heard you were, but I thought it couldn’t be true!”

“If I get an O in Potions, I am.”

Boot grinned, and it was such a nice, happy grin than it made Harry’s mouth curve up as well. God, he hated Boot. Hated how happy and together he was. And he also thought he was an alright chap and they probably would’ve been friends if Harry wasn’t trending towards basketcasedom these days.

“That’s brilliant. I just need an O in Astronomy, and I’m on at the Apache Point Observatory.
Can’t wait for Mexico. I love sun, don’t you?”

“Sure. Sun’s great.” If one could brew a proper Suntan Solution.

“Harry,” said Hermione, always his wingwoman, even if she was sometimes an entire conversation too late. “Did you re-brew the Heart Helper? You were struggling with it last week.”

He scowled. “I remember. I re-brewed it.” Thanks to Snape, he didn’t add. Merlin, he was almost becoming fond of the stupid bastard portrait.

He’d once thought he’d never pass Potions without the Prince’s book. Now, he didn’t necessarily need the book, but his understanding of the theory had only improved since Malfoy stopped—well. Now that Harry was brewing alone, Snape made a habit of showing up in the Caravaggio opposite the worktable. He didn’t even comment on the fact that Draco never came with any more, even though, like Dumbledore, he surely must’ve known. For that, Harry could be grateful.

The downside of this was that he had no outlet for his sarcastic commentary except Harry; the upside was that Snape was indeed incredibly bored and had a lot of commentary to offer, thus leading to Harry finally—finally—understanding the value of precise stir-counts in medical potions.

Dark Caravaggio backgrounds and tortured expressions suited the late Potions Master more than pre-Raphaelite idylls, at least.

“One week,” she reminded him.

“I could hardly forget.” He dredged up a smile for her, much easier than for Terry Boot. “Don’t worry, Hermione. I’ve got this.”

She pursed her lips. “See that you have.”

Then she pulled out her bottomless bag and fished around for something. Millicent became engaged in the proceedings shortly after her head and torso disappeared inside. Her eyes met Harry’s over Hermione’s bent, half-missing form.

He shrugged. “Hell of a bag.”

Boot took up a conversation with Susan then; Millicent’s eyes followed their discourse for a moment, judging, then returned her gaze to him. “You think you’ll get an O?” she asked.

“I got an E on my OWLs knowing less.”

“Less to know for OWLs.” She rolled her eyes. Harry shrugged. She sighed. “Draco got his Animagus last night.”

That…was not what he’d expected to hear. Nor what he wanted to hear. Draco didn’t need him. Never would need him. He pushed that thought away, and when he smiled at Millicent, at least his pride for Draco was genuine.

“Good for him. Tell him—tell him I said congratulations.”

This seemed to be what Millicent was looking for. Her eyes roved his face for a split second, resettled on his own. “You aren’t talking any longer.”

“No.”
She took this in stride, considered him for a moment. “Draco’s like a boggart. You’ll never know what he truly looks like if you’re looking right at him. It’s only when he thinks you aren’t paying attention that he becomes himself. You shouldn’t have looked at him.”

His whole body heated with something unidentifiable. He hated Slytherins, hated how enigmatic they were, how they so enjoyed riddles.

How insightful they could be.

He hated that he might love one of them, and they were the hardest people in the world to love because to get close to them was to walk across a live battle field in your shirtsleeves with your arms spread and your eyes closed.

“Too late now,” he said, shrugging.

Millicent frowned. She had dimples when she did. “No. Just stop looking at him.”

Too late for that, too.

-x-

The first morning of NEWTs came, and Harry felt invincible for the twenty minutes it took for him to stumble out of bed and into a set of robes, then make it down the stairs for breakfast. Then he saw the examiners’ rigid faces at the head table, and felt disinclined to finish his breakfast.

“Eat,” Hermione said.

“Not hungry.”

“I didn’t ask you if you were fucking hungry, did I? I said to fucking eat your breakfast so you have some fucking energy for your Charms NEWT, you bloody, fucking, stubborn, cocky Gryffindor prat!”

Every face at the eighth year table turned towards her, many with mouths gaping. Harry supposed they hadn’t heard the additions to her vocabulary yet. This was nothing.

“Stressed?” he asked lightly, though he did cut up a sausage and start eating again.

“Yes,” she growled.

He smirked at his plate. At least he wasn’t stressed anymore. It was hard to take anything seriously when Hermione was swearing. “It’s just Charms. You’ve got this.”

She made an annoyed, shrilling sound and stormed from the breakfast table. Millicent rolled her eyes. Harry grinned at her, and then his eyes slid past her. His stomach clenched as his eyes met Draco’s. For a moment, there was no one on Earth but them. The look was so private, so intense, so very much like the looks he’d received when they were still friends. And then Draco looked away, and the sounds of the Great Hall rushed back in to fill the void that remained, like high tide in Cornwall.

“Attention, students!” Flitwick called from the head table. “Breakfast is now over. First through fourth and sixth year students will disperse to their common rooms or other—quiet—activities. Seventh and eighth year students sitting a Charms NEWT will report to the Charms wing for their
NEWT practical. Fifth years will remain here for the written Charms exam. Now, hop to it!”

Hermione was, of course, already waiting by the time Harry arrived at the Charms wing. Her hair fluttered behind her, almost like an afterthought, as she paced back and forth.

“Harry, thank Merlin,” she said, upon seeing him. She strode over, grabbed his shoulder. She shook him once and said, very calmly: “I am having a nervous fucking breakdown.”

“It’s just Charms,” he said again. “You altered a Protean Charm for a galleon, made an infinite handbag, and survived a duel with Antonin Dolohov with only a 30 centimetre scratch. I think you’ll be fine.”

She breathed deeply. “I suppose you’re right.”

They were called in alphabetical order again, which would have been fine if Harry wasn’t in the same group as Draco and Parkinson. He did his best not to let it affect him, but he could still see the look Draco wore in his mind’s eye, and it made him miss him desperately.

The actual practical wasn’t too bad. They started him off asking for three degrees of stasis charms—and with all his Potions work lately, he was practically a pro at those. Next, he had to make a piglet fly without transfiguring wings onto it, and finally cast a glamour over himself that made his eyes black and his hair green.

“Are you going for extra points, Mr Potter?” the examination witch asked at the end, without looking up from her note-taking.

“Yes, what are my options?”

“Any high-level charm not taught as part of the standard Hogwarts curricula will be considered for extra points.”

So he cast a Patronus, feeling inordinately pleased with himself as the flash of shimmering white leapt from his wand. But then he noticed the shape, and his face drained of blood. There was a greyhound dashing about the room, and any hope that he could cancel it before Draco noticed was shot. For the second time that day, their eyes met, and Draco looked anything but happy.

“Very good, Mr Potter,” the witch said, bored. He ran from the room as fast as a snitch.

-x-

“Harry!” Hermione whispered as he was walking back from the written examination that evening. She tugged him into the girls’ loo, where, fortunately, Myrtle was nowhere to be seen. “It’s all up and down the castle that your Patronus is a dog now. I thought you were over Sirius by now. Are you not? If you’re not then—”

“It wasn’t Snuffles,” he said. The petname for Sirius’ Animagus form barely gave him a twinge of pain these days. That was good, he supposed.

She paused. “Then what…?”

Harry looked away, down. There was a long crack in the marble floor by the sink. “It was a greyhound.”
She breathed in hard, deliberately, through her nostrils. Took a single step back to better look at his face. “That’s Malfoy’s Animagus.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” he said bitterly. “I’m well aware.”

“What happened between you two? You were thick as thieves for months. It was the happiest I’ve seen you since Ron started Auror training.”

Harry’s mouth twisted. “I know. We just…I don’t know, Hermione. You couldn’t have really expected us to be—friends forever. It’s me and Malfoy, for fuck’s sake.”

She bought it. He hated that she bought it. Hated that no one could see what’d really happened, and that he couldn’t tell them either. He felt like he was going to explode with the weight of it. I love Draco Malfoy and no one will ever know! he wanted to scream.

“All right, Harry. I’ll lay off for now. Let’s just get through NEWTs and then we’ll have all summer at Ron’s to decompress.”

“Then back to Hogwarts for another three years.”

She grinned. “I hope so.” She took another deep breath. “We can do this, Harry. There’s always life after, well.”

“I know,” he said. It sucked, but if Hermione could handle Life After Family, then he could do Life After Malfoy. Even if he was the only one who knew it had been there to begin with. Merlin, fuck, it hurt to hold it all himself, but he wouldn’t betray Draco by telling.

He owed him that much, at least.

-x-

The next Monday, his last NEWT came. The Potions examiner let them in at exactly ten a.m. and Harry took up his usual seat with the emotional burner. At least it wasn’t a Wednesday.

“Only one to a table. I’ll come around with a hat, from which you will draw a piece of parchment. Upon the parchment you will find the name of the potion you are to brew. After you have brewed your potion, decant two ounces for analysis, then continue through the door at the back of the room to the written examination where you will receive further instructions.”

The wizard came around and Harry reached into the hat for a piece of parchment. The examiner was already moving on. Harry unfolded it and read, and wanted to laugh. Liver Repair Elixir. He could, quite literally, brew this potion drunk. Draco had seen to that, at least.

He set his cauldron up and headed for the front of the room, where a selection of potions ingredients were arrayed for him to choose from. There was the boggart liver, and the astragalus and chicory root and all the other minutiae involved. He took a measure of distilled water and returned to his table.

It was while he was steaming his chicory roots that he caught the movement from the corner of his eye. The painting was of a darkened transmutation lab, so he blended in well. Snape watched Harry’s brewing with a curious focus. Their eyes met once, but Harry quickly looked away, back to his potion, before the examiner could see him. This was one NEWT he definitely didn’t want to get accused of cheating on, and soon the feeling of eyes on him faded away entirely, and he lost
himself to the meditative effect brewing brought him.

When he finished his last set of 100 stirs, he set his rod aside and took a moment to just look at his potion and feel calm. It was perfect. Better—it was his version of perfect. It’d taken until his NEWTs to achieve, but he finally, after all this time, understood what Malfoy had meant when he said you could repaint a Dali but it would never be art until you were an artist yourself. He was certain he understood it now.

He moved on to the next room after turning in his two-ounce sample for analysis, and was greeted at the door by a young witch with a crooked nose, like she’d broken it once or twice. “Choose a parchment. You will find six potions on the table to my right. Your assignment is to identify the potions on your parchment and write about the brewing process for each. Details on the board.”

He grabbed another paper from another hat. Heart Helper Potion, Cold Cure, Draught of Living Death. It wasn’t difficult at all to identify his three potions (1, 2, and 6), nor was it difficult to know what to say. He’d worked so much with them lately that he rather thought he’d have too much to say. Hermione would be amused. And vindicated, most likely.

Elated from his practical, Harry set to work outlining the potions. A crick in his neck had him looking up to work it from side to side, and there he saw him again, looking refreshed and intensive in a Vermeer. Harry gave Snape a small smile, which remained unreciprocated, and returned to his essays.

When he finished, he felt both relieved and pensive. He knew he’d done well—but well enough? He was fairly sure of it, but never before had he understood Hermione’s need for perfection until now.

But he was done, and there was nothing more he could do except wait for his results. He exited quietly, carefully avoiding looking at Draco as he passed his desk on the way out. But it was impossible to miss Draco’s elaborate script, and the large Liver Repair Elixir printed at the top of his page. They’d done that potion together, sort of. And here they were, sort of doing it together again.

Harry wondered if Malfoy remembered that night together as he wrote, the way Harry had been propelled by the memories of Draco’s hands on his waist and the way they’d counted together, and the smell of chicory root and Draco’s freshly-washed hair, and how much focus he’d needed to keep his spells within the acceptable power range when he’d been drunk off whisky and Draco’s body heat. Harry would never forget a single part of how to brew that potion. It had too many vibrant memories attached to it.

Draco’s fingers tensed around his quill as Harry walked by. A drop of green ink splattered on the desk. The same colour ink Harry used. Stop looking at him, Millicent had said. He could do that.

Harry shut the door carefully behind him.

“Potter.”

Harry turned. Snape had followed him into the siren’s painting outside the Potions classroom. “Yes, Professor?”

“Take some time this summer to harvest a selection of inedible mushrooms for your first assignment as apprentice. I shall see you in September.”

Then he disappeared, leaving Harry alone in the corridor. His mouth stretched, slowly at first with
disbelief, and then with the unbearable pull of happiness. He jumped in the air, whooping, and not even caring that he would look utterly ridiculous to anyone watching. Then he took off for the common room to write a letter. He couldn’t wait to tell Ron.

-x-

Hermione had fallen asleep against his shoulder. He couldn’t blame her. He was nearly there himself, but the whistle of the train roused him from his doze as it slowed for their arrival in London.

Ron was on the platform with Mrs Weasley, and Harry felt, insanely, like a first year coming home for the first time. His laughter woke Hermione, who blinked sleepily at him before following his gaze.

“Oh, Ron,” she said, a little sadly. Ron was waving madly at them already, looking unfortunately dashing decked out in his scarlet Auror robes, with the wind sweeping his hair all about. They both plastered on excited smiles and waved back.

“Good to be home, isn’t it?” said Terry.

“Yes,” Harry said, and meant it. It was good to see Ron again, even if they were drifting apart.

“Three Broomsticks this Sunday, yes? Still coming?”

“Oh, I’ll be there,” Harry assured him. He might even bring Ron. Maybe it would help them reconnect, and Ron could go back to filling that hole that Malfoy dug for himself and then abandoned.

Out on the platform, Ron rushed them, crushing first Hermione, and then Harry, in over-excited, scarlet-coloured hugs. “Merlin, it’s been an age,” he said, and couldn’t seem to stop himself from grinning. “I got your letter, Harry. Are you fucking me about?”

“Ronald!” Mrs Weasley exclaimed, as she disentangled from a hug with Hermione. They ignored her, and she bustled off to find Ginny, who’d decided to ride home in Luna’s compartment with the other ‘real’ seventh years.

“Not at all,” said Harry. “Won’t know for sure until results come in July, but Snape seemed confident, and, well, it’s Snape.”

Ron whistled, still grinning somehow. “Blimey, Harry.”

“I checked,” Hermione said. “He’s definitely not under Imperius.”

“What? Really?” Harry was scandalised. “It’s just a bit of Potions!”

Ron and Hermione both rolled their eyes. “And a last minute career change to your worst subject ever,” Ron said.

“And suddenly seeking the approval of a dead Potions professor, that, might I add, you despised,” Hermione added, most unhelpfully.

“You are both horrible friends,” Harry muttered. “I can fight off an Imperius, in case your memories are quite that poor.”
“Are we ready to go? Got your bags, Harry, Hermione?” Mrs Weasley said, returning from the train with Ginny and Luna in tow.

“Yes, Mrs Weasley,” they chorused.

Harry couldn’t help turning for one last look at the train before he stepped through to the other side. It was the exact moment that Draco turned from his mother’s dotage to look his way. Their eyes met, and held, and then, with more willpower than he actually felt, Harry turned away and walked through the gate.

-x-

“Why don’t you just write the book? Twenty thousand galleons is a lot of dosh. You could buy a flat, travel, whatever.”

Why this wasn’t a done deal was quite beyond Harry. Hermione didn’t have any other support, and apprentices didn’t receive any stipend beyond room, board, and ten galleons a month. Barely enough for necessities. She needed it.

She flopped back on Ron’s bed and stared with a frown up at the Cannon’s poster on the ceiling. Harry wondered if she found it as disagreeable as he did. “Would you really want everyone to know what it was like for us, for you?”

No. “Maybe it will give them some perspective.”

“It won’t change them,” Ron said. Harry rolled his eyes. He knew.

“I’d rather Hermione write it than Skeeter, and if they’re offering her money to do it, it just seems stupid for her to pass it up. Especially when authorship is something our Hermione’s always wanted.”

Even from his bed, he could see the blush suffusing her face. She was always a little surprised when he or Ron managed to show that they actually paid attention to her.

“Well, I don’t know,” she said.

“Just do it,” Ron said, in that way that Ron always did, because he saw the world in black and white (or maybe orange and white) and sometimes Harry wondered if it would be easier to go back to that. “Harry doesn’t mind.” He cleared his throat. “Although try not to linger overmuch on my, er, missteps.”

Harry laughed. “Maybe you could just not mention Ron at all during that time. If you never say one way or another, it’ll look like he was just unusually quiet for a month.”

“I could do that,” Hermione said, frowning thoughtfully.

“Nah,” Ron said. “I was a berk. Don't romanticise it.”

“You were a bit of a berk,” Hermione allowed, but she was smiling. All of that was over now, and they could laugh about Ron being twatty. “All right, I’ll do it. They want my outline by the end of the week, so I suppose I’d better go and get started.”

She stood from the bed, stretched out a kink in her neck, and wandered over to Harry. She bent
down, pressed a quick kiss to his head, and said, “Thank you, Harry.”

Then she ruined it by wrinkling her nose at the state of his hair, and making a frustrated, abortive attempt at fingering it into some degree of decency. She shut the door behind her as she left, and Harry turned back to Ron, who was staring at him with one cocked eyebrow.

“Nothing like that, you know how she is,” Harry said.

“If you’re sure,” Ron said. “Because it would be okay if you did.”

“I’m sure,” said Harry.

Ron resumed his relaxed pose against the wall, his legs stretched out before him on the bed. “I was beginning to wonder if you’d changed your mind about preferring blokes…haven’t heard about anyone special, you know?”

Harry chuckled. “Who has time to even think about that sort of thing with all the crap they threw at us last term?” he asked, but in his head he was chanting, *Me me me*, and *I’d never change my mind after Draco Malfoy*. Then, to get things back on safer ground, he said, “How’re things with Lavender? Is she going to be your partner full time?”

Ron grinned again. Of the three of them, he had the straightest, most uniform teeth, and it bugged Hermione no end. You could take the girl away from dentist parents, but you couldn’t take…well, Harry didn’t really know where he was going with that one actually, except to avoid thinking about Draco.

“She’s great,” Ron said. “We really get on these days. It’s so weird. But Dawlish and Robarbs think we’re a good team, so I expect so.” He paused, a sheepish look crossed his face. “D’you think Hermione’d mind if I brought her over for dinner one day? I’d really like it if we could all be friends, you know?”

Well. Hermione was a saint, but Harry wasn’t sure that this wasn’t pushing it a bit far. “You’d better ask,” he said.

“Course,” Ron said. “This weekend if she agrees. Say—there’s this great pub in muggle London that the Aurors go to sometimes. We could catch a game of footie on the telly. You, me, and Hermione. That’s what they’re called, right? Tellies?”

Harry grinned. “That’s right. But I don’t know if Hermione’d be interested in watching a football game. D’you want to come to the Broomsticks with me on Sunday for my Quidditch fantasy league?”

Ron looked wounded for a moment before it cleared from his face. “Sounds great, Harry. Yeah. Anyone else in it with you?”

“Well,” Harry said, wrinkling his nose, “there’s Terry Boot.”

“He’s an alright bloke,” Ron said. Then he turned thoughtful. “Always so happy, though…”

“Yeah,” Harry said with a grimace. What was with people being so happy? First Boot, then Malfoy…and an ache coursed through him; he pushed it away. He was so bloody tired of struggling with this feeling he hadn’t any control over. Malfoy wasn’t interested and that was fucking that. There was no need to be so stuck on Draco sodding Malfoy. Plenty of fish, big wide world, et cetera et cetera.
“And Malfoy’s in it, too,” he added, because it was better to rip these things off like plasters.

“Bloody wanker. You mean you didn’t walk straight out when you saw him there?”

“Ah, no. We were…friends for a little while. I…actually joined the league with him.”

Ron threw himself back on the bed as if living were too much to bear. “Please tell me you’re having me on.”

“’Fraid not. We’ve been going back and forth on first and second place all season.”

Harry frowned, remembering the distant looks Draco sent him on Sundays when Vic announced the standings and Harry was in first again. There was none of that spark left when he looked at Harry; it was like he was…dead. Inferi.

Not for the first time, a single question rang through Harry’s head, echoing like church bells. Why?

Why had Draco changed his mind about him? He’d been so keen that first night. Were Harry’s emotions really that off-putting? It wasn’t like he did it on purpose, for Merlin’s sake.

“Are you beating him now?” Ron asked.

Harry smirked. “Yes. Just pulled ahead again.”

This seemed to satisfy Ron. “I suppose I can handle this, so long as you’re still better than him.”

“Ron!” Harry said, laughing. Maybe their friendship wasn’t dying after all. Maybe it just needed time.

What bullshit, he thought. He and Ron could be mates until the end of the world, and it still wouldn’t make up for the feeling he got whenever he turned to tell Draco something funny, and Draco wasn’t there.

-x-

“That’s not a morel,” said Hermione.

Harry eyed the mushroom more carefully. He plucked it up and checked the inside of the stem. Cottony, not hollow. He tossed it in his bag. “Good. I don’t want a real morel, I want a false morel.”

“Why?” Ron was eating an apple from a wild apple tree. Hermione had already checked to make sure it was a real apple while Harry and Ron patiently, and quietly, waited for her to do so. They weren’t stupid, after all.

“Snape said I need a bunch of poisonous mushrooms.”

The quiet became tense, and Harry stood to find Ron and Hermione communicating silently. “What?”

They looked at him guiltily. “Well, what if you don’t get an O? NEWT results won’t come for a couple more weeks.”

I would probably sink into a depression at the thought of joining the Aurors and then struggle to
hide it by blowing millions of galleons fronting as a playboy to distract myself from post-Malfoyism. Or something slightly less melodramatic, maybe. “I’m going to get it.”

They shared another speaking look. Ron was the first to look away. Harry bent down to gather more false morels.

“Say, Hermione,” said Ron. “Would you mind if I had Lavender over for dinner—let us all get to know each other better, you know?”

Harry peeked up. Hermione’s eyes fixed on Ron’s face, her look intense. There was a decidedly entertained glint to her stare. “Sure, Ron. If I can invite Millicent. I’d like us to all get to know her better, too.”

Harry smirked, said nothing. He could practically hear the gears working in Ron’s brain—perhaps a little creaky from disuse. Harry knew the exact moment that Ron caught on. “Well—sure. Mum does love to cook.” He prodded Harry’s rib with a boot. “Anyone you want to invite, Harry?”

He clenched his fist around a morel, accidentally destroying it. God, yes. “No, thanks.”

Because for some stupid reason, his plus-one no longer cared to speak to him. It was just a little love, for Merlin’s sake. Never killed anyone. Probably. Might start with Harry, actually.

Get it together, Harry, he thought. You can’t live your whole life like this. But then again, where was rationality when you needed it?

Probably with Hermione.

-x-

The dinner went okay, about as well as could be expected when Hermione was forced to suffer Lavender Brown’s company and Mrs Weasley was forced to attempt conversation with Millicent.

Although, even Hermione would have to admit, as Mrs Weasley brought out the pudding, that there was something different about Lavender—something strong and Gryffindor that she’d lacked all through school. And she sat with Ron on her left, as if she wouldn’t let him forget that that half of her face was covered in four long, red slashes.

Ron didn’t seem to mind. He gazed at her adoringly when she wasn’t looking, and when she smiled at him, her cheeks dimpled only on one side.

“You should’ve invited Malfoy, Harry,” Ginny said. Harry choked on his treacle tart. “Weren’t you two friends last year? I swear I never saw one of you without the other after Christmas. I bet he would’ve liked to get away right about now.”

“Ah, yeah,” Harry said, bemused. “Yeah, he was busy.”

“That poor boy,” Mrs Weasley said. “I can’t imagine what he must be going through right now.”

Bewildered, turned to Hermione, but it was Millicent who caught his eye. She shook her head minutely. Reluctantly, he turned back to his treacle tart. Everything in the kitchen was tense after that, or maybe it was just Harry. He could’ve married, had three children, and sent the first one off to Hogwarts in the time it took Mrs Weasley to declare supper over and begin clearing the plates.
Harry grabbed the girls directly after and dragged them outside to the shed, amid Mr Weasley’s muggle miscellanea. “What happened?”

Millicent pursed her lips; Hermione worried her own. He stared between the two of them, feeling his skin come all over heated. How horrible could it be?

Hermione broke first. “Oh, Harry—didn’t you see the Prophet? It’s been all over the papers for days.”

“You know I don’t read that rubbish. What happened?”

“His father was killed by an Azkaban guard in May, but it was hushed up. There was an investigation going on and Malfoy had to give testimony right before NEWTs. A dozen witnesses came forward to say the Auror had acted out of protocol, but charges were dropped two days ago.”

Harry stared. “Fuck.”

The traitorous thought that maybe this could have had something to do with Draco’s reluctance entered his mind and wouldn’t leave.

“Those people never change,” Millicent snarled. She turned and punched Mr Weasley’s dartboard, right on the bull’s eye. “They’ll always think we’re worthless, and they’ll always get away with it because of fucking insignificant nonsense like dark and light magic. It was a Reducto to the head that blew Lucius Malfoy to bits, Potter, not Cruciatu. Fuck your light magic and your pretentious definitions of good.”

“Oh, Mill,” Hermione murmured. She ran her fingers over the other woman’s knuckles, and the skin knitted together in their wake.

Harry followed the motion with his eyes, and was momentarily overcome by the memory of Draco’s sharp gaze focusing on him whenever he did wandless magic. He hadn’t done any since then. He hadn’t been able to.

“Oh, shut up, Hermione,” Millicent said, sighing. “Sometimes pain is compulsory.”

I should write him, Harry thought. Then: Fuck, I’m the last person he’d want to hear from.

He wanted to be there for Draco, but that was selfish. So, he turned away, fiddled with the egg beater on the workbench, and reminded himself that Draco didn’t want him around anymore, especially not at a time like this.

-x-

The letter came on the first of July. It said:

Dear Mr Potter:

I am delighted to inform you that you have been accepted into the Hogwarts Apprenticeship Program, for Potions and Herbal Transmutation under Severus Snape, Master Alchemist, 1st Degree; Master Transmutist, 1st Degree; Grand Master of Potions, 3rd Degree; (deceased).

Please report to Hogwarts by 5pm, 31 August for supper and room assignment.
Enclosed, you will find a list of required items. Note that Apprentices must be dressed in the colours of their Master at all times, so we suggest that you purchase more than one set of robes (details enclosed).

We look forward to the next three years of discovery with you.

Yours truly,

Minerva McGonagall
Headmistress
Order of Merlin, First Class
Grand Mistress of Transfigurations, 3rd Degree
Mistress Transmutist, 2nd Degree

“Bloody hell,” Ron murmured. Harry jumped, startled. Ron stood behind him, peering over his shoulder, a half-eaten apple in one hand. “You really did it.”

“Yeah,” Harry said.

Had he really? It felt surreal. He flipped to the next page and saw the results of his NEWT exams:

**Charms:** Exceeds Expectations
**Defence Against the Dark Arts:** Outstanding
**Potions:** Outstanding
**Transfigurations:** Acceptable

Outstanding. He’d got an Outstanding! Across the breakfast table, Hermione made an anxious sound. They both looked. Her face was white, her hands gripping her own letter too tightly.

“Hermione?” Ron said.

“I got in.”

Harry laughed. “Well, of course you got in. It was me we weren’t sure about, remember?”

“I’m going to be an Arithmancer,” she said, face still bloodless.

“Yeah, in three years, though,” said Ron. “That’s ages. You’ll have plenty of time to get used to it.”

She squealed. “Oh, Harry! Ron! I’m so excited! I’ve got to go buy apprentice robes and books and a new abacus and—oh, I hope Millicent got in, too. I know they weren’t sure about letting both of us apprentice under Professor Vector at the same time, and—”

She ran from the room, and Harry shared a look with Ron. They grinned. It was almost like old times. It was almost as good as sharing a joke with—

Nope. No, it wasn’t.

“Blimey,” Ron said, tossing the apple core in the compost bin beneath the kitchen sink. “Wait ‘til
Lav hears about this. I can’t believe you’re going to apprentice in Potions.”

“You’d better start believing,” Harry said, as he scanned his list of required items. “’Cause we’ll be twenty-two before you see me leaving Hogwarts again.”

Ron laughed. “You’d better at least come out for my ceremony when I make full Auror in two years.”

Harry grinned. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world, mate.” And he meant it. Right then, at least, he meant it.
09. Inhibition

The process of holding back or restraining

-x-

Fuck it, Harry thought, as he walked past the magical pet shop window on his way up to Hogwarts, and felt two black-rimmed eyes following him. He stopped, annoyed with himself, then turned back, and entered the shop. Putting on his don’t-mind-me-just-browsing façade, he came round to stare at the grey kitten, now somewhat larger, in the pen by the window.

“Anything I can help you with, dear?” asked the shop witch. She came up to him, followed his line of sight down to the cat. “Last one left. She’ll be here awhile, I’m afraid. Poor dear.”

“Why?” She looked like a perfectly normal cat to Harry. And everyone liked kittens, didn’t they? Even if they looked like they were wearing NHS glasses and had astigmatism?

“Bit of a squib, that one is.” She paused to chuckle at her joke. “Full blooded kneazle and not a drop of magical prowess in her whatsoever.”

“She’s not as smart as other kneazles?” guessed Harry, who wasn’t aware that kneazles had any magical prowess to speak of. Crookshanks was a dab hand at catching Animagus Death Eaters, but it wasn’t like he could apparate. The cat seemed to bristle for a second, but then it turned away, and curled up on the floor of the pen. Harry’s brow furrowed. Could cats be dejected?

“Oh, she’s plenty smart. Just won’t do you a lick of good when it comes to ward-setting. That’s all anyone ever wants a kneazle for, really. Good for detecting things that aren’t what they seem, and good for knowing when things aren’t what they’re supposed to be, too. Helps with monitoring wards and putting them up. Also work as pocket sneakoscopes if you can stand the fur on your cloak, but not this one.”

“Even normal cats are good at that sort of thing,” said Harry, dubiously.

The witch hummed, obviously unwilling to disagree with a potential customer, no matter how much she might like to. He kneeled, reached out to run a finger over the cat’s ear. It flicked once, and he thought he was in for being ignored, but, slowly, one eye opened and regarded him, almost hesitant. Feeling emboldened, he rubbed along her head, and soon the cat was purring. Quite without his permission, Harry began to smile. Fucking Malfoy. Somehow this was his fault.

“If you say so.”

Harry looked up at her, smiling from the cat’s reluctant purrs. His fringe fell aside, and he knew the moment when she spotted his scar.

“Mr Potter!”

Inwardly sighing, outwardly smiling, he rose and accepted the handshake she was offering. “Any pet you’d like—any pet at all. I can’t thank you enough for what you did—”

“I like this kneazle,” he said. The cat’s ears twitched again, as if startled by this pronouncement.
“Oh but surely not! A squib kneazle for the Boy-Who-Lived? We have some beautiful snowy owls in—much better suited to a wizard of your—”

“No,” he said. She stopped talking at the tone of his voice. He followed it with the PR smile he was developing just in case. “I’d like the kneazle, please. How much?”

“Gratis, of course!”

“I’d rather not receive preferential treatment.”

She fluttered a hand at him. “As you say, Mr Potter, but even if I weren’t inclined to, that cat isn’t worth anything to a wizard. I couldn’t charge anyone for her.”

Harry blinked, momentarily startled by the effect those words had on him. Who’d disregard a life like that because it couldn’t be used for some specific task? He reflected on how lonely it got without…Hedwig. Without Draco. He could use a new friend. And there was always value in that.

“She’s worth something to me, so I’d like to pay for her.”

Four galleons and fifteen minutes later, he emerged from the shop, being led tentatively along by the cat, who wasn’t quite sure about the leather kneazle lead she was strapped into. The cat sniffed at an apple core on the cobbles, looked back up at him with huge, intelligent eyes. Harry sighed. So he had a pet again.

“All right. To the school. Do you know how to get to Hogwarts?”

The cat blinked at him, once. Then it turned and set off directly for the path that led back to the castle. No magical prowess my ruddy arse, Harry thought.

She might not be any good at ward-setting, but Harry didn’t know of any mundane cats who understood English. No wonder this one had a complex. If he’d been in that shop listening to people call him a squib for all eight months of his life, he’d have one, too.

In addition to the other complexes he had, like being unable to stop thinking about Malfoy even though it was over—hadn’t really even begun—and there were plenty of kelpies in the sea.

-x-

McGonagall called the first faculty-staff meeting of the year on the morning of 1 September.

Harry’d overslept. He did that sort of thing sometimes. Especially when he was overwrought about seeing Draco the next morning and he had a new kneazle who wanted to explore every-bloody-thing in his new room, but didn’t have any magic to keep things from falling off wardrobes when she knocked them over.

Thus, he was last to arrive at the staff room, and of course there was only one empty seat remaining. The one next to Draco. His kneazle trotted in after him (she refused to stay behind and her caterwauling was not something he would willingly suffer), curled up on his lap and immediately went to sleep. He felt eyes on him; cut his own to the right, and was simultaneously pleased and dismayed to find Draco smirking at him.

His grey eyes flicked from Harry, to the cat, and back to Harry again. He cleared his throat, as if nervous. “Jollies?” he asked.
In that moment, Harry’d never felt a more profound guilt than he did for not writing his condolences over the summer. Broken-up (is that what they were?) or not, he should have acknowledged Draco’s pain, even if he’d despised the man who died, even if he’d been the one who said he couldn’t deal with being his friend and not more. Harry had owed him that much.

Harry scoffed, forced a smile. “As if.”

“Bertie?”

“She’s a girl.”

Draco shrugged, and turned his gaze to the agenda McGonagall was passing out. Across the room, Neville, Luna, and Hermione were all bunched up on a cosy-looking couch, with Millicent skulking about by the fire. He was really here, wasn’t he? Apprenticing.

“What a lovely feline, Harry,” said Professor Sprout, to his right. He caught Hermione giving him a very pointed look. It said, A cat, really? Kneazle? It looks full-blooded.”

“She is,” said Harry.

“Oh, lovely,” Sprout said, nodding. “Kneazles are superb for ward-setting.”

*Not this one.* “She’s great, yeah.”

Perhaps it was his imagination, but the cat’s purring seemed to increase in fervour when he said that. He skritched her behind the ears and she made a terribly endearing little *mrew* sound, stretched her toes, and went back to sleep.

“Mr Potter,” McGonagall said. “I can appreciate a fine cat as well as the next witch, but if you don’t mind, we do have a meeting to attend to. Perhaps we could save the pet-related discourse for lunch.”

Harry fought down a flush with an arcane strength he’d not known he possessed. “Yes, Professor, sorry.” He could bloody *feel* Malfoy smirking.

“Introductions are in order, I think,” McGonagall continued. She held an arm out, indicating the woman to her right, and with a start, Harry realised that he’d met her before. The night he first met this woman, he and Draco had spent *hours* together and, for the first time, not argued once.

“Our new Potions Mistress, *Senhorita* Miguela Caldeirao, comes to us by Horace’s recommendation. Professor Caldeirao received her Mastery in Theoretical and Applied Potions under apprenticeship with renown brewer, Agnès-Laure Pascal, and until recently held the post of First Brewer for the President of Portugal. Please welcome her.”

Miguela, cool and collected, thanked the staff for their welcomes, and offered nods to both him and Draco. Harry relaxed some. At least he wouldn’t be subjected to someone who hated him—Snape could handle that for everyone.

“And of course, this year’s batch of apprentices—Hermione Granger and Millicent Bulstrode, both of whom Professor Vector has agreed to take on; Harry Potter, fulfilling a rather unconventional apprenticeship under Professor Snape; Luna Lovegood, whose remarkable proposal convinced Professor Flitwick to take her on without a gap year; Neville Longbottom, under Professor Sprout, Emrys Cadwallader, now entering his second year under Professor Hagrid, and Draco Malfoy, who will be continuing the most beautiful and majestic magic of Transfigurations, under myself.”
Several discreet coughs sounded, but McGonagall pretended to ignore them. Finally, Professor Vector said, “A large crop this year.”


“A few orders of business, and then I’ll see the first-year apprentices. Firstly, Professor Switch will finally be taking on the role of Head of Gryffindor. If you have any issues with Gryffindor students —”

“If?” said Professor Sinistra and Snape’s portrait at the same time. They shared a speaking look.

“—Then I do ask that you send them to Mairwen instead of me.”

Professor Switch rolled her eyes. *Mairwen*, Harry thought. Sometimes he forgot that teachers even *had* first names. She’d taught him just last year. And now he had to call her by her first name. Weird.

“And secondly,” McGonagall said, smiling rather like a cat cornering a mouse, “I would like to welcome back—for his *second* year as DADA professor—Professor Finlay Hound.”

McGonagall smirked all through the cheers that rose up and filled the room. Harry hadn’t even noticed Hound off in the corner, half-hidden by his hair, with his legs bent up in his chair, but he grinned and waved at them all—even Harry, who’d always forgotten his name last year.

“I think I called him Professor Horn sometimes,” Harry whispered to Draco. As soon as he did, he remembered: they weren’t friends anymore. They weren’t *anything*. It was so easy to forget.

To his surprise, Draco’s lips curled up, and he glanced at Harry quickly before looking away again. But he said, *sotto voce*, “You did. Frequently. I was embarrassed for you.”

“What!” he whispered. His face heated up and he tried to hide it in the voluminous collar of his black apprentice robes.

“Afraid so.”

“Something you’d like to share, Apprentice Malfoy?” McGonagall said.

Draco immediately straightened, and the moment was gone. Harry would not feel bereft. *Stop looking at him*, Millicent had advised. It was good advice. Harry knew well how boggarts worked. Sometimes it was weird that the absence of Draco hadn’t been his boggart. Sometimes it was hard to remember a time when Harry hadn’t wanted to be around him nearly as much as he wanted to breathe.

“No, Professor.”

McGonagall did not look impressed, but turned back to other matters. Harry listened with half an ear, too intrigued by the grey tartan detailing on Draco’s navy apprentice robes. The McGonagall colours looked rather…nice…on him.

Much posher than Harry’s plain black ones. Since Snape didn’t have family colours, he got to choose Harry’s robes, and he’d chosen…black.

At least it had the fitted chest and fell loose about the legs like the robes Snape always favoured. It practically screamed brooding Potions Master, which Harry suspected could be rather sexy in the right hands. He was determined to be those right hands. Later on, in his rooms, he was going to try
that billowing thing Snape used to do. There was probably a spell involved.

The professors began filing out. When the room cleared, and it was just McGonagall and the apprentices left, McGonagall conjured a tea service and floated out a stack of papers while they served themselves.

“Here are your information packets, including the requirements of your apprenticeship, standards for publication of your final project, and rules and other miscellanea you will find useful during your tenure here.”

The packet was at least fifty parchments thick. Gross.

“However the main reason I’ve held the six of you back is to remind you of your required cross-subject project, due at the end of your first year. You may work separately or in pairs, and the field of study is negotiable. The only requirement is that you demonstrate the relevance of another subject to that of your own. In the past, there have been very successful pairs between Astronomy and Divination, for example, as well as Potions and Herbology, and Charms and DADA. You have any number of options. Produce original work. This is in addition to your final capstone within subject required for Mastery.”

“Can we work with subjects that Hogwarts doesn’t offer?” asked Hermione.

“Within reason,” said McGonagall. “What did you have in mind?”

Hermione chewed her lip a bit. “Well. I’d quite like to pair Arithmancy and magical Renaissance art.”

McGonagall looked pained. “Speak to Professor Vector and me later, Granger. Any other questions? No? Good. I expect all of you to be present and on time for the Welcoming Feast tonight. Potter—no kneazles at the Head Table. She’ll have to stay in your rooms.”

He nodded, but McGonagall was already on her way out. Being Headmistress was apparently a rather busy affair. He supposed that was to be expected, especially today.

“Dra—Malfoy, wait,” Harry said.

What was possessing him to set himself up for this humiliation, a small part of his brain was wondering. The other was focusing on the fact that Draco had stopped, turned, was now looking at him. Harry felt his face heat and had no idea why. This was his fault, he reminded himself. He just couldn’t stand having nothing to do with Draco Malfoy.

“Back to surnames, are we?” said Draco. The evenness of his voice helped Harry’s racing heart a little.

Harry shrugged, frowned. “I can never tell what you want.”

“No,” said Draco, studying his face quite intently. “I suppose you can’t. What is it?”

“I thought we could work together. I know that I…” He stopped, deciding that was exactly the wrong thing to say. “Remember what Miguela said? We need change. It’s part of us. It’s why we chose the subjects we did. I had all summer to change myself, and now I want to know if that offer is still open. The one where we could still be friends. We worked well together, once.”

Draco hesitated. The staff room was empty. The fire crackled in the hearth and it sounded so intimate and domestic that Harry couldn’t help imagining what it would be like to have Draco as
his friend again… just the two of them, maybe flatmates, maybe forever, and he’d come home from
the lab at night, and Malfoy would come home from wherever it was Transfigurists worked, and
they’d lounge in front of the fire together, shoes off, calves tangling—

God, this had to stop. He was such a creeper sometimes. Love was really not Harry’s thing,
probably. And he was such a liar. He could never fall out of love with Draco, no matter how hard
he tried.

“Are you sure this time?”

Harry nodded firmly. “I’m sure.”

Maybe it was his imagination, but he would’ve sworn that Draco smiled, for the briefest of
seconds. “All right, Potter. What did you have in mind for the project?”

Harry grinned, relief flooding him. “Alchemy.”

-x-

Draco wasn’t quite the same, really.

Harry again felt guilty for failing to write over the summer. What a rotten son of a bitch Lucius
Malfoy was, he thought. And yet, Draco loved him. Merlin, Harry was an awful person for not
being sorry Lucius Malfoy was dead. Except he was sorry. He was sorry Draco had known what it
was like to feel free for a while, and some bigoted Auror ruined it for him.

It was all he could think about as he watched the students file in from the carriages for another year
at Hogwarts. It’d been raining, and the second and third years were rather damper than they
might’ve been.

“Can you believe it, Harry?” Hermione whispered. She was so excited to be sitting at the head
table, even as she was absentely tugging at the fitted sleeves of her robes. Vector’s green and yellow
family colours weren’t bad on her, but they were better on Millicent.

“It’s weird,” he decided.

Malfoy slunk in and took the seat next to Harry just as Flitwick began leading the first years
through. Harry stiffened, tried to hide his surprise, but he wasn’t sure if he was successful or not.
Maybe they were talking again. He wasn’t entirely sure if the project carried over into their social
lives.

“I hope McGonagall didn’t see me,” Draco murmured.

Harry craned his neck down to the middle of the table, and found McGonagall’s sharp green eyes
glaring back at them. “She did, mate.”

Fuck. He’d already slipped back into that little place where he and Draco were friends, and it was
only the first day back. How was he going to do three years with him like this, when every moment
without him was like scraping open a slowly-healing wound?

“Fuck,” said Malfoy, not exactly quietly.

“Shut up, Malfoy,” said Neville. “The acoustics are really good in here.” He nodded to the students
seated closest to the head table, who all had wide, scandalised eyes turned towards the end of the table where the apprentices were sat. And further down the table, McGonagall was sending them death glares again.

“Bollocks,” Malfoy muttered, much more quietly this time. Several students gasped. He looked at Harry. One side of his mouth curved up in a grin, unrepentant.

Harry laughed and no one realised it was just a little forced. Merlin, how he wanted him. He took a sip of pumpkin juice, looked anywhere but at Draco. Luna peered around, caught his eye. Her pale brows lifted. She pulled out a necklace with a pendant shaped like a greyhound, and began counting beads on it like a rosary.

Fuck, he was lost. Everything changed. Everything stayed the same.

-x-

A week in, and Harry’d only left the dungeons for meals. Even his rooms were down there, isolated from everyone else’s except Miguela, who was housed a corridor away. Snape had him testing new bases made from poisonous mushrooms, and it was exhausting work, but he absolutely loved it. And that was such a revelation that it floored him when he had time to stop and think about it.

It was just so cool to do experiments all day. He felt like he was in primary school with a clay volcano spewing bicarb and hydrogen peroxide. He made explosions on purpose and Snape was pleased with him for it. It really just didn’t get any better.

“Notice the disparity in explosion altitude between the pure silver and the adulterated silver compounds, Mr Potter,” said Snape, from his Caravaggio. “What can you tell me from that?”

“Pure silver’s the fourth least reactive element,” Harry said, thinking. “The adulterated silver had an explosion twice as high and big as the pure one did. Whatever’s mixed in with the silver is probably four times as reactive as silver, assuming the quantity of the pollutant is the same as that of the silver.”

Snape grinned. It was close to his sneer, but Harry could tell the difference now. “Good, Mr Potter. Now, take a sample of the adulterated silver. Your assignment for the evening is to find two spells that will tell you each of the elements in your compound, three spells that will tell you the proportions, and one that will separate them. You will write for me three feet on the process of discerning when a metalloid ingredient is contaminated, with what, and how best to purify it.”

They had a system worked out now. Harry had a little oil painting of a desk top, and some new quick-drying, oil-based ink. He wrote all of his assignments on the parchment on the canvas desk for Snape to pick up and read. It was ridiculous. It was great. No one else had a dead Master.

“Brewing time is logarithmically inverse to length of effect; you know that, Potter,” Snape said upon returning his latest essay. “Stop pretending to be a moron.”

Hermione teased him relentlessly when he rushed in late for meals, his hair still curling at the nape from brewing steam, his mouth unable to frown. He’d never realised what a high it was to create something, to feel magic seeping out of his skin and into something, to make something meaningful, even if it was just a mistake.

Most of the time, Draco would sit next to him, and most of the time, he’d have that same look on
his face. Like Transfigurations was something ineffable, something that took him elsewhere. And they were maybe friends again. Just like last year. And just like last year, it was both freeing and confining, both wonderful and misery-inducing to be around him so much and always have that line drawn between them.

On this side, they were friends; they had undercurrents of something *more*, and...Draco was free.

On the other, they *were* more; Harry knew the taste of Draco’s sweat-soaked skin, and...Draco wasn’t free. Apparently.

Harry was incurably in love with Draco Malfoy, and it was the most awful thing in the entire world, but he was happy anyway. He had potions, and explosions, and two/three really great best friends, and Draco turned to him first when he had something witty to say at tea in the staff room. Love, Harry figured, didn’t have to be returned to be brilliant.

Although it would’ve been great if it had been.

It didn’t matter how much he wanted him; it only mattered that this was what made Draco happy. So Harry would keep his distance, and learn to stay happy being Draco’s best mate. It was enough.

A knock came at his portrait one night, and he waved his fingers vaguely in that direction to open the door, too engrossed in the September *Ars Alchemica* to get up himself. A shadow fell over his page, and it didn’t have a large, bushy area at the top like Hermione’s did. He looked up and inhaled sharply at the sight of Draco in his rooms.

“I wasn’t expecting you.”

Draco lifted an eyebrow. “Who *were* you expecting?”

“Dunno,” Harry said. “No one, really, but Hermione and Millicent come by sometimes.”

“I thought we ought to start planning for our inter-subject project.”

“Oh, right!”

Harry jumped up, and, noticing the disarray of his sitting room, sent everything back to its place with a few pointed gestures and annoyed looks. Draco watched him, and it occurred to Harry that it was the wandless magic again. Maybe he hadn’t forgotten how to do it. He’d only wanted to keep trying for Draco, after all.

A harassed yelp came from his wardrobe as his last jumper flew in, and then his kneazle jumped out, her face covered by the same.

“Oh, darling,” Harry said to her, when she stumbled piteously up to him for help. He helped her pull her head out of the sleeve and sent it back to the wardrobe again. She *mewed* in thanks and he pet her ears until she started rolling around on her back. “There’s my girl.”

“You never said what you named the cat.”

“She’s a kneazle,” Harry said. “And I haven’t named her.”

Draco took it upon himself to sit on the couch, which was alright as far as Harry was concerned. He liked that Draco felt like he didn’t need an invitation at his place. “Are you sure? She doesn’t feel like she’s attached to your room wards...”
The cat turned to Draco, staring at him dourly through her big, black-rimmed eyes. Harry rubbed her tummy and she made a rumbly noise. “She’s a squib.” And before Draco could comment on that, “And she’s great.”

Draco only raised an eyebrow. “She still needs a name. Are you sure you don’t call her Jollies when no one’s around?”

“Definitely sure.”

“Hmm.”

“What should I call her? Something not very Gryffindor, so you don’t bitch about it.”

“How about Severia?”

Harry gagged. “You can’t be serious.”

“What? It’s a nice name. If I had a daughter, that’s what I’d name her. After my godfather.”

“It’s good that you’re gay then,” Harry muttered before his mind caught up to his mouth. His eyes shot to Draco’s, horrified, but Draco was definitely not looking at him. Was, in fact, avoiding looking at him. Harry could read him, could see right through all his Slytherinity. He was hiding something.

He swallowed, much too loudly. *Stop looking at him.* “Severia is okay, I guess; it’s up to her, really.”

The cat regarded him, blinking slowly. Draco was now scratching her behind the ears and she was accepting it regally, like a queen condescending to have her hand kissed by a peasant.

“Do you like Severia?”

She yawned. He chanced a glance at Draco’s face, his eyes following the profile of his aquiline nose and Roman mouth; such a bloody fucking posh-looking git. He thought of tandem brooms rides, and greyhounds, and fantasy Quidditch, and standing on cliffs and beaches and mountains with Draco next to him and the smell of life in their noses. *Fuck,* he loved him.

Draco looked up, caught him looking.

“What?”

Harry shook his head, looked down at *Ars Alchemica,* but it didn’t inspire in him any profound methods of subject change. “It’s just—I was reminded of how transitory things are sometimes. How you can look at…something, and everything feels right, and then it occurs to you that it’s gone, or it was never there.”

Draco gave him a bitter smirk. “You’ve been breathing too many potions, Potter.”

Maybe he had been. It was just that Harry was learning subtlety from his apprenticeship, too—and those lessons had taught him to see the way Draco’s eyes shifted to the side when he said that, sort of how they did when he’d amused himself. There was something buried beneath this moment, something tense and closely guarded by the both of them. He just wasn’t sure if it was meaningful yet.

“Severia,” Harry said to his kneazle, choosing to ignore Draco’s words. They’d come too close to
saying too much already. The kneazle looked at him questioningly. “I’m afraid you’ll have to get used to it. What Malfoy wants, Malfoy gets.”

She flopped on her back, and rolled around again, and he realised that she probably didn’t care what he called her since human naming systems were beneath her. She might be a squib, but she was still a kneazle. Harry smirked at Draco, trying to unravel the tenseness. Draco shifted his eyes again. This was going nowhere.

“So—our project.”

“Yes,” Draco said, and they were both being entirely too nonchalant for that moment to have meant nothing. “I’ve never heard of anyone even trying to turn lead into gold via Transfigurations, but the more I thought about your proposal, then more I thought we had to try it. I really have no expectations that we’ll make any progress at all, especially with you constituting half of an academic pursuit, but it’s an interesting prospect, and, fuck, it might be moderately fun.”

Harry considered this. “That was the most rousing bid for my company that I’ve ever entertained.”

Draco rolled his eyes. It was flattering to know that he thought Harry had been having him on, when, in fact, he hadn’t. Sad, but true. They grinned at each other.

“So which area should we focus on then? There were seven problems that alchemists generally concerned themselves with. In fact, there’s a decent biography on Flamel in the library that covers his mastery of each of them—”

Malfoy cut him off. “Well I’m certainly not interested in making any homunculi, and it would be difficult to combine Transfigurations with making the alkahest, and I’ve no interest whatsoever in finding a solution to dissolve gold—in fact, who would?—so that narrows things down.”

Harry pulled out the broad notes he’d been making over the summer, when his reading on Potions had first led him down the mysterious path to Alchemy. He frowned. Neither he nor Malfoy really needed gold. What could hold their interest long enough to not kill one another?

“We could try restoring plants from their ashes…” he offered.

Malfoy scoffed. “Do I look like Longbottom to you, Potter?”

“No, I suppose not,” Harry said, studying him intently. Malfoy sneered, and Harry was forced to hold back a smile.

Suddenly, Malfoy looked serious. “You know what we’ll choose, Potter,” he said quietly. “Neither you nor I would ever settle for second best. We don’t bother with commonplace things.”

Harry swallowed. “The Philosopher’s Stone,” he said. He felt guilty even thinking about making one. Hadn’t Dumbledore spent a whole year trying to hide the last one? Hadn’t Harry held it in his own hands and never felt desire for the things it offered?

But he was eleven then, and eleven-year-olds didn’t understand how dysphoric life could become when you had everything you needed only fingerlengths from you, but it would be another twelve-hundred years before that person wanted you back. Harry would wait twelve-hundred years if his body was up for it.

“Yeah,” Draco said. His throat bobbed as he swallowed. “Unless you’re scared.”

“Never,” Harry said. It was the first lie he’d told all night. Because Draco constantly scared him.
He wasn’t the only person who’d take part of Harry with him if he walked away, but he was the only one Harry thought would actually leave.

God, Draco was ruinous, and Harry was going to give up things he’d fought for as a child, just to be ruined.

-x-

“I lost!” declared Terry. “But Merlin did I have a good time!”

Harry groaned. God, was it too much to ask not to have to listen to Boot being so annoyingly chipper on an otherwise pleasant Sunday evening? He lifted his eyes to the ceiling. “Please, Merlin, if there was a Merlin, don’t let Malfoy win the fucking league.”

“Hey, it’s alright, Harry,” said Terry. Vic had just begun announcing the final standings. Of twenty, Boot came in twelfth, and his sister, Thérèse, eleventh. He elbowed Harry in the ribs, and while it didn’t hurt, Harry pretended it did just the same. “If Malfoy wins, he can take us down to Diagon for some celebratory dinner, eh? Two-thousand galleons is def enough for three steak dinners, am I right?”

Malfoy’s eyes narrowed, his lips tilted up in a smirk, flicking from Harry’s ribs up to his face in a look that clearly said he’d known Harry was faking and he thought he was acting like a first year. Harry felt exposed, and wished Draco would stop looking at him, too. They were settling back into their previous friendship, and most days it was great, phenomenal. It was just that other days, it was more than Harry felt any man should have to endure.

“I don’t buy steak dinners for people who come in past tenth place.”

Boot shrugged good-naturedly. His eyes creased when he smiled, and with his newly Mexico-tanned face, he looked rather rakish, in an overly-happy sort of way. “Ah well. I suppose it’s just you and Harry then. Say, Harry, if you go to that new place—what’s it called?—Incendio, then bring me back one of those little crème brûlées? They do ‘em up right proper. Little gold flames on the top to keep it warm and crispy until you’re ready to eat them.”

Harry smirked at Draco. “Now it’s not sounding so bad if I come in second. I like little crème brûlées.”

“Fourth place—Gina Whitecauldron,” Vic called, to cheers and less savoury responses.

“Please,” Draco replied. “As if I’d be seen in public with you.”

Given the fact that they were already in public together, Harry reckoned the odds weren’t as bad as all that. In fact—

“Second place—”

All three of them held their breaths. It was only Harry and Draco left. Harry crossed his fingers, scrunched his eyes closed, and belatedly took up a religion. Because even if second place meant extorting Draco into dinner, it also meant that Harry would come in second place. To Malfoy.

“—Harry Potter.”

Fuck!” Harry said, at the same time that Draco leapt up from the table and made some sort of
half-yip, half-whoop sound that wouldn’t have been out of place at a Cannons match, but definitely
would have at Malfoy Manor.

Terry clapped him on the back. “Bad luck, mate. Now you’ve got to have a free dinner with
Malfoy. Could be worse—could play for the Cannons. Then you’d have to wear orange all the
time.”

Well, there was one thing he liked about Terry, at least. Any wizard who was morally offended by
the Cannons’ colours was all right in Harry’s book. He smirked at Terry. “Could be worse—could
be a reserve player for the Cannons.”

Boot guffawed, slapping the table a bit as he struggled to breathe. Between laughs, he somehow
managed to get out, “Could be—could be worse…could have been cut first round from the
Cannons’ pre-season draft.”

It was at this point that Draco returned with his winnings and his smirk. He eyed them for a
moment, taking in Terry’s red face and choking gasps, and Harry’s more restrained, but still
ridiculous, delighted laughing.

“Could be worse, I suppose,” he said, seemingly to himself. “I could be friends with a Weasley.”

“Hey!” Harry said, because Auror or not, Ron was still his mate. Mostly.

This only served to set Boot off on another round of laughter, as Ron’s questionable judgement in
regards to Quidditch teams was well-documented throughout Hogwarts.

“All right, Potter,” Draco said, still eyeing Boot warily. “Let’s see if that hideous scar of yours can
get us a table at Incendio.”

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It happened that it could get them a table. In fact, it could get them a table on the patio beneath the
fairy lights and near to the fire pit. Harry supposed he could like Terry a bit after this. After all,
he’d somehow managed to convince Draco Malfoy to take him on a date. Sort of. Even if Draco
didn’t know it was a date, and it wasn’t, in actuality, a date. Harry wasn’t complaining. Especially
now that he’d seen what Malfoy looked like beneath fairy lights.

Amazing, basically.

“Good evening,” said the waiter, when he arrived.

Harry grinned at him. “‘Lo.”

Malfoy rolled his eyes, tried to hide his face behind the menu as he spoke, as if Harry were
somehow as happy as Terry, and therefore embarrassing to be seen with. “We’ll each have the
steak, rare. My friend will have the salad, because he’s always worried about staying fit for the
magazine covers. I’ll have the salad because I appreciate the importance of balanced nutrition.
House ales, none of those shit imports. Thank you. Please leave.”

“I love it when you’re a twat,” Harry said. He leaned back in his chair and felt the heat from the
fire pit warm his back.

Draco raised one eyebrow. “Really.”

“Yeah. It’s very—you. You were all happy for a while and it was so Terry Boot that it was
nauseating.”

“You prefer my misery,” Draco surmised.

Harry pretended to consider. “That’s about the sum of it.”

The waiter returned with their drinks, but they didn’t acknowledge him, staring at each other and people walking by. Draco toyed with his beer glass, picked at some bread in a very posh manner. “Do you ever use your Animagus form?” he asked.

Harry shook his head, swallowing. The truth was he’d not wanted to do anything at all that reminded him of Draco while they were apart. It was enough to see him at Quidditch League on Sundays. “Nah.”

“How anyone could not want to be an Animagus, Harry could almost hear him thinking. “I got mine, finally.”

“I know.” Harry shrugged.

Their food arrived, and he busied himself cutting his steak and eating some. Draco did not look as though he’d let himself be distracted, as was in line with Harry’s luck. “Just didn’t want to bother. Queen Elizabeth would probably think I was a quail and shoot me.”

Draco furrowed his brow. “What? Harry—there is no monarchy in Britain. Why do you keep talking about it as if there were? Have you been hexed?”

“You called me Harry again.” There was no point in opening up muggle society for discussion with Draco.

Draco waved him off, and the look on his face said that this was about to turn into the worst non-date ever. Harry leaned back, trying to put as much space between them as he could stomach. He was fairly certain that Draco was going to try to talk before “Look, I know that we—I know that I’m not what you want me to be—”

“Not true,” Harry said, before he could stop himself. “I like you as you are. You’re my…” he hesitated. “You’re like my best mate, next to Hermione.”

This stopped Draco right in his tracks. “What about Weasley?”

Harry shrugged. “He’s an Auror now.” As if that meant anything.

Draco shook his head, uncomprehending. “And?”

Harry shrugged again. Honestly—he really wasn’t sure. That was something he was going to have to think about, maybe, but now, Draco was rolling his eyes, and waving his hands like Harry’s whacko thought processes were too much for him to suffer. “I don’t want a relationship, Harry. I don’t have the energy to care that much about another person anymore.”

Harry pressed his lips together, and stared down at his plate. Why couldn’t Draco just keep his bloody mouth shut? Harry was doing as Millicent said. He was not looking, and things were better, and Harry was basically happy—mostly, the sort of happy that consisted of the happiness of being around someone minus the happiness one could gain if they were yours. It came out to zero in the end, but it was better than miserable, which he had been after Draco refused him. It’d taken Harry all summer to force that needy feeling aside and learn to live again. The free steak dinner wasn’t looking so appetising any longer.
“Then, you’re seeing other people,” he guessed.

He heard Draco huff, then his fork and knife actually clinked against the plate as he set them down. “No, Potter, I’m not seeing other people.”

“Then why are you bringing this up? I haven’t asked you for anything.”

“Because I don’t want you to think that this is going anywhere—”

“I don’t,” Harry hissed. He flung up a muffling charm around their table, and Draco’s eyes narrowed in response. So what if Harry could only do wandless magic around him? Draco didn’t have to know that. “Are you never going to let me live it down? I couldn’t bloody well help how I felt. Be a mate, and just fucking forget, Draco.”

“I can’t,” Draco bit out.

Harry rolled his eyes, pushed his plate away. He was no longer hungry, free or not. “Why?”

“Because I don’t want to, you twit.”

Their waiter approached warily, circling around the privacy spell and trying to gauge their facial expressions. But Draco’s water glass was empty, and apparently desperately needed to be filled. The waiter broached the edge, hesitantly refilled Draco’s glass, and hurried out again.

When he was gone, Harry was feeling bitterness sink in again. “You seemed to want something pretty badly in April.”

“So did you,” Draco replied.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Obviously. I’m bisexual. You’re fit. We were friends at the time. Why wouldn’t I be interested?”

“And then you continued to want it,” Draco continued, eyes narrowed to slits.

Harry waved his hand. “See above.”

He drank his beer to give his mouth something else to do besides talk, but when he set the glass down again, it seemed that it still wanted to have a go. “Look, Draco,” he said. “It was a one-off for you. I get it. It’s shitty for me, but I get it. I won’t spend the rest of my life pining after you, if that’s what you’re worried about.” Liar, his mind contributed. “But you can’t blame me for being attracted to you. You were attracted to me, too, once.”

“So if it was just sex,” Draco said, “then you’d be happy.”

“No.” Harry clenched his fist beneath the table. “You’re my friend, you git. If we go back to—that—then of course I’m going to fall for you again. That’s what love is, stupid. Friends plus sex plus love.”

Actually, now that he thought about it, the sex part wasn’t needed, but he’d be damned if he was going to take it back now. Draco would latch onto it, and then they wouldn’t even be able to be friends anymore for his stupid fear that Harry loved him.

“You can’t define something by using the defined word in the definition.”

“Oh, shut the fuck up, Malfoy,” Harry said softly. He smiled, to show he didn’t mean it. And that he desperately wanted this conversation to be over. “Look—just don’t worry about this. Let’s go
back and do something productive with the rest of the night. I found a manuscript on early Alchemy that I think you’ll be interested in. It suppositions that transfigurations was the final step in creating a stone.”

Draco nodded, but didn’t look happy about it.

Harry signalled for the waiter, and when he came, said, “Could you pack us up two crème brûlées and owl a third one to Terrence Boot at the Leaky Cauldron? All on this twat’s bill, please,” Harry added, tipping his head towards Malfoy. Draco huffed in annoyance, but nodded when the waiter looked to him for confirmation.

“I suppose friends buy one another crème brûlées,” he said levelly.

Harry smirked.

-x-

“I named my cat after you,” Harry said, stirring his Polyjuice.

It still had a month to brew, and then Snape was going to have Miguela put animal hairs in two, and her own hair in the third. Harry would have to figure out which two were bad, take the one with Miguela’s, and report on what happened to the body when one changed genders via potion versus via human transfiguration. He was not looking forward to it.

“Well, she’s a kneazle, really. A squib. No wards.”

There was a heavy pause. “You named a female, squib kneazle after me,” Snape said, to clarify. Harry nodded, too busy trying to keep count to respond with words. “Why?”

Harry let him simmer (hah—potions joke, he thought) while he got his Polyjuice to a stopping point. He covered the cauldron and set his stirring rod aside. Snape was aghast. The artist had not been confident with such an expression.

“Only if you plan to use her for ingredients,” Snape hissed. His threatening demeanour was greatly impaired by the pastel landscape.

Harry shrugged. “Nah. I think I’ll keep her.”

They were silent for a while as Harry set to work on his essay for understanding the qualities of common antidotes. He could hear Snape shuffling around in his frame, where he’d set up a makeshift office amid the heather. Finally, he could take it no more, and said. “You and Mr Malfoy are—friends,” Snape decided, hopefully.

Harry shrugged. “Yep.” Except for the part where I’m almost to the point of drawing our names inside hearts, like Ginny used to do. He checked his potion and returned to his essay. Snape didn’t seem inclined to continue his line of questioning, which was all right with Harry.

The door opened and Draco stuck his head in. His eyes slid to Snape and back to Harry. “You’re late, Potter. You were supposed to meet me twenty minutes ago.”

“Hardly unusual,” Snape said.

“Bugger.” Harry scooped up his papers and placed a series of alarms on his Polyjuice, to warn him
if it needed attention.

“Please, be dismissed,” Snape said, sarcasm dripping from his voice like oil paint. “I shan’t keep you from your no doubt very important friend activities.”

“Hi, Uncle Sev,” Draco said, unperturbed.

“Draco,” Snape greeted. “I understand you chose my name for Potter’s deficient kneazle.”

“She isn’t deficient!” Harry said. He stuffed his inkwell in his bag angrily, and then had to get it back out again to check the cap. He didn’t need another essay ruined by a lake of green ink.

“We’re going to make a Philosopher’s Stone for our inter-subject project,” Draco continued. He was staring at his nails, the very picture of nonchalance. “What do you think?”

“That you’re wasting your time,” Snape replied, just as bored. “Potter—do remember to have that essay to me by tomorrow night. That is, if you plan on passing your first term.”

Harry huffed. “Yes, Professor.”

He slung his bag over his shoulder and followed Draco out of the lab and back to his rooms the corridor over. Draco opened the door before Harry arrived and held it open for him.

“I don’t remember giving you the password,” Harry said, eyes narrowed, as he stepped through the portrait hole.

“I don’t remember you giving it to me, either,” Draco said.

They dumped their bags on the table in the sitting room and Harry summoned a stack of books from his bedside table. He heard Severia yelp and when the books floated over to him, she was atop *The Alkahest and the Azoth*, claws sunk desperately into the pages to keep hold.

“Sorry, Sevsy,” Harry murmured to her, and she was fine again, rolling about on the floor and offering her tummy for his inspection. “There’s my girl.”

He caught Draco’s raised eyebrow, and grinned. “Severia’s such a long name.”

“Don’t let my godfather hear you butchering his name like that. You’ll never get Mastery if he doesn’t sign off on it.”

Harry snorted. “Do I look that stupid to you?”

“Hmm,” was all Draco said.

“I was thinking that we should start with trying to define a Philosopher’s Stone exactly, and work backward from there to make our hypothesis on how one’s made.” It’d worked for learning Potions, after all.

“Immortality,” Draco said. “And transformation of base metals into precious ones.” He chewed on his bottom lip with his erotically crooked canine teeth. “They’re such wildly different effects that I can’t think of anything that would be able to do both of them.”

“Not that different,” Harry said, scrunching his nose. “Just opposite. One part creates value, another destroys it. The link is already there.”

“Pardon? Eternal life, Potter…It’s hardly destructive.”
“Isn’t it? How can anyone find value in life if there’s no end to it? There’s no motivation to do anything, no sense of urgency or need or meaning at all. Just an endless, boring chore.”

Well, that certainly seemed to put a damper on Draco’s spirits. He was silent for a long time, eyes drifting somewhere in the middle distance. Harry used the time to outline his essay for Snape and make a list of topics he’d need to cross-reference.

“I think you’re wrong,” Draco finally said. “Maybe you just haven’t got a reason to live forever.”

“Obviously.”

He’d died already, and it wasn’t so bad. Just boring. A lot like life would be if it never ended, he supposed. Same old train station, same old emptiness. He thought of the lost spirits in the woods that his crow-self watched, and hoped to Merlin that he was never like that, eternal and stuck; unable to change.

“That’s what connects them,” Draco decided. “Not opposite forces of creation and destruction—a need for life and wealth…or maybe just the belief that one needs it, for something particular. Alchemy has always relied on a spiritual connection to the divine.”

“Maybe,” Harry allowed. Same difference, in any case. He started thinking about potions that worked with need. Felix Felicis, for one. Nutritive potions, maybe. Those shared a few common ingredients; both used a distilled water base. Purity, perhaps, could link them in some way, and then there was—

“Potter.” Draco kicked his shin a bit. Harry scowled. “You had a look on your face I haven’t seen since summer holidays after third year.”

“What happened then?” Harry asked, but he wasn’t sure he wanted to know the answer.

“Uncle Sev invented a healing potion.”

“So?”

Draco smirked. “It was a healing potion that healed everything he tried it on.”

Harry stared at him. “Panacea.” He’d forgotten all about that aspect of the Philosopher’s Stone. Had Snape been trying for the Great Work as well? And how did universal healing tie in with endless life and wealth?

“Doubtful,” Draco said, with some disappointment. “But he had that look on his face when he was working on it, like you do now. That cataloguing look.”

“That’s what I was doing.”

Draco grinned, all sexy teeth and crinkly eyes. Harry died, perhaps, then struggled to maintain his best we’re-just-mates-and-I-only-love-you-like-a-bro face. “I know, moron. This time last year, you didn’t give a toss about Potions. It’s…”

“Brilliant?” Harry suggested, still undone by Draco’s smile. “Cool? Great? Sexy?” He added the last one because he’d finally perfected Snape’s swirly robe manoeuvre and one of these days, Draco was bound to notice. Luna had. Though, perhaps Luna noticing wasn’t necessarily reflective of its obviousness.

“Weird,” Draco decided. Harry scowled. “But still useful. It means I have to do less work for our
inter-subject project and I can focus on my capstone.”

“God, you cock,” Harry said, but with only a little rancour. “You’re using me.”

Draco smiled. “Obviously.”

He’d inflected his voice like Snape’s, to mock Harry, and how he’d unconsciously picked up that trait since last spring. It went straight to Harry’s trousers. Which was really the last thing he needed. But he tossed a quill at Draco and laughed, and pulled his legs up on the chair like he was getting cosy, and no one had to know.

-x-

In November, the door to Harry’s rooms opened quite without his permission, and he turned from his reclined reading position on the rug to find Millicent Bulstrode holding a very irate-looking Dark Lady, who, if Harry was not mistaken, had died the previous September.

“How do you Slytherins keep getting my password?” he wondered, and thanked Merlin that he’d at least left his trousers on. It was after the students’ curfew, after all, and he couldn’t be expected to be decent at all times in his own rooms, when there was a Merlin-fucking password on his door. He should probably summon a shirt, but couldn’t be arsed.

“Blame Granger,” said Millicent. She deposited the mutinous-looking cat on Harry’s settee and gave it a pointed stare. “I used her research to get in.”

The cat hissed angrily, and Harry quite suddenly realised that—Hermione was on his couch. And she wasn’t pleased about it. He turned to Millicent. “Is that—?”

“Yes.”

Harry nodded slowly, attempted to take this in. “Wait—what research?”

“She was looking into how Arithmancy could be used to affect the animation of Renaissance portraits. Specifically, those holding passwords. You’ve got a Botticelli on your door. Granger wasn’t talking,” —and here the cat gave a very vocal and unequivocal hiss— “So I disabled the password with her hypothesis equations.”

A Botticelli, eh? He’d thought it was just a handsome bloke who liked to wink at him when he said his password.

“Calm down,” said Harry. “At least you know your hypothesis is correct.” He reached out to pet her on the head, but drew his hand back quickly when she began a low, ominous growl. Of course, the sound drew the attention of his kneazle.

Severia trotted in from the bedroom, blinking wide, sleepy eyes, and mewling curiously in Harry’s direction. He tipped his head towards the cat on the couch, saying, “I wouldn’t if I were you. She’s not best pleased right now.”

Typically, he was ignored. Severia hopped up onto the couch and immediately set about sniffing and pawing curiously at Hermione. Hermione glowered at Harry from her perch, tail swishing as angrily as Crookshanks’ ever had around Scabbers. Her eyes never left Harry’s, the dour look promising murder if he didn’t end this indignity straightaway.
“Is she stuck?” asked Harry.

Millicent had taken it upon herself to sit in the armchair and help herself to the tea service recently delivered from the kitchens. “Seems that way. I came back from dinner and she was on my bed like this. It’s not unusual to find her on my bed,” —Hermione hissed warningly, and was ignored— “but it’s unusual to find her there with fur. And it’s been an hour. Even Hermione doesn’t spend so long in research mode without a break.”

“How do we get her out?”

Millicent added milk to her tea and twirled the spoon around without clinking the porcelain. Where did Slytherin come up with these posh types? You’d never even think it to look at her. Harry supposed it didn’t matter what kind of trousers Millicent wore, she’d never be able to hide how she crossed her ankles, just like Ron would never be able to hide that he was a milk-in-first sort of bloke.

Harry solved it by being a tea-in-only sort of bloke.

“Beats me,” Millicent said. She sipped her tea while Dark-Lady-Hermione glowered. “I’ve never bothered to learn the Animagus transformation. You and Draco are the resident experts on that, but he isn’t in his room.”

Harry eyed Hermione warily. “What about McGonagall?” There was an abrupt and violent uproar from Hermione-Dark-Lady, and Harry hastily scooted back on the rug, putting as much distance between himself and her claws as possible.

“Fine, no McGonagall. For fuck’s sake, Hermione, you don’t have to attack me.”

Hermione only growled.

Harry rolled his eyes. Millicent was enjoying his tea and he was cowering in a corner. “Hermione, can I—?” He gestured vaguely, trying to impart ‘hold you’ without actually saying or gesturing ‘hold you’. She merely stared at him, so he approached, and when her claws remained retracted, he carefully picked her up, sliding a hand beneath her ribs to feel her pulse. It was hammering.

“Okay, first you need to calm the fuck down. How are you not exploding? I know you’re scared,” —Here she growled again, but it sounded rather plaintive and terrified to him— “but you have to calm down. Take a deep breath. If you can. I don’t know how cats work.”

Fuck, she was having a panic attack. This was so exactly like Hermione while being nothing at all like Hermione. She wasn’t calming down at all. Feeling exceptionally uncomfortable, Harry started petting her back. His fingers got lost in the fur; even as a cat, Hermione had an excess of hair.

Severia butted up against his thigh, then popped herself up on his lap and curled up next to Hermione, purring. “Sevsy, don’t be a nuisance,” Harry murmured. She blinked slowly at him and then returned to cuddling Hermione.

Just when Harry thought he was finally getting Hermione’s pulse to slow down, his door snapped open again.

“Harry, I know you wanted to try transfiguring the Felix Felicis into bad luck, but I think we should wait because—hello, Mill.”

Draco stopped as he came around the couch, and catalogued the scene with efficiency. His eyes
lingered briefly on Harry’s bare chest.

“Draco,” said Millicent. She sipped her tea.

“Popping round for tea?” He finally took in Harry’s situation, that of a man with two cats on his lap. He smirked. “Don’t tell me you’ve talked Potter into getting another squibby kneazle. Although, that one looks a lot like—”

“Fuck! Fuck, don’t say it,” Harry yelped. He reached down and dug Hermione’s claws out of his thigh. “Shit. Retract.”

“She’s stuck,” Millicent offered. “And rather choleric.”

Draco took the spare chair and poured himself the last of Harry’s tea. Bugger. He hadn’t got to drink a single cup of that. Another tea-in-first sort of bloke, although Harry’d known that in first year. Weird.

“How’d you get stuck?” asked Draco, as if Hermione were capable of creating English vowels and consonants at present.

“I think she panicked,” Harry said. He resumed petting. “Come on, Hermione. You won’t be stuck like this forever. Stop panicking and start thinking. You have to calm down.”

Severia began licking her head. Harry wasn’t sure it was helping, but he could appreciate wanting to contribute. To his surprise, Draco got up from the chair and came to kneel on the floor in front of Harry. His face would be right in front of Harry’s crotch if he just leaned forward, but that was exactly not what he wanted to think about with Millicent staring beadily at him and Hermione on his lap, claws millimetres from embedding in his upper thigh.

Draco leaned into Hermione’s line of sight, eyes narrowed, studying. “Granger.”

Hermione’s ears flicked. Her tail swished once, jerkily.

“How long have you been like this? Hours?”

She flicked her tail three times.

“Is this the first time you’ve successfully transformed?” An awkward, cattish nod. “Were you surprised by something after you transformed?”

She flicked her ears, flicking Severia off in the process. Malfoy’s eyebrows went up. “And did you panic? Forget what it felt like to be a human?” She huffed.

Draco cocked a grin, lopsided and entirely too much for Harry to endure. “One must certainly appreciate your panurgic nature, Granger. You didn’t quite beat me to the transformation, but you’ve certainly beat me for flair. I didn’t realise it was even possible to have an existing animal as your form, but where there’s a Potter, there’s a way, and you do spend rather a lot of time with him.”

There was a redoubtable meow. Draco retreated to instruct her at a remove, leaving Harry tensed from the threat of fresh claws sinking through his wool trousers. Millicent sipped Harry’s tea and he rather wished he’d put a shirt on at some point prior.

“Think about sex,” Draco suggested, to raised eyebrows and infuriated tail flicks. He ignored them. “It reminds you what it feels like to be human.”
They all watched her for moment, but it didn’t seem to be doing the trick. He sighed, resumed his seat in the chair next to Millicent. He closed his eyes, tipped his head back as if life were too exhausting to mess about with. He swallowed and Harry watched the movement of his throat, hypnotised.

He said, “It happened to me, not the first time, but the second. It was well after curfew and I was alone in my rooms, with no way to get help for hours. For the first hour, I panicked; for the second, I tried to turn pages in *Metamorphosis* with paws. When the third hour came, and I still couldn’t change back, I decided to wait it out, but I’m not a patient person.

“I curled up on my bed, but I was too wound up to sleep. When I’m tired and I can’t sleep, for whatever reason—I think about sex. It gives me something familiar and relaxing to focus on, like counting werewolves, and if I—don’t take it too far—I can fall asleep.”

Harry swallowed, absolutely dissolute. Hermione had crawled off his lap and curled up on the cushion next to him, cat eyes bright and big, and focused entirely on Draco. Her tail was still for the first time since she arrived. Even Millicent was watching with an uncommon intensity.

Draco ignored them all, eyes still closed.

“I suppose it’s too much for you to have any of your own experiences to draw on. Well, neither do I, really, but I can imagine. I’m good at that.” He swallowed again, as if girding himself for a difficult task. Harry felt heated with anticipation.

“I like to think that I’m in the dungeons. The view is nice from my suite in the Transfiguration wing, but there’s something erogenous and intimate about the dungeons, and it’s familiar to me, so that helps. I think about my prefect dorm, with the big window and the yellow-green light that filtered through the lake water and refracted in waves over my bed. The way it moved was like bodies: undulating, osculating. Intimate. And I think that someday I’d like to be one of those bodies.

“My—he comes in and closes the door softly behind him. It’s dark but for the lake light, and his eyes reflect like water. He stares at me like there are three billion other men in the world, but I am unsurpassed. I’ve been waiting for him my whole life, I think, but he’s never come before now.

“I would be on my bed, and it would be warm, the light moving all around me. I’m rushed with anticipation. He says my name as he crawls onto the bed, hovers over me. My pulse speeds up, my chest begins to slowly heave. He’s finally there, and now I’m alight, but still somehow terrified.

“He trails his fingers from my temple to my jaw, leaving little tracks of magic behind. My eyelids fall shut and he traces over the lids, down my nose; his fingers catch on my bottom lip and tug it down. Gasping, I swirl my tongue around the tips, and it’s just as arousing as I’d always thought it’d be. He slides his fingers down the front of my chest, and the buttons on my shirt slip open in his wake. The fabric falls aside.

“I am heated and tensing; untensing, tensing. Undulating like the lake water. He sits up to pull his shirt over his head and fling it to the floor, his muscles flexing with the movement. I turn my face into the pillow and bite down, overcome. It’s both everything and nothing like I imagined. I respire, barely. My hips flex up and meet his, still straddled over me. I feel as though a single breath would send me over the edge. He groans, and the sound echoes through my room.

“It’s too much for me to bear. I reach up and finally, finally, touch him. His skin is hot. His nipples tight and responsive beneath my hands. He lets his head fall backwards and the pose is so excruciatingly erotic that my fingers clench around his waist and hold him there as I shift my hips
up again, move them against him like the water. He begins to move with me. He leans forward, holding himself on his hands, and bends his head to kiss me fiercely. I make a wretched, needy sound, and surge up to meet it. I have never been kissed like this before—like he has a thousand options, but thinks I’m the prize he has to fight for.

“My hands have moved down to his hips, and I’m struggling to divest him of his trousers without letting him move away from me for even a second. We slide out of those and our pants, and then it’s just skin. Hot, damp, affecting; our breaths humid and fast between us. I’m too undone to take everything in; my system is overloaded with sensation.

“The feel of my body overwhelms him and he can’t stay away from my mouth, can’t stop fitting his to mine, couldn’t stop kissing me even if the window were to crack and all the water came rushing in. He falls to his elbows and slides his fingers into my hair.

“Our bodies touch all over. His cock is slick with pre-ejaculate and it slides against mine. I’ve never felt any such thing before, but it’s hot and heavy and I am trembling from arousal.

“He shifts his weight, reaches down, takes hold of both of us at once. I can’t stop myself from moaning at the feel of another man touching me, wanting me. He bites his lip. His face is flushed and glistening from the heat. He bends his mouth to my ear and nips at the lobe. I arch my neck up, aching for more. I can hear his rasping breaths against my neck.

“He touches me, and he murmurs, ‘There’s no one but you. There’s never been—’”

Hermione whimpered, and the moment evaporated, leaving Harry entirely undone. He felt raw, exposed. Draco lifted his head, blinking heavily. His face was flushed. The very air weighed as much as treacle. Harry swallowed and glanced around the room, looking for anything to stabilise him. Millicent was staring at Draco with wide, still eyes. Hermione was—Hermione.

She sat next to Harry on the settee, wrapped up in her dressing gown, not a claw to be found. And she was staring at Draco as if she’d never seen him before.

“Back with us, I see,” Draco drawled, swallowing heavily. He looked uncomfortable, but didn’t bother to hide it when he reached down to rearrange his trousers. “I told you it would work.”

Hermione made another small, unidentifiable sound; looked as though she might fall off the edge. Harry steadied her waist. He was feeling as though he could make unidentifiable sounds, too. It was just that, he could so easily see himself saying those things to Malfoy, and who would have ever guessed that that was what turned him on?

_I see you, Draco Malfoy_, Harry thought in resignation.

He caught movement from the corner of his eye and glanced at Millicent to find her giving him a pointed look. He shrugged, helpless, sliding his eyes back to Draco. He couldn't look away, because no matter how long he closed his eyes, he couldn't help _seeing_ Draco when he finally opened them again.

And Draco was the most dangerous magical creature of all. Both boggart and heart's desire.
10. Fermentation

*The conversion of organic substances into new compounds in the presence of a ferment*

“Well,” said Hermione, at breakfast. She served herself some eggs, exchanged polite words with Neville and Luna further down the table. “Well.”

“Well,” Harry agreed. Draco hadn’t made it down to breakfast yet. He wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or disappointed.

“Last night was certainly…” She cleared her throat.

“Yes,” Harry agreed, wholeheartedly.

Millicent entered at that point, taking the available seat next to Hermione. “Morning, Potter; Dark Lady.”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed. “Millicent Bulstrode,” she hissed, “I dare you to say that again.”

Millicent smirked. “Dark Lady.”

Hermione flicked her wand, her face set in a scowl, but she didn’t voice the spell and Harry couldn’t tell what she’d cast on Millicent. Only the widening of Bulstrode’s eyes, followed by their narrowing, proved that a spell had been cast at all.

“While we’re on the subject,” said Harry. Hermione’s furious gaze slowly swung from Millicent to him, but he was Gryffindor and therefore was undersupplied with sense of when a situation was becoming dangerous. “What were you surprised by last night? That made you…forget?”

“Yes, I’d like to know as well,” Millicent growled.

Harry spared her a glance. Her face was red and she was staring intensely at Hermione, no doubt refusing to admit that whatever spell Hermione had cast on her was painful. *Bloody prideful Slytherins*, Harry thought. Even if they weren’t Slytherins anymore, exactly.

“Oh, Harry!” Hermione said.

Overwhelmed by the suddenness of her mood swing, he was unprepared for Hermione throwing her arms around his neck and thereby tackling him to the floor. She sat above him, seemingly unaware that they were now on the floor of the Great Hall and in full view of the impressionable students staring at the head table.

“I’d nearly forgotten! It was a letter!”

“From Ron?” Harry hazarded.

“From— from Wendell and Monica Wilkins!” She’d barely got the words out before she burst into tears.
Despite her apparent pain, Bulstrode pushed her chair back and gathered Hermione off of Harry and into her arms, where she immediately turned her face into Millicent’s shoulder and attempted to both laugh and cry at once. Harry, concerned for her sanity, tipped his head towards the antechamber the staff used to enter the Hall, and Millicent followed him through, half-dragging, half-carrying Hermione along.

They had the misfortune of meeting Draco as he was coming in, and he took in the situation with a gimlet eye, before his gaze slid to Harry’s. Harry shrugged. Millicent grimaced at the wetness soaking the front of her apprentice robes.

She patted Hermione’s back awkwardly. “Go on, Herms. What the bloody hell is wrong with you?”

Hermione’s sobs reached new levels. “Mill!” she wailed, half-laughing, half-crying. Her fingers curled into the fabric of the other woman’s robes and kneaded, catlike. “They wrote me a letter!”

“Who?” asked Draco and Millicent.

Hermione only cried louder. Harry cleared his throat. “Her parents,” he said.

Millicent’s nose scrunched. “Was she adopted? Why aren’t they called Granger? And why wouldn’t they write you a letter, Herms?”

“We can’t talk about this here,” Harry said quickly. The last thing they needed was some enterprising student hearing about Hermione’s morally questionable and legally certain (totally illegal) familiarity with memory charms on muggles.

Rita Skeeter would start an inquisition.

“Come on—my rooms are closest.”

-x-

Once installed in his rooms again, Harry realised with great despair the degree to which he’d fucked up. They somehow all ended up in the same positions they’d sat in last night, and he couldn’t even look in the direction of his grey armchair without picturing Draco’s exposed neck and hearing him reveal a secret fantasy—a secret fantasy that had kept Harry up all night in his bed, imagining himself in place of the mysterious man Draco wanked over.

Hermione was once again curled around his shoulder, sniffing, but otherwise appearing to be rather more *compos mentis*. He called for tea since none of them had a chance at a proper breakfast, and also because it gave him something to focus on besides Draco’s tented trousers and his unashamed adjustment of them after spilling his own fantasy to the rest of them last night. It had left Harry spilling rather more, after their awkward departure.

When all were served, Hermione disentangled herself from him, and patted at her face with the handkerchief thoughtfully provided by the house-elves alongside her teacup from her rooms. The cup was black and had, in looping gold calligraphy, the words *Get Shit Done* scrawled around the outside.

“This is my favourite cup,” Hermione said, sniffing loudly.

Harry was afraid that she might start again and searched the biscuit offerings desperately for one of
the little chocolate ones she liked, to distract her. This was the first time she’d ever cried over her parents, and he really had no idea what to do with it. “Remember, Harry? I bought it when we got to— to... fuck.”

“Australia,” he finished for her, softly.

Back to the swearing; he felt his heart disintegrating in the face of her emotional breakdown. She’d let up so much since making friends with Millicent. “Hermione, what did the letter say?”

She sniffed, and reached down to rummage in her endless bag. Harry shook his head at the others’ confused looks in his direction. She straightened, hands shaking as she unfolded a single, crisp page of lined, muggle notebook paper.

“Dear Ms Hermione Granger,” Hermione read shakily. “My husband and I write to you in regards to your unusual visit to our home on the nineteenth of December, last year. After your departure, we put the entire, distressing event out of our minds, however as we began sorting through some boxes for an impending move, I came across a photograph that I could not identify. I located the card you left with your forwarding address at that time, in hopes that you could help us to identify its origin. You see, the photograph showed a young girl who looked remarkably like you, sitting on my husband’s lap, in front of a Christmas tree. Neither of us could remember such an occasion; however what disturbed us most was the appearance of snow outside the window. Living in Australia, we have never seen such a thing as snow during Christmas, and as we have never spent the holiday in the northern hemisphere, we are quite at a loss as to how it came to be. I have included the photograph in question for your review. If you have any insight into this photograph, we implore you to respond. Sincerely, Drs Monica and Wendell Wilkins.”

Harry exhaled in a rush. “Have you got the picture?”

She nodded and passed an old, muggle photo to him. It had to have been taken only the year before they started Hogwarts. Hermione looked so much like the little girl he met on the train, that it was impossible to deny. Seeing the shining look in Mr Granger’s eyes as he watched her unwrapping a brand new book on zymology, Harry wondered how the Grangers could have forgotten their daughter, even with the aid of memory charms. And—was that a little cauldron set off to the side there? And of course it was; Hermione would have got her letter that September, and been forced to wait almost an entire year before she could finally attend Hogwarts. She’d had plenty of time to prepare for it, unlike Harry.

“You memory charmed them,” Millicent said. Of course she wasn’t aghast or anything. Just impressed.

“Holy Merlin, Granger,” Draco said. Also impressed. Slytherins.

“Yes, well,” said Hermione. And because, like Harry, she’d learned to read Slytherins of late, she added, “It would have been more impressive if I could’ve managed to reverse it after the war, but I couldn’t. And they thought Harry and I were con artists trying to kill them for their life insurance policy.”

Neither of the Slytherins had, of course, any idea whatsoever what Hermione was talking about, but did gather that it was a crime to do such a thing, and that Hermione was righteously indignant over the entire thing. On top of being dejected.

Millicent stood. She had the presence of a military commander. “Come on then, Granger,” she said. “We’d better get on it. You can compose a reply draft while I charm Pince into lending me that memory spells book she keeps behind the desk. We’ll sort it.”
“Oh, Mill!” Hermione rushed her, but unlike Harry, Millicent barely swayed from the impact of Hermione’s arms going round her neck. She fairly dragged the other woman from the room, as much as anyone of Hermione’s skinny stature could drag Millicent Bulstrode.

And just like that, Harry was left alone again with Draco. With two strong Arithmancers on the problem, there was a decent chance that Hermione’s problem would be solved before they finished their apprenticeship. Which just left Harry with his own, unsolved, problem. Unlike Hermione’s, no spell could reverse it—although perhaps he could develop an anti-love potion…

He chanced a guarded glance at Draco, across the room from him. Merlin, he missed him. Even with their renewed friendship, it wasn’t anything close to the one they’d shared before the—event. The event that ruined everything, including and especially Harry himself. He missed the cavilling, the ease that came with their banter. He missed the way he was almost certain Draco’s body was reacting as Harry’s own was, tingly and unbearably hot.

Draco was a walking rococo movement with the detached,undaunted air of an impressionist. Apprenticing under a portrait could teach a man a lot about art. It was unfortunate that it couldn’t teach him anything about love, though. Specifically, how to get rid of it.

He wondered if maybe Hermione could do one of her botched memory charms on him, so that he could forget everything he loved about Draco Malfoy, and go back to just being his indifferent study and project partner. It wouldn’t change Draco, though, and inevitably, Harry’s luck being what it was, he would fall right back in love with the stupid git again. Then he’d ask Hermione for a memory charm. Then he’d fall in love. It would last the rest of his life.

It was sad, and it was inevitable.

Although, when he peeked up at Draco, Harry saw the same downtrodden look on the other man’s face that greeted him in the mirror each morning. His heart lurched, and he wondered—could Draco also be less-than-happy about their distant relationship? It was looks like that that made Harry take leave of his senses.

“Do you feel free?” Harry asked, when the silence between them didn’t seem to be abating.

Draco startled. He charmed his tea hot again, sipped at it. “Sometimes.”

Harry nodded as if this made loads of sense to him when in fact it didn’t. “I thought I’d be free, after the war,” he said, mostly to fill the empty space. “I thought I’d be done with all the bad stuff, and I’d marry Ginny Weasley and we’d have a bunch of precocious kids and I’d be an Auror and she’d play for the Harpies and it would be great.”

Draco snorted. “But?”

Harry shrugged. “But it turns out that I didn’t want that. It turns out that what I thought would make me free just made me feel trapped instead.” Unbidden, his boggart returned to him, and then, just as unbidden, the form Hermione gave it when she cast Riddikulus.

He pulled his legs up on the settee and propped chin on top, wrapping his arms about his calves to steady himself and his untouched tea. He fought down the instinctive reaction such thoughts gave his body, looked up at Malfoy from beneath his lashes. “So I just wondered, really—what would make you free?”

Draco exhaled in a rush. When he looked at Harry, Harry could have sworn that there was something more in the intensity of his gaze. Something deep and meant only for him, but then he
blinks and shook himself to dispel it. It was the same look Draco always gave him when they were alone, and it probably meant he was just being too sappy for Draco’s evil sensibilities.

“I don’t know.”


“No.”

“I think being free is when you don’t force yourself not to do something because you’re afraid that doing it would put your heart at risk.”

Draco sneered, habitual and forced. “How could that be freedom when I’d just be controlled by whatever pathetic emotions developed from it?”

“How could you be free when you don’t allow yourself to feel them?” Harry returned. “Either way, you’re a slave. So then, the question becomes: which would you rather enslave yourself to? Happiness or misery?”

“No.”

Harry laughed, but it was deprecating. Well, it was worth a shot, he supposed. “Alright, Malfoy,” he said. “You win.”

Draco snorted. “Not likely.”

Harry stared at him, unspeaking. He’d run out of things to say, things that might bridge this weird divide between them. Last night, for a moment, he’d thought perhaps—but no. And then Draco spoke.

“Sometimes I think my father has done more to destroy me in death than he ever did alive.”

Harry shook his head, uncertain. “What?”

Draco looked away, smiling bitterly. “You’re right, Potter. Either way I’m destined for emotional Azkaban. And I’m intimately aware of what happens to people in there. My father made sure of that.”

Harry’s chest clenched. “Draco. I should have—”

Draco shook his head. “Don’t bother. There was no love lost between us, only resentment. On both sides. I thought perhaps that after the war, I’d be free from it all; then I thought maybe after his death and the trial, I would. Now both of those have passed, and...you’re right. It doesn’t end, and I don’t know which way is escape and which is imprisonment.”

Harry didn’t either, frankly, because he wasn’t entirely sure he knew what Draco was talking about. It could have been any number of things; but there was just one thing he hoped it referred to, and he couldn’t bring himself to be selfish enough to broach the topic now.

So he did what he did when Hermione said something uncomfortable. He changed the subject. “What was that you were going to say last night then? About the Felix Felicis? Because you know I’m right. It’s a brilliant idea.”

“It’s dangerous,” Draco said right away, the previous conversation apparently easily forgotten.
“Can you imagine what would happen if we accidentally ingested some bad luck potion?”

“You have to take some risks to achieve greatness.”

Draco snorted. “Please, spare me, Albus Dumbledore. You may enjoy flinging yourself from cliffs, eating sweets from Weasley twins, and interacting with muggles, but I have common sense, and my common sense says it’s stupid to start out with the most dangerous option when we could test others first.”

“Says the only Slytherin to ever perform a backflip from his broom during a Quidditch game to catch the snitch.”

“If I’d failed, I would’ve landed on the Hufflepuff. It would’ve been fine. But I didn’t fail, and Slytherin won the game. It was a calculated risk…not an ignorant one.”

“Whatever, fine,” Harry said, but he was forcing himself to grin. He’d once heard that faking a smile tricked your brain into thinking you were happy, and therefore made you happy. Harry was all for that. “Listen, I was thinking the other day, when I was brewing Polyjuice, and I wondered—what makes gold so special?”

“Other than being gold?” asked Draco, as if to clarify.

“Arguably, human life is more special than gold,” said Harry. “And yet Polyjuice can change that around no big deal. So—what is it about gold that refuses to be created from other materials? Everything’s made from the same molecules, really, so, in theory, alchemical processes are absolutely possible. It’s just that no one’s figured out—”

“Are you talking about those muggle things again?”

“Afraid so,” said Harry. He summoned a chemistry primer from his bedroom and passed it to Malfoy. “Read this first. My whole point here is that I think that the reason Philosophers’ Stones have been so unobtrusive is that wizards have the magic to change elements, but they don’t have the knowledge. Muggles have the knowledge, but they don’t have the magic. If we can apply our magic to muggles’ chemical knowledge, then I think we can make gold from lead. And if we can make gold, then we can make one-third of a Philosopher’s Stone.”

Draco considered him for a long moment. Finally, he slid the book into his robes. “Alright. I’ll give you this one this time, Potter. But next time you try to shove muggles down my throat, I want you to remember how nicely I accepted this request, and let it warm you as I tell you to fuck off.”

Harry smiled, remained smiling even after his flirty Botticelli closed behind Draco. It was sort of working, this smiling thing. It was just that it was also sort of making him batty. He was hopelessly in love, with no chance for redemption, and…it wasn’t really that bad. Well, it was crap, but he’d definitely been through worse. Being friends with Draco was about three-fifths fulfilling, and three-fifths was so much more than no-fifths.

He remembered how happy Ron had been over the summer, and last Christmas, how happy Draco had been after the holidays in eighth year. Harry couldn’t recall ever feeling that…exuberant. For Harry, happiness had always been tempered by something else. He’d got a Hogwarts letter, but still had to live with people who hated him. He’d learned magic, but been chased by a psychopath. He’d fallen in love, but been rejected.

But he was pretty much on par now with the happiest he’d ever been, and…even if it sort of ached to look at Draco and not touch him, at least he got to look.
A curious meow brought his attention to the floor. Severia peered up at him, already on her back and positioned for a belly rub.

“I am such a hot mess,” he announced to his cat. She began to purr.

-x-
“Lead only has three more protons than gold does,” Draco said the next week.

They were out by the Forest, talking idly of their project while Harry gathered paralytic mosses for Snape’s assignment from the grey-pink stones that stuck up from the grass near the trees. Sometimes he wasn’t entirely convinced that Snape wasn’t using his apprenticeship as a way of *accidentally* killing Harry off.

“Yep,” said Harry; he’d already read the book, after all. “Knock those three bits off and it’s no longer lead.”

Draco scrunched his nose as Harry scraped off a bit off moss, not quite as carefully as he could’ve. “I just find it really hard to believe that *muggles* have achieved one of the main tenets of Alchemy…”

“Well, not really,” said Harry. “I mean, they did transmute a really tiny bit of gold a few times, but it was radioactive, and I think it decayed back into mercury or something anyway.”

“I still don’t understand what radioactive decay means,” said Draco. “Nor how an inorganic substance can decay. Bacteria doesn’t eat metal.”

“It’s a different sort of decaying,” Harry said. “There’s different types of radioactive decay, but you could think of that kind like this—suppose you had a pureblood family—an element. It’s a pretty stable family. Christmas dinners with relatively no fighting, everyone’s got little heirs, no one’s causing a scandal. But then, one of the heirs, a proton, goes off and marries a muggleborn, and the heir is disinherited. The pureblood family tries to be a new element, an element that never needed that heir, but it did have that heir once, and it knows that someone’s missing.

“No matter how hard it tries, it can’t be normal without that heir, because it’s unstable. And it just keeps getting worse. First, one of the other heirs hates the family, and decides, since the other heir left, it can, too. The family’s only got three heirs left, so one tries restabilising the family, and it marries into another good pureblood family, and for a little while, the family is sort of stable again, held together by the new family. But it can’t last, and then another one of the heirs gets addicted to dark magic, and goes mad. And then another one resents what’s happened to its family and does something crazy to fix it, but it ends up getting it killed. There’s nothing left but the heir who married out, but now the family is so unstable, that the last heir has to renounce it all together, and become only this new element it married into, or else it’ll go mad from the instability too.”

Draco considered this. “My mother’s family is radioactive,” he decided.

Harry nodded. “Yeah, and radioactive things destroy everything else around them. So that’s why muggles haven’t really achieved Alchemy. They can’t keep the gold stable once they’ve turned it. It’s not real, natural gold. It’s just sort of gold. To make normal gold, you’ve got to take away three heirs without tearing the family apart. They have to be good marriages. And then you’ve got to sort
out the neutrons—the, erm, house elves.”

“Why anyone would get married with all this radioactivity is beyond me,” Draco muttered. “Imagine having to decide who gets to keep the cooking elf and which of the scullery elves has to be killed altogether?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Imagine.”

They’d reached the castle by now, and the door opened just as they came upon the stairs. The Headmistress stepped out, peering all around the grounds before she noticed them ascending.

“There you are, Malfoy,” she said. “I’ve finished analysing your mineral transfigurations and I have some comments for you. Shall we discuss it now? I’ve an engagement this evening.”

“Of course, Headmistress,” Draco said, and he was already up the stairs and disappearing into the castle for McGonagall’s office before Harry even blinked.

“Potter,” McGonagall greeted. “No regrets?”

Harry beamed. “None, Professor.”

She smiled, softly. “I’m glad to hear it, Potter.” She hesitated, and then seemed to come to a decision. “My apprentice may’ve hinted that you helped him complete the Animagus transformation. Very difficult for someone who hasn’t done it himself to teach another. But I am certain that no student of mine would become an unregistered Animagus.”

“Absolutely not,” Harry agreed, doing his best to feign shock, outrage, and being scandalised.

McGonagall made a little sound that, in anyone else, might be constituted to be a huff of laughter. “However, if one of my students were to, hypothetically, do such a thing, what sort of form do you imagine he might take? Out of curiosity.”

Harry did laugh, ducking his head, to hide the extent of his fondness for McGonagall and her inability to be subtle, even when she was breaking the rules. There was no question about whether or not to trust her. Headmistress or not, they were of a kind, and Gryffindors were loyal to their own. “One might be a crow, Headmistress.”

She considered this. “That would be an excellent form for a student so captivated with flying,” she decided. “Well, if this student should ever like to become an Animagus, and register, then I should be delighted to assist in any way as he begins the process.”

“Thanks, Professor.”

McGonagall smiled again. “I am glad that you and Mr Malfroy have made peace with one another. You’ve both changed a great deal, and you’re stronger for it. Now, run along to the dungeons. Professor Snape informs me that Professor Caldeirao added the final ingredients to your exam potion, and they’re ready for your analysis. He’ll meet you there.”

-x-

“I was just thinking,” Harry said a few days later, when the almost-conversations he and Draco had lately wouldn’t leave him alone, “that maybe you could forget the part where I fucked things up last spring, and we could try that other bit again, the part where we fucked instead of fucking up.”
Draco was apparently startled into a bark of laughter by Harry’s frankness. Or at least Harry hoped he was startled and not mocking him. He tried on a smile to prevent the awkwardness from setting in once Draco realised he hadn’t been messing about.

Draco looked over at him, eyes sparkling with humour, and—and maybe something else, too. Harry tried to look closer, but it was gone before he could identify it. “Potter, you silly bugger.”

“Why does everyone say that to me?” Harry wondered. He reconvened stirring his potion, as this line of inquiry was evidently going nowhere. Nowhere he was interested in going, anyway.

Draco snorted. “You can’t be serious.” But the way he said it, the tone of his voice suggested it was less statement than question. “Potter, we already—”

“I know,” Harry said. Bugger. He shouldn’t have let himself get so maudlin last night. Three-fifths happy was loads more happy than lots of other people got. Now his mouth was running off without leave again. “But I’m not, erm, seeing anyone, and neither are you…to the best of my knowledge.”

“I’m not,” Draco supplied, after an awkward moment.

This cheered Harry more than was healthy, he reckoned. “Well, right then. So, we’re unattached, healthy, strapping, young men. There are certain, ah, needs…”

He chanced a glance at Draco, and found him regarding Harry with a carefully blank expression. “There are also hands,” said Draco. “Single, attractive people don’t engage in affairs with one another just because they’re of compatible sexual orientations and states of freedom.”

There was that word again. Malfoy was beginning to sound very American.

“Look,” said Harry, setting his stirring rod aside. Malfoy didn’t look away from his Transfigurations text, but did appear to be listening. “I know I said I could—that I could stop feeling particularly about you, and I know, we both know, that it was…a lie. Maybe not really a lie, but I didn’t know, at the time, how to deal with having those sorts of feelings. It’d never happened before, you know?”

Draco didn’t respond at all, but it seemed to Harry that his shoulders stiffened some. Which part provoked it, Harry couldn’t say. It couldn’t have been the last bit; everyone knew Harry hadn’t ever managed a successful relationship. Harry sighed.

“But now I’ve had almost a year to get used to the feeling. Being away from you all summer helped—it made me realise that I could exist without you, even if I didn’t particularly want to. Before, I thought that my life would be defined by whether or not you returned it. But I realised that life isn’t either/or; there can be an entire scale of possibilities. Maybe, yeah, it’d put me at the top of the scale if you felt the same about me, but I figure I’m about sixty per cent happy right now with us just being friends, and that’s not bad stats.”

He stopped, swallowed heavily around the thick words he wanted to say but wasn’t sure were wise. He’d hate himself if they pushed Draco away. He’d hate himself if he never said them, always wondered ‘what if’.

“I…desire you. Still,” Harry finally said. “I’ve never wanted anyone before. I waited to see if it was just a crush, to see if it would fade. It hasn’t. I want you as much as I ever did. And I won’t delude myself this time into thinking that I’ll be able to stop…feeling. You were right. Not even I can do that bit. But—this is what I can do,” and here, he looked up, and stared hard until Draco was forced to meet his gaze.
“I can feel enough for you to let you go, or let you stay, or let you do both. Whatever you want, I want it, too. You still want me, too, I think. I think that’s what you meant the other night, when we talked about your father. But you didn’t want to lead me on. So thanks for that. But I, ugh, love you enough that I’m content to put all my Gryffindor romance notions aside, if the only way you want me is a blow and an argument about the Quidditch the next morning. Even knowing you’ll end it. It would be better to have you for a while, partially, than not at all. And I think you need to have someone for a while, too. I’ll be your distraction.”

“Are you suggesting friends with benefits?” Draco asked.

“I suppose so.” Harry grimaced. “I’m suggesting whatever you need. Or want.”

Draco’s eyes narrowed. “No strings?”

“Not a thread,” Harry assured him.

Draco exhaled in a rush, and suddenly, he looked furious. “Harry.” The word was so inflected, but Harry had no idea what the inflection meant. He was still too startled over hearing it from Draco again. “You’re asking me to take advantage of you.”

“I’m telling you that you wouldn’t be taking advantage of me.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Draco muttered.

“I’m just saying,” said Harry, before Draco could get started, “that if you—if you ever wanted to, then go for it. I’ll welcome it. And I’ll never try to…cage you.”

“This is ridiculous,” said Draco, but his voice was so quiet and his eyes were so wide that Harry rather thought Draco was thinking anything but.

“I quite agree.” They both jumped, turned to face the newly occupied Caravaggio. Snape looked annoyed and disappointed in the both of them. “Potter—I don’t know what stupid scheme you’ve pulled together, but I’ll thank you to not involve my godson in it. Given the end his father suffered, you well know how tenuous his hold on his freedom is.”

Harry pressed his lips into a flat line. That word. Repetition was starting to make it sound like gibberish to him.

“Yes, Professor, how unthinking of me.”

“Mm,” Snape said. He eyed them both, now seeming to realise that perhaps he’d not got the entire gist of the conversation. “Potter—I don’t know what stupid scheme you’ve pulled together, but I’ll thank you to not involve my godson in it. Given the end his father suffered, you well know how tenuous his hold on his freedom is.”

Harry pressed his lips into a flat line. That word. Repetition was starting to make it sound like gibberish to him.

“Yes, Professor, how unthinking of me.”

“Mm,” Snape said. He eyed them both, now seeming to realise that perhaps he’d not got the entire gist of the conversation. “Well. Potter—have you completed your analysis of the Polyjuices?”

“Yes sir,” said Harry. “Flask 1 is the human Polyjuice.”

Snape’s mouth twitched on one side. It sort of looked pleased, as far as Harry could tell. But it could have also meant that Snape was smirking at him. “And the types of hair in Flasks 2 and 3?” he queried, of course not telling Harry whether or not he was right.

“Trick question,” Harry said, narrowing his eyes at the portrait. “Flask 2 was a crocodile scale and Flask 3 was an augury feather.”

Snape’s smirk intensified. It was definitely a smirk; it was just that Snape’s smirks could also mean he was really chuffed about something Harry did. Which meant he was correct.
“You seem quite certain.”

“Yes.”

“Certain enough to drink the first flask?” asked Snape, one eyebrow up.

Harry briefly considered the horror it would be to accidentally Polyjuice into a crocodile. But, well—Gryffindor. In answer, Harry uncapped Flask 1, and tipped it back.

Immediately, he felt himself changing. His skin tingled all over. His hair grew, his nose straightened, his teeth changed, his shoulders narrowed, and his waist, too, and then—Merlin!

Harry squeaked. His junk disappeared.

“Oh my God,” Harry said, and his voice was definitely not his own. “Everything just changed, and I am really sort of terrified right now, I’ve got breasts and…pierced nipples—what the fuck, where is my cock for fuck’s sake!”

Draco started laughing. Harry turned to face Snape’s portrait, horrified, and nearly fell flat on his face. His centre of gravity was all wrong. How did Ginny even stay on a broom if women had to spend so much effort just staying upright? “I have a… a…”

He couldn’t even say it.

“Vagina,” Snape offered. “I am pleased.” Snape paused here, a look of consternation on his face. He frowned. “I am pleased that you chose the correct flask,” he corrected. Then, “What are your thoughts on the transformation so far, Potter?”

“That I need to take the antidote right now,” said Harry, already moving towards the door. He’d find Miguela, and she’d give him the antidote, and then he could have his bollocks back.

“Ah, ah, ah,” Snape said. “Not quite yet, I think. This is part of the assignment. You will remain as you are for the entire hour, noting the differences in the body, and when you’ve transformed back, you will have Draco perform a gender transfiguration on you so that you may compare the effects. You knew this, Potter.”

“I knew it,” he muttered, in Miguela’s pretty voice. “It’s rather harder to concentrate on an assignment when you’re panicking about your missing cock, though, Professor.” God, he sort of had to pee, too, but like hell if he was going to actually go now.

Draco snorted again.


Harry took a deep breath. “It was a smooth transformation. I feel fine. No tingling, no numbness, no dizziness.”

“You noticed that your balance has changed,” Snape observed.

“Yes. It’s sort of…lower.” He tried to walk. “I feel…swaggery.”

“You look swaggery,” Draco said, choking on his laughter. Harry attempted to swing his hips like Hermione did, but ended up tripping and nearly smashing Miguela’s face into the floor. “Professor—really, this is quite enough. What am I going to do for an hour, like this?”

“This is part of apprenticeship, Potter. Withstanding the effects of potions one does not find
entirely comfortable. It’s imperative that a Potions Master is intimately familiar with every potion he brews.”

“So you turned into a woman when you were apprenticing, too?” Harry asked. “Who’d you do?”

He’d thought it would rile Snape up a bit. He’d thought it might annoy him enough that he’d let Harry take the antidote. He should’ve known better.

“What happens when they try it?” asked Snape, no doubt already knowing the answer. He approached the front of the canvas and stared intently down at the two of them. “Furthermore—you have the ability to attempt a line of inquiry I never had. What happens when an Animagus takes Polyjuice?”

Harry’s eyes widened. “I don’t know.” He flung an extinguishing spell at his whacko burner, despite the fact that the harsh dowsing would make it even more emotional the next time he used it, and a stasis at his potion. “But I’m going to find out. Come on, Malfoy. I need you there in case I get stuck.”

Draco gasped, and when Harry met his eyes, his own face flushed. He hadn’t even been thinking of that, but there was no denying that if Malfoy talked dirty to him, Harry would definitely remember what it was like to be human. And male. And randy.

“Right,” Draco said. “Let’s go.”

-x-
After barely escaping what would no doubt be an awkward confrontation with the Headmistress, Harry and Draco made it out to the grounds. Harry wasn’t quite sure of his new gait, but he managed to make it down the steps, and then the rocky, grassy slope that led to Hagrid’s and the Forest beyond. They curled around the edge of it for a few minutes, looking for a discreet place to enter.

Draco seemed hesitant to go in, but Harry felt more alive in the Forbidden Forest than anywhere else. It was where he’d died, after all, and where he’d lived again.

When they finally passed the Quidditch Pitch and descended the hill beyond it, Harry slipped into the trees, knowing Draco would follow. There was no particular path, but he picked his way through with ease, having some instinctual understanding of the Forest.

Or maybe, he just remembered, somehow, the path he’d taken during the final battle, for it wasn’t long before the trees broke away and Harry was staring into a clearing. He inhaled sharply. Ten feet before him, he’d died.

Harry walked forward, feeling brush and leaves crunch beneath his shoes.

“Harry?” Draco said, coming to stand beside him.

Harry shook his head. “This is where it happened. I thought—I didn’t think I remembered how to get here. I was so…out of it, when I came that night. Out of my mind, I mean. I don’t think I really knew what was happening. I’d buried it beneath...something else.”

“Here?” Draco asked, and suddenly he seemed terrified, or as close to it as Malfoys ever got.

“Yeah, here.” Harry checked his watch. It hung from his tiny wrist. Twenty minutes until the Polyjuice wore off. “I’m going to transform now.”

Draco nodded, said nothing. That detached look was on his face.

Closing his eyes, Harry concentrated, and forced himself to change. It was easier this time, quicker. His arms turned to wings and he pumped them forcefully, taking off for the trees even as his feet were growing talons.

Harry struggled for a few seconds until instinct kicked in, and he began to understand the mechanics of flying. He pumped his wings again, and then he was soaring all through the trees, avoiding branches and other obstacles with ease. He settled onto a branch to rest, not quite accustomed to the maneuvering yet.

He looked down, towards the forest floor, and there they were: the little crawling spirits of long-dead creatures, too stupid to know they were dead. He could send them on their way if he tried hard enough. He could look into the afterlife if he tried hard enough.

But he didn’t want to. Harry would leave that for the real crows.

He turned and found Draco still standing in the middle of the clearing, looking back up at him with a bemused frown. Dead things were crawling all over his feet, curling about his legs. Little foxes wrapped their tails around his calves, and snakes slithered up his torso to settle on his arms. He had no idea he was being covered in moths and beetles, that thestrals were circling him, flickering ghostly tails.

And Harry couldn’t look away from the disturbing sight. Draco’s life was attractive to the spirits.
And to him. There was something undeniably alive about Draco, something that Harry hadn’t realised he didn’t feel until he looked at it. I see you, Harry thought. I see all of you, now.

It felt like every important moment in Harry’s life had been connected to Draco in some way, and he couldn’t think of anything but the smell of burning and the screams of Fiendfyre. That had been the moment Harry changed.

He’d just not realised it until now.

Every alchemy required a catalyst, and saving Draco Malfoy had been his. And suddenly—Harry knew. He knew what they were missing. He should’ve known from the start, when Draco first suggested he read Paracelsus, because it had been right there.

He flew down, transformed neatly back to himself. “It’s the Azoth,” he said. “The mercury.”

Draco quirked an eyebrow, eyed him from top to bottom. “You have no idea what a marvel you are, do you?”

“What?”

“There’s ten minutes left on your Polyjuice. And yet—you’re you.”

Harry looked down, startled. So he was. He’d overridden a very precise potion, and he had no idea how. He shook his head. He could ask Snape about that later. Maybe he’d just mis-brewed it.

“Draco, listen—”


“It’s what we’re missing,” Harry said. “The spirit of change. I was right about the Felix Felicis hypothesis, I know it. We have to make the opposite of the Philosopher’s Stone. It’s the Azoth that turns it into the Magnum Opus.”

Draco stilled. “A stone for poverty, death, and illness?” He shook his head. “Harry, you can’t be serious. We can’t make it…” He paused, considered. “No, we definitely could make it, but it’s insane!”

“If it was easy, don’t you think every second degree Alchemist in the world would have made one by now?” Harry said. “I know this is right.”

Draco grimaced. “This is mad,” he whispered, seemingly to himself.

When he looked back at Harry some minutes later, his face was bloodless, shocked. “I think you’re right, Harry.”

Harry’s face was pained. This was so much further than a silly inter-subject project. It was so much more. He flicked his eyes back to Draco’s. “We could abandon it. Do something different,” he suggested.

Draco exhaled in a rush, walked away, then came back, as if he had no idea what to do with himself. “No, we can’t, Harry.”

Harry nodded. He knew. “We can’t tell anyone.”

Draco smiled ruefully. “I know.”

As one, they turned and began picking their way back through the Forbidden Forest to the grounds.
Harry’s heart was hammering, and for the first time, it wasn’t due to Draco’s presence. Everything was still and silent all around him, but a flash of blue caught his eye as he stepped over a fallen tree trunk, and he gasped.

“What is it?” Draco whispered, as if the silence of the Forest was affecting him, too.

Harry shook his head. He could still see them. Little creature spirits were following along behind them, trailing after Draco and all the life he gave off. There was still a ghostly runespoor cosied up around his neck, and he had no idea. No idea the effect he had on dead things, or on Harry, who was, arguably, a dead thing himself.

“Nothing.”

The creatures followed them all the way to the edge of the Forest, where they stopped, and stared after Draco from the safety of the trees. But Draco hesitated a few feet beyond the Forest, his brow scrunching up in something like confusion.

“What is it?” Harry echoed.

“I…” Draco turned, looking all around. “I felt something unusual.”

Harry bit his lip, eyed the little blue ghosts. “Like what?”

Draco shook his head and turned back to the trees, trailing his hand along the foliage as he walked, as if feeling for something. The spirits were following his hand, trying to get close enough to nuzzle his fingers. “I don’t know.”

Harry followed him as he walked, and said nothing. Draco stopped near to Hagrid’s hut, where the rocky highland slope sunk into the Forbidden Forest, and looked around again. “It’s here,” he said.

“What is?”

Draco shrugged, a highly irregular gesture. “Something’s…resonating. Don’t you hear it? Or feel it? I’m not sure.” At that moment, one of the spirit beetles crawled over a stone, trying to scuttle closer to Draco’s outreached hand. Draco made a sudden noise in the back of his throat, and bent. The rock, beetle and all, hopped into his hand.

He stood, staring in consternation at it. “It’s gneiss,” he said, flicking his eyes up to Harry. “Same thing my stone cauldron’s made from.”

“The one you brew sal ammoniac potions in?”

“Yeah,” Draco said, distractedly. He turned the rough, pink stone over in his hand, but the frown on his face didn’t ease. “It’s a metamorphic stone, made from quartz and other things. My—my father used it as a focus stone inlay in his wand.”

“What?”

“Quartz resonates with a particular frequency…a frequency that aligns with that of magic. The other minerals in it help to concentrate it.”

Harry’s eyebrows lifted. He glanced around the grounds. This same rock was pushing up from the ground all over. Some of the stones of the castle were the same greyish-pink of that in Draco’s hand. If that was the case, then no wonder Hogwarts had such a big personality. It was practically swimming in the stuff.
But that still left the question, “Why did you sense that now? Especially if it’s so common?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” said Draco. “McGonagall had me working on mineral transmutations recently; maybe I’m just more attuned to particular compositions of them now.”

Harry scrunched his nose, remembering the beetle. Carefully, he said, “But you wanted that particular stone.”

“It feels different from all the rest. It feels...more.”

“More,” Harry repeated, dubiously.

“Yeah. Like it’s more...alive.”

The beetle was still crawling happily around on Draco’s wrist. Harry’s watched it for a moment, feeling something like dread curl up in his gut. What had the spirit beetle done to this stone, to attract Draco to it? And what would it do to Draco?

Harry strode to him, grabbed his wrist under the pretense of having a look at the gneiss. He squashed the beetle, sending it off to wherever dead beetles were meant to go, and felt not a second’s regret. There was absolutely no way he was going to let one of these spirits drink up Draco’s life force, or whatever they wanted to do.

Draco inhaled sharply at Harry’s touch, and their eyes met, both startled. Draco’s pulse was hammering beneath Harry’s fingers, his skin heating. At once, Harry remembered Draco’s fantasy, his throaty voice as he recited it, and his breath thick and heavy. Draco’s eyes were mercurial in the fading light. Harry squeezed his wrist tighter, and barely recognising what he was doing, stepped closer. Draco didn’t step back. Their mouths were inches apart. He could feel Draco’s breath puffing against his lips and it sent shivers down his back.

What was he doing? He’d promised.

“We should go back in,” said Harry, forcing himself to take a step backwards. “You’ve still got to do that human transfiguration on me, and I’d rather be in my rooms for that.”

Draco licked his bottom lip, nodded once. “Of course.” He turned and started up the slope to the castle, slipping the stone in his pocket as he went.

Harry took a moment to compose himself, but he soon realised that it would take much longer than a moment. “Fuck,” he breathed. He ran to catch up, with one last glare at the spirits, daring one of them to follow.

-x-

Draco was already holding the portrait to Harry’s rooms open by the time Harry got there, and, damn it, one day he was going to figure out how the git kept getting in. He’d changed his password twice already.

Their shoulders brushed as Harry stepped through, and he suppressed a shiver as best he could. It was like Draco’s skin was made of the same quartz, piezoelectric and attuned specifically to Harry. The Botticelli shut behind them, and Harry headed for his settee, but a hand on his shoulder jerked him to a stop.
Draco spun him round and pressed him against the door. All the breath rushed from Harry’s lungs. “Potter. You can’t keep doing this to me.”

And then he kissed him. It was sudden and hot and everything Harry remembered, only a thousand times better, since it was happening right then.

“What’s going on?” Harry managed, around a gasp. He squeezed his eyes shut, certain he would die if he opened them and this wasn’t real.

“Making me want you,” Draco said into his skin, as he trailed a slick trail of kisses down his neck. “I can barely function as it is, and then you go around counteracting Polyjuice because you feel like it, and swanning through trees, and staring at me like you could live off the carbon dioxide I exhale.”

Harry was startled into a laugh, but Draco’s fingers tugged at the buttons of his apprentice robes, and he stopped at once. “Shut up,” Draco said, as if Harry might still be considering speaking, which he wasn’t. “I read your stupid muggle chemistry book.”

Harry felt warm all over, and it wasn’t entirely due to arousal. It was just that the book reminded him of Draco’s irregular method of shocking Hermione out of her Animagus form. His arms came up and pulled Draco tightly to him, effectively stopping his progress with Harry’s robes.

He kissed him fiercely, once, then pushed him back a bit to take his hand. Harry tugged him towards the bedroom, and the wall sconces flickered on as he entered, and the light flowed across the walls with the reflection of the lake coming through the window. Severia, sleeping on the bed, was quickly dispatched as Harry levitated her through the door and set her carefully down on the armchair. She didn’t even wake. He shut the door behind her and turned to Draco, smirking.

Wandless magic was as easy as breathing when Draco was around.

Draco growled, and tugged at Harry’s buttons again until he had the entire row of them undone. Harry’s robes fell off his shoulders and pooled at their feet. The sudden brush of dungeon air against his fevered skin made him shudder, but Draco followed it with his hands, running them down Harry’s arms and over the thin t-shirt he wore beneath.

Harry arched against Draco’s fingers trailing down his chest, his eyes falling shut, and when he opened them again, he found Draco staring back at him with more intensity than he’d ever seen. At once, everything slowed. That desperate need was still there, but like Dreamless Sleep potion, it was simmering slowly beneath the surface.

Draco tugged at his shirt hem, and Harry obediently lifted his arms. Everything was silent then; nothing but the rustle of cloth as it hit the floor. This was that event horizon thing, Harry thought. He tried to gauge Draco’s thoughts, but he’d long ago set his wall sconces to never rise above a certain luminescence, and it was too dark now to see clearly.

Carefully, he reached out, ran his hand up Draco’s arm, and curved it around his neck to draw him closer. This time, when they kissed, it was softer, more measured, but still organic. Harry whimpered against Draco’s mouth, feeling himself falling apart and unable or unwilling to stop the destruction.

He slowly threaded his fingers through Draco’s hair. Merlin, it was just as soft as he’d imagined it. He heard their breathing filling the room, and felt the air becoming humid. They pulled apart to slip Draco’s robes off, and Harry fell back on the bed at the merest push.

Draco crawled up after him, and Harry was mesmerised by the curve his back made as he bent
down to slide their mouths together again. Harry reached down and drew his fingers around the edge of Draco’s waistband, hesitant, asking permission. He felt Draco’s abdomen contract at the contact, and it flooded him with desire—*his* touch was doing that.

“Yes,” Draco answered against his mouth.

He drew one hand down and placed it over Harry’s. Their fingers interlocked, and Draco slid their joined hands over, until Harry’s palm was fitted over the hot, thick bulge in draco’s trousers. Harry shuddered; his fingers curled around it, unable to help himself.

Draco moaned and arched into the touch, his mouth pulling away from Harry’s to gasp for more breath.

It was all too much for Harry. He flipped them over, reversing their positions, and popped the row of buttons out, and slid his hand all the way up Draco’s thigh, curled over the waistband of his trousers, and pulled them down. Draco’s cock bobbed free, a rush of cool, dungeon air against his skin making him shudder.

He spent a long moment taking in the sight before him, of Draco sprawled on his bed, skin flushed, panting. He had nice, Quidditch-toned thighs. He had nice feet, with long toes currently curled up in anticipation. His shoulders were wide, and the rest of him lanky and glaringly patrician. And he had a nice penis, too, Harry thought, somewhat hysterically. It was leaking all over his stomach right now, and Harry desperately, desperately, wanted to know what that tasted like.

Draco pulled himself up on his elbows and somehow managed to look in control of the situation despite the utter disarray of his hair and body. “Why aren’t you naked?”

Harry really had no idea, but the words were doing terrible things to him. Or maybe that was just the weighty look in Draco’s eyes.

He slid off the bed, and fumbled with the buttons of his trousers until he managed to get them undone. Draco was still propped up, watching, apparently unconcerned about having his cock out. Hands shaking, Harry lowered his trousers, stepped out of them, and kicked them off to the side.

Draco’s eyes immediately fell to the area in question. The moment lasted thirty years, in Harry’s estimation. He’d never had his cock out in front of anyone before, save for the Quidditch changing rooms, and he would’ve expected to feel horribly exposed and vulnerable with some fit bloke staring right at it.

He did. He just hadn’t expected to become even more aroused by the exposure.

He growled, lightly pushed at Draco’s shoulder until he lay back on the bed. He could not bear to not know what Draco’s skin felt like against his any longer.

He wasted no time lowering his mouth to one pointed hipbone and circled his tongue around it. Malfoy arched up, somehow looking very aristocratic about it. His cock rubbed against Harry’s jaw, the tip sliding wetly over his skin as Harry lapped at his hipbone, and then further down. He trailed his tongue down, traced the crease where his leg met, then slid his hands beneath Draco’s knees to pull them over his shoulders. Thus, better positioned, he licked all around Draco’s balls, felt himself smiling smugly at the sounds Draco was making—desperate, wanton sounds that went straight to Harry’s groin.

What he lacked in experience, Harry made up for in sheer Gryffindor bloody-mindedness, or perhaps cockiness. Pretty much the same thing.
He took Draco in his mouth and felt himself harden even more, if possible, at the moan that followed. He wanted Draco liked he’d never wanted anyone or anything before, and suddenly, it was too much to bear not to be able to see Draco’s face as he fell apart. Reluctantly, he removed his mouth from Draco’s prick and slid up his body, feeling Draco’s legs fall around him—it was such an intimate position that Harry began trembling and couldn’t stop.

Draco blinked heavy grey eyes up at him. His arms came around to settle on Harry’s biceps, but he said nothing about the shudders, for which Harry was eternally grateful. “Why’re you stopping?” he rasped.

“I wanted to see you,” he said, and right then, that one sentence meant a thousand different things.

And there was another part of Harry that just didn’t want this to end, because, in the back of his mind, he knew this might be the only time Draco ever wanted it. So he was going to have him the way he wanted, at least this once.

Draco smiled at him, more brilliant than the light in the room.

Yeah, he was definitely done for.

But Draco was still looking at him in that careful, intense way, and there was nothing for it anymore. It wasn’t enough to come any longer. He had to know what it was like to feel connected to the person he loved when he did.

Harry summoned a vial from his bedside table and uncorked it over his hand. Oil poured out, coating his fingers, and he reached down to coat Draco’s prick with it. Merlin, he had no idea what he was doing, and he was terrified of fucking it all up.

Draco’s eyes widened as Harry began to twist and stroke. Their eyes locked. Harry’s fingers slid up to tease at the underside of the head, and Draco’s mouth fell open, his eyelids sinking almost closed. Harry was fascinated by the way he seemed to struggle with breaths, the way his chest flushed, the way, his fingers curled and uncurled against the duvet.

“Yes, yes, yes,” Draco panted, barely audible. His chest arched up. Harry bent to drag his tongue over it. He circled his tongue around a nipple, then took it in his mouth and sucked. Draco made a sound that Harry would now hear in his head every time he wanked, forever.

Draco lifted one of his hands from the bed and held his palm out, shaking only a bit. “Give me some,” he panted. Harry poured oil into his hands and watched, engrossed, as he slicked up all his long fingers. “Come here.”

Harry crawled up his body, and wondered if this was reminding Draco of his fantasy like it was Harry. He bent to kiss him again, letting his tongue slide against Draco’s swollen lips and dip into his mouth. Draco’s hand ran down his side, curved around his bottom, and dragged his body closer. Their cocks brushed, and Harry gasped, and then moaned when Draco’s slick fingers moved to wrap around it.

He pressed his hips forward helplessly, and Draco smirked at him. It made Harry want to growl. Instead he just resumed the movement of his hand over Draco’s prick, watching his face flush and his hair curl from humidity like when he brewed potions.

It was perhaps the most wonderful thing in the world to watch Draco as he wanked him off, and feel the rush of pleasure through himself as Draco did the same. Their legs tangled together, and it felt—intimate. It felt like this was always the place Harry’d been destined for, and Draco was
always the person. God save him from the mess he was making of himself, he thought, even as he bent to kiss Draco’s jaw and then his lips as Draco turned his face towards him.

His chest tightened, a frenetic, aching feeling as their lips met. He clenched his eyes shut tight and put everything he had into that kiss, knowing that he wasn’t honouring the offer he’d made Draco, but unable to stop himself. Draco made him a liar. Draco made him more honest than he’d ever been in his life.

His skin was soaked, and the dungeon air chilled against it, but he noticed none of that. All he could feel was Draco’s fingers sliding up and down his shaft, and the feel of Draco’s beneath his own fingers. He knew when Draco got close. He could feel it in the way his kisses became fiercer, more desperate; in the way that the sounds he made became sharper. They sounded panicked to Harry, almost devastated—or maybe he was just projecting. It sent a rush of pleasure through him, and he surged into Draco’s hand, unable to prevent his hips from moving. Draco was close, so very close, and it was making Harry close, so very close.

He pulled back from the kiss with a gasp, and Draco’s eyes flew open, wide and startled. *Fuck, I love you*, Harry thought resignedly. Draco moaned, and it was hot. And then everything rushed at Harry, a surge of almost unbearable pleasure, and he lost it, coming all over their hands and their stomachs. Draco arched upwards at the first splash of come against his chest, and Harry twisted his hand the way he liked himself, and then Draco was coming, and it was the most amazing thing Harry’d ever seen in his life.

Harry dropped his head, panting. His elbow began to tremble and he knew he had to roll away or else he’d collapse on top of Draco. He opened his eyes to look at him again, to have this one moment where they’d done this to each other, and their bodies were still tangled together as they ought to be, and was surprised to find Draco looking back at him.

He looked startled. He looked…devastated. Like maybe he’d just realised something he’d never known.

Harry rolled away. He’d probably just now realised what they’d done, and then he’d run, and they’d never talk of it again, despite how Harry’s life would never be the same again.

Harry stared at the plaster ceiling, listening to Draco’s breathing returning to normal. His own was starting to rush again, with the terror inherent in the possibility that he’d fucked up spectacularly by letting this happen. No matter what he’d said to Draco in a moment of weakness, he didn’t think he’d be able to do this. He was, truly, his own worst enemy.

Draco cleared his throat. Harry forced a grin as he rolled over to face him. Damage control time. “Well?” he asked with false nonchalance.

Draco cleared his throat again. “Average.”

*Like hell it was*, Harry thought. He rolled his eyes. “Could’ve done worse, I suppose. At least I’m as good at getting blokes off my first time as I am at Transfigurations after seven years of it.”

Draco looked surprised at the confession, but thankfully didn’t comment on it. Harry ran his fingers through the come on his belly, feeling amazed that it was there at all. They lay like that for a long time, and it was pretty much the best day of Harry’s life, ever. And also the worst.

He knew he was stupid for thinking this, but: he really hoped Draco didn’t want to end this too soon. Maybe Harry was just a glutton for punishment.
At breakfast, a letter arrived from Terry, courtesy of an exhausted Yucatan Amazon. It said nothing of importance, except to relay Boot’s extreme happiness with his job, his progress with Spanish, and his life in general. Harry passed it to Hermione, so she could deal with it. He might’ve got laid last night, but Terry Boot was still entirely too much for decent folk to deal with so early in the morning.

Hermione’s *Daily Prophet* landed next, and Harry was briefly interested by the headline, *Delayed World Cup to be held this summer!* which was nice news, although Harry doubted Snape would let him out of his sight for long enough to attend. And frankly, he’d had enough of camping for a while. Draco would probably be interested though, Harry suspected, upon reading on. The English National Team had made it to the playoffs last year, before the war interrupted everything, and Draco’s favourite Chaser, Hermes Kilgore, was on that team.

“‘You and Bulstrode have any luck yet?’ he asked her as he poured himself a cup of black coffee, and pretended to exude an aura of nothing-has-changed-and-I-haven’t-slept-with-Malfoy.

Hermione looked exhausted, and Bulstrode not much better. She was glaring down at her eggs, even as Hermione passed her a fresh coffee. They’d both been running themselves ragged working on their apprenticeships, their inter-subject project that would come due in four weeks, and this new side project of fixing the Wilkins-Grangers.

“Yes,” she said, covering a yawn. “I wrote back and they’ve agreed to let me try my ‘hocus pocus’ on them one more time. So we’re portkeying over in a couple of weeks. I just want to be absolutely sure that we can do it this time.”

“Good,” he said. Then, “Heard from Ron much?”

“Honestly, Harry,” she said. “Why don’t you just write him yourself?”

Harry shrugged. “Feels weird.”

She eyed him narrowly. “He’s going to be devastated when he finds out Malfoy’s your new Ron, you know.”

“Malfoy is definitely not my new Ron.” Harry was firm on this.

“Whatever you say, Harry,” she said.

At the beginning of December, Hermione and Millicent left for Australia. Peep and Crookshanks were left behind, in Draco and Harry’s respective cares, which sucked since, of course, they were always in Harry’s rooms playing some weird cat game with Severia whenever he returned from the lab. He really had no idea how everyone was getting past his wards. Severia was a squib and therefore couldn’t—

Harry narrowed his eyes. “Severia Potter!” he called.

She trotted in, mewed inquisitively. “I know you’re a squib,” he said, and her green eyes narrowed,
but he continued, “But have you been—somehow—disabling my wards? You do realise that kneazles are supposed to help their masters protect their homes, not open them up to whomever they please, right?”

She flicked her tail in annoyance, and turned to leave him again. “Oh no you don’t,” he said, scooping her up. “It’s Bring Your Naughty Kneazle to Work Day, my dear. You’re coming with me since you obviously can’t be trusted not to open doors to annoying white cats and Slytherins.”

This seemed to bother her not at all. She curled up in his arms and promptly began purring. Harry sighed, summoned his potions notes and other things he didn’t trust to leave in a classroom overnight, and set off for his lab. He stuffed her in his cauldron for better carrying, and of course, she was okay with that, too.

He arrived at the lab to find McGonagall relaxing in a red tartan chair. His stool was missing.

“Hello, Professor,” he said, warily.

“Ah, Potter,” said McGonagall. “I was looking for my apprentice and Severus assured me he wouldn’t be here, so of course this is where I came.”

Harry heard an exasperated sigh from the painting behind the desk, and withheld a smirk. He set his cauldron on the worktable carefully, so as not to jostle his kneazle. “He usually comes in about now.” *And then I snog him for a bit while my water boils.*

“I shall wait,” McGonagall said then. She flicked her eyes at the painting, challenging.

“Of course you shall,” Snape muttered.

Harry scooped Severia out of his good cauldron and set her on the table. She stretched her toes out, and got comfortable, watching him lazily as he got the burner going and unrolled the mosses he’d been drying for two weeks.

Her purring drew McGonagall’s attention. “Your kneazle does have a beautiful coat, Potter.” Severia purred louder. “Where did you get such a fine creature?”

“That pet shop in Hogsmeade,” Harry said. He pulled on his dragonhide gloves, having no wish at all to paralyse one of his limbs. “Malfoy named her.”

At this, there was a loud, tinny crash from the portrait. Harry smirked at his knife set, pretended to take his time choosing between the #4 and the #5.

“Potter!” Snape snapped, righting his chair. “I told you to leave that blasted cat out of my potions lab!”

“Not yours anymore,” Harry said. “In fact, it’s not even your lab. It’s just a manky, old classroom. Miguela’s got your lab, or have you forgotten?”

“Now, Severus,” McGonagall chided. “The kneazle’s not doing any harm. She’s perfectly docile, look.”

“I don’t need to look,” Snape said. “One cat is like any other. It will swish its tail in a burner and end up setting the entire school on fire, my portrait included!”

“Now see here, Severus—” McGonagall began, on behalf of all cats.
“Headmistress,” Harry interrupted, before she could begin a defense of cats. She gave him an annoyed look. “Since you’re here, there was something I wanted your opinion on...if you don’t mind?”

She narrowed her eyes, but did resume her seat in the tartan armchair. The tartan armchair that most certainly had once been Harry’s favourite stool. “I’m always available to students, Potter. It is my job as Headmistress.”

“How bloody stupid can one Potter be?” Snape muttered.

“When I took Polyjuice for my term exam,” Harry said, “I was able to...” he trailed off, suddenly remembering exactly how hypothetical his Animagus form was in McGonagall’s eyes. Well, bugger. This was more than just a passing fancy, and might be significant for his and Draco’s inter-subject project, so he was just going to have to suck it up. He flicked his wand at the door and set a few privacy spells around the room. McGonagall lifted an eyebrow, but said nothing.

“I was able to transform into my Animagus form.” He paused for her to give him a disappointed look and for Snape to snarl something like, ‘How bloody stupid can one Potter be?’

“Mr Potter,” McGonagall said. “You will register your form.”

“I—yeah. Okay.” He scrunched his nose. “But when I transformed back, from my Animagus, I came back as me, not the form I’d taken under Polyjuice. And there was still ten minutes left on the potion. Just switching to my Animagus and back overrode the potion, without an antidote.”

McGonagall considered. “Animagus transformations can override potions and human transfigurations,” she said. “This isn’t unusual.”

Finally, Snape looked interested. “Isn’t it, Minerva?” he said. “Properly brewed potions don’t just fail, and as much as it pains me to say this, Potter’s Polyjuice was—perfect.”

Harry smirked, pleased. “Obviously.”

He was ignored.

“Severus, be serious,” McGonagall said. “I know you never cared much for the art, but Transfigurations changes a body at the most basic level. It isn’t just the form that changes, it is also the function. When a witch or wizard has an Animagus form, he or she is that form. Even when human, they are still their animal; it never leaves them. Once transformed once, they are always two.”

“Potions does this as well, Minerva.”

“Oh?” She smiled. “It seems that both of our chosen fields are robust ones, then, Severus.”

“Don’t patronise me, woman,” he said. “That isn’t the only factor. We both know that Charms is trivial magic,” —here, McGonagall snorted, and tried to cover it with a cough— “and yet, Polyjuice doesn’t override Glamours. There is something more at work, here.”

“Pish,” McGonagall said. “You’re thinking about it the wrong way, Severus. The Animagus form is the wizard. Always. The genetic makeup of an Animagus animal is embedded in the wizard right next to his own. When he transforms, he doesn’t keep to his original formation, it all shifts, down to the very last gene. When he transforms back to human, it shifts back. One set turns on, another turns off. Polyjuice doesn’t do that.”
“It changes the wizard enough to override his original form,” Snape insisted. “How then, is he able to transform into his Animagus while under the effect of the potion in the first place?”

McGonagall opened her mouth to reply, and let it hang there. “Ah. I see your point now. I—am not certain.”

The door opened at that point, and Draco strode in, slinging his rucksack on the spare table and heading straight for Harry. He caught sight of their guest a bare step before his mouth would have collided with Harry’s, and deftly detoured to the table, as if he were going for the cat the whole time.

“Headmistress,” Draco said. He picked Severia up and cuddled her like a baby, as if this were a completely normal thing for him to do. “Have you met Severia?”

“Mister Malfoy!” Snape said.

“Oh my goodness,” McGonagall chuckled. She eyed Harry warmly. “You said Malfoy named your kneazle, but you didn’t say he’d named her in memoriam.”

“Potter will be in memoriam if he doesn’t rename that cat,” Snape said. “I will not suffer this.”

“I can’t just go around renaming her every other day, Professor,” said Harry. “She’ll get confused, and then she’ll have a complex. Besides, she likes her name.”

Severia blinked wide green eyes at Snape’s portrait, and then flexed her front feet lazily against Draco’s chest. She made a little rumbly, mewly sound and curled her fluffy tail up before falling back asleep. Snape narrowed his Perylene eyes.

“Potter, stop antagonising Professor Snape,” McGonagall said. “Now, Malfoy—I came to see about those minerals you transfigured for me. I’m very pleased with the stability of each of the transfigurations, but you’ve befuddled me with this one.”

She pulled out a rough, pink-grey stone, not unlike the gneiss he’d found with Harry by the forest, and floated it over to him. “I noticed that the composition is predominantly mica, and yet you chose to attempt a permanent quartz transfiguration anyway.”

“Yes,” agreed Draco.

McGonagall raised her brows, obviously waiting for further explanation. “Why?”

“Go big or go home,” Harry suggested, but was ignored.

“There was significant quartzite in the composite to encourage me to try it,” Draco said. He shrugged. “I like quartz better than feldspar.”

McGonagall’s lips twitched. “Be that as it may, Malfoy, you must know that the transfiguration wouldn’t hold.” She passed the rock back to him. “I’m surprised it lasted as long as it did, to be frank. Notice the central segment of the cross-section; it’s reverting to mica again.”

Draco frowned down at it. “There was no material amount of mica in that area originally. It was feldspar granite throughout the middle.”

“Really,” said McGonagall. She stood and came over to peer down at the specimen again. “Interesting. Well—I shall expect a full report on this then, Malfoy. Let’s say, three feet, by Monday?”
“Of course,” Draco said absently, still staring at the gneiss. Harry came over to look, but had no idea whether it was much changed or not. It was still pinkish-grey on the outside, like many of the stones around the Highlands, but a specimen wedge had been cut from it, and in the centre, the stone was shiny grey, like mercury. There were a few spots of clearish-looking quartz or quartzite, but Harry really wasn’t well-versed enough in the subject to know which.

When she was gone, Harry turned to Draco.

“Is it because it’s a metamorphic rock?” asked Harry. “You said they were, that day. It likes to change, doesn’t it?”

Draco opened his mouth to reply, and then hesitated. “It’s amenable to change,” he said carefully, instead. “Gneiss wasn’t one of the stone types McGonagall set for me to transfigure...I did it on a whim, after we found that one. But, yeah, it’s metamorphic, and I didn’t expect it to take a change at all, much less a change to quartz, when it only had a very little bit to begin with.”

“And it was unstable,” Harry said. “Like your Mum’s family...with the extra house-elves.”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Yes, it was unstable...but I know the central area was predominantly feldspar, and now it’s all mica.” He shook his head. “I’ve no idea why.”

Harry bit his lip. “You’ve still got that gneiss stone you picked up when we went out to the forest?” he asked.

“I’ve got loads of them,” Draco said, still staring intently at the mica in the middle. “McGonagall’s had me on mineral transfigurations for a month.

“It has to be that one,” Harry said. Something changed in it when that little spirit beetle crawled over it; something that made it special. He briefly considered going out and getting his own collection of them, but the spirits had not been interested in him in the forest. He was touched by Death—

“Why?” asked Draco.

And suddenly, Harry knew. Magic sought balance, always. The spirits were attracted to his life; but Harry wasn’t truly alive in the way that other people were, and he was boring to them. When the beetle crawled over the rock, it took in all of the elements of death into itself, making the rock wholly life-oriented, and leaving itself still deathly. It didn’t want to consume Draco’s life force; it wanted to balance it with itself.

Which meant that Harry was either too dead to bother with, or...already balanced.

“I’m sentimental,” Harry said. To which Draco rolled his eyes, but he did reach into his robe pocket and pull it out without having to conduct a search. Now who’s sentimental? Harry thought.

“I’d better start on that essay for McGonagall,” said Draco. “I’ll see you later.”

Draco gathered his things, but Harry grabbed his wrist before he could get out the door. “Do you want to get a drink tonight? Hogsmeade?”

Draco’s face went carefully blank, and for a minute, Harry was sure he was going to fly into a romance-induced rage. But then he said, voice neutral, “Okay.”

Harry did not beam at him because that would be overstepping. Instead he said, “Brill. See you then, mate.”
And Draco left without another word. Harry *Scourgified* the stone to remove any surface impurities and set it inside his cauldron for safekeeping. “Professor?” he called.

“What.” Snape was still in one of his bitter-about-having-a-kneazle-named-after-him moods. It almost made Harry wish he’d stayed with Ginny. He would’ve gone one better and named a *child* after him if he’d known it was this rewarding.

“Remember last year when we studied spells to test for and remove impurities from metals?”

“Obviously. I’m dead, not senile.”

“Do you think they’d work on stone?”

Snape pursed his lips, but this time, the gesture was thoughtful.

-x-

It wasn’t really his turn to buy drinks, but somehow Harry ended up at the bar pulling galleons out of his pocket anyway. Draco had a way of manoeuvering him like that. He asked Rosmerta for a pair of firewhiskys, and she winked at him as she tipped some into two glasses.

It was a Friday, and the Three Broomsticks was as boisterous as any Sunday during professional Quidditch season, only without the giant, single table. Harry wound his way through the tables, holding the glasses high to prevent spills, and towards the table Draco’d secured for them with a fierce glare and an unwavering sense of superiority. The couple necking there previously had cleared out lightning quick after that.

Yeah, Draco would never have felt like second best compared to the Boy Who Lived, if they’d grown up friends.

Draco turned from his contemplation of the street outside the window when Harry set his whiskey in front of him. “I asked for a pink umbrella charm and a swizzle wand, but Rosmerta said she’s out of poncey paraphernalia. Sorry.”

“No problem,” Draco said. “You can probably drink it easier without them.”

“Wanker,” Harry muttered.

Draco smirked. They sipped their drinks and let the hum of people relax them into something less than awkward—something that felt less like two blokes who’d seen each other naked and more like two blokes who were just mates.

It was just that Draco’s crooked smirk undid him completely.

“The Quidditch starts again next month.”

“Yes, the Quidditch,” Harry said, rolling his eyes. “I don’t fancy the Wasps’ chances this season.”

Which of course set Draco off on a treatise of Hermes Kilgore’s ability to carry a shoddy team through to the Championship. The roar of the pub faded to the background, and sometime between their second and third firewhisky, Harry forgot completely that he was not supposed to be in love with Malfoy, and that in the event he was unable to help himself, he still wasn’t supposed to show it.
It was a credit to Hermes’ skill on a broom that Draco didn’t notice the fond smile cemented to Harry’s face, or the way his fingers reached across the tiny table to run along a wet ring left by Draco’s glass.

When they finally set off for Hogwarts again, bursting from the Broomsticks in a warm, drunken arrangement, the snow and cold hit Harry’s face, and stung his heated cheeks. Draco smiled at him, absently, the sort of way a mate would smile at him if they were both drunk and pleased with themselves.

“Come back to mine,” Harry said abruptly. Then, before Draco could read into it, he added, “I had an idea about that gneiss.”

“Sure, Potter,” Draco said right away, unsuspecting. Harry bit his lip, trying not to smile. He was so stupid for Draco.

Draco pulled a bit ahead when they entered the dungeons. Maybe he felt more comfortable down here than he did up in the Transfiguration wing, Harry reckoned. Sometimes, at night, when Harry curled up in the chair of his sitting room, all done in green and ivory, with green-fire torches flickering weirdly against the walls, and the sound of rushing water from the lake somewhere beyond the walls, he would think of Draco and wonder if this was what it felt like to grow up in Slytherin. Sometimes he wished he’d grown up in Slytherin. Sometimes he wished his best mate had never felt like he wasn’t good enough for him.

His Botticelli swung open some ten feet before Harry got to it, and Draco stood there, holding it open for him, not an ounce of guilt on his face.

“How are you doing this?” he asked, exasperated. He peered around for Severia, wondering if she really was behind it all, but there was no sign of her. “I didn’t even hear you give a password.”

Draco smirked, but said nothing.

Harry huffed. “My notes are in my room. I’ll be right back.”

He sorted through the stack of papers on his bedside table, and finally unearthed the notes he’d taken after leaving the lab. There was something he’d overlooked all along, something he felt ridiculously stupid for not remembering. He’d held a Philosopher’s Stone in his hand, once.

He knew exactly what they looked like. Blood red, about the size of a snitch, smooth surface, uneven shape. They were bright, and sometimes the colouring was uneven. They looked rather a lot like quartz filled with blood. And Harry was no expert in that field, but even he was starting to see some suspicious similarities there.

He snatched up the notes and turned to rejoin Draco in the sitting room—but Draco wasn’t there. Harry’s chest slammed against another, and the air was knocked from his lungs...although likely not from the impact, but from the heat of Draco’s skin against his, separated by entirely too many winter layers.

“Oh,” said Harry, stupidly.

Draco narrowed his eyes. “You cast a sobering spell on yourself before we left Rosmerta’s,” he said. “I saw you do it.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed.

Draco’s eyes narrowed further. “I didn’t know why at the time, so I used one, too, and now I
Harry swallowed heavily. “Know what?”

“That you don’t trust yourself around me when you’re drunk,” Draco said. He shifted his stance, somehow bringing their bodies even closer together. Harry willed himself not to die from overexposure. “But I agreed to let things go further, as you asked. So that begs the question—what would you not trust yourself not to do when drunk? I’ve given you leave to do almost anything.”

“Right,” said Harry, for lack of anything else.

“There’s really very little I’ve forbidden,” Draco added.

“That’s true.” Harry forced himself to step back and around Draco. He desperately needed to end this conversation before it became too much. “I found the notes I was telling you about. I think there may’ve been some sort of alchemical action applied to a stone like your gneiss, originally. Fire, I think, since Calcination is typically agreed to be the first step in the process. So the fire burns a stone...a metamorphic rock, I think...and that causes it to change, it separates it into ash and heat-treated quartz? Maybe? I—”

“I don’t care, Potter,” Draco said. And then he was in front of Harry again, bearing down on him in a way that made Harry think of broom rides through Fiendfyre and heated romance.

“Okay, fine. Well, I guess I can look into it myself—”

“Harry.”

Harry stopped, sucked in a startled breath. He stood there, as his fists slowly clenched, and tried to force the shudders from his body. The sound of his name in Draco’s voice was the best sound in the world, he was sure. “Yeah?”

“What do you want, Harry?”

Harry scowled. These games weren’t fair. “You know what I want.”

Hands came around his waist and he gasped. Draco’s palms flattened against his abdomen. He felt his stomach clench in the wake of his fingers as he slid them inwards, upwards, and settled against his throat. Harry’s head tipped backwards and rested against Draco’s shoulder. Draco turned his face, his nose rubbing against Harry’s jawline, his breath fanning out against Harry’s sensitive neck.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Giving you what you want,” Draco whispered.

Harry tried to pull away. “No. I don’t want this,” he said, but Draco tightened his arms and Harry remained where he was. “I don’t want a pity fuck, Draco,” he added quietly. *I don’t want playacting at love,* he thought. “You know that.”

“I know,” Draco agreed, and his fingers began plucking at the top button of Harry’s shirt, sending tingles all down his torso. “I don’t give those, anyway.”

“Then what is this?” Harry asked lowly.

Draco’s fingers slipped down to the second button and tugged it free. “I told you. It’s what you
want.”

“I want you,” Harry burst out. “And I want you to want me in return...either because I turn you on, or because I...turn your heart on. Either sex only or sex and love. I don’t want charity. Like you said, I’ve got a hand.”

“Malfoys don’t do charity.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Of course they don’t.” He tried to tug himself away again, but Draco held fast, and was nearly to the bottom of Harry’s shirt by now anyway. He waited, defeated, as Draco undid the last button, and stepped back to let the shirt fall away.

“We don’t do charity, Potter,” Draco stressed, as his hands came back around to pull Harry against him again. Harry shuddered, the feeling of Draco’s expensive shirt against his bare skin almost overwhelming. “Not even for Losers Who Lived.”

Harry swallowed. “Then what is this?”

Draco bent his head forward, and nipped at Harry’s ear. “It’s what you want, moron,” he whispered.

How was it that Draco insulting him turned him on so much? Which one? he wanted to ask. Which of the things I want? But he didn’t dare. Instead, he melted back against Draco, let his arms come up and reach backwards to tangle his fingers in Draco’s soft hair.

Draco moaned, arched into it like a cat, and licked a trail up Harry’s neck. Harry gasped, and then Draco spun him around and kissed him harshly, like he’d been waiting to do it for ages and it was Harry’s fault they never did. Harry moaned into it, feeling himself unravel and just knowing that he’d never be able to sort himself out again.

Draco sank to his knees, his fingers coming up to toy with Harry’s button fly.

“I would ask what you’re doing,” Harry managed, through a gasp. “But I think I have a fair idea.”

Draco’s expression softened. For a moment, Harry wondered if, and was horrified by, the possibility that, Draco was using Legilimency on him again. God, how was it that he always ruined things for himself? Things like Draco maybe going down on him. Draco’s hands began a slow, delicate trail up and down Harry’s thighs.

Apropos of abso-bloody-lutely nothing, he said, softly: “I like it when you make connections with Potions things.”

Harry swallowed. “What?”

Draco grinned, a bit smirkily, but his eyes remained focused on his task. “Your idea about the gneiss. And how you’ve already run through the possibilities of using Polyjuice to augment Alchemy, and dismissed most of them as impossible not because the normal wizard assumes them impossible, but because you understand the theory now. You do have talent for it, when you apply yourself.”

Harry choked out a laugh to cover his building hysterical nervousness. “And so you’re going to reward me by, by sucking me off?” Merlin, he was so hard it was a wonder he didn’t explode like that Stomach Settling Solution that Snape made them brew in third—

Malfoy’s fingernails grazed his skin above his waistband. He may’ve died. He wasn’t sure.
Malfy snorted. “Please. I’m doing this because it’s all I’ve been able to think about, much to my own annoyance,” he added under his breath, but Harry still heard it. And even quieter: “Because I figured out that I want what you want.”

Harry forced himself to smirk, gestured magnanimously, even though his heart was beating faster than a snitch’s wings. “Don’t let me stop you, then.”

Draco didn’t seem to need further invitation. Harry’s trousers fell to the floor, and Draco’s hands returned to his skin, running along his thighs and the backs of his knees. Places Harry hadn’t even known he liked touched, until Draco touched them.

Then finally Draco’s hand slid up, teasing the skin all around, touching everywhere but there. Harry threw his head back, gasping, in some vain hope that it would open his lungs and let him breathe again. “Fuck’s sake, Malfoy, you twat. Do it.”

He felt the exhalation of air against his prick as Draco laughed, and then warm fingers closed around his shaft, and he nearly came from it. Draco stroked him, completely at his leisure, the cocky git.

And then when he finally leaned forward, wrapped his mouth around Harry’s cock, the look on his face was almost—almost reverent. Oh God, Harry thought then, I’ll never recover from him this time.

He’d played a dangerous game with himself, and he was about to lose. Hard.

Harry couldn’t look away. He catalogued every single detail of the moment—the overwhelming, sweet, woody smell of the chicory root from his potions kit by the door; the humidity and the coolness of the dungeon air making them flushed and gleaming and shivery; the curl of hair at Draco’s collar from his sweat; the distant sound of water somewhere above them; the heat of Draco’s mouth, and the chill that followed it when he slid it down to the tip before taking all of Harry in again. It still wasn't enough. He could spend the rest of his life like this and it wouldn’t come close to being enough.

“Merlin God, Draco,” he whispered, not really in any state of mind to know whom he should thank or pray to at the moment. He rather thought it prudent to cover all contingencies because he would definitely not survive if Draco decided to stop.

Draco didn’t. He worked Harry’s prick relentlessly, until Harry wasn’t sure what legs were anymore, whether or not he had any, or how he was remaining upright with or without them. Every time he got close to coming down Draco’s hot throat, Draco’s fingers would curve over his bollocks and tug a little, and he’d be stuck there, right on the edge, most likely dying. It lasted forever. It was over entirely too soon—too soon, he felt that slow build again, and the expected denial never came.

His fingers clenched in Draco’s hair. He gasped, “Draco, please—”

He felt Draco’s smile around his cock, felt Draco’s fingers curl possessively around his hipbones. One slid down, curled under his sac again and he was going to cry if Draco denied him one more time, but the finger trailed further back, and then he felt it teasing slickly at the tight hole beyond. He tensed, hovering right at the edge of climax. It didn’t occur to him to wonder where the lubrication came from. The finger slid inside him, curled over a brilliant spot, and Harry’s vision went black for somewhere between a millisecond and a year, then Draco’s tongue pressed hard against the underside of his cock and Harry lost it, pumping everything he had into Draco’s mouth, and screaming something that was more sob than English.
He locked his knees, attempted to remain upright. Draco continued to softly finger his arse, even after he’d pulled his mouth away and licked the come from his mouth.

“Fuck,” Harry breathed, mesmerised by the sight.

Draco grinned, finally removed his finger. Harry felt the loss of it keenly. He sunk to his knees, no longer able to hold himself up without Draco’s hair to hold onto. When he could finally breathe again, he took in the state of Draco’s hair (hot mess), the flush of his cheeks (very), and his lips, red and swollen from heavy use. Unbidden, that day in Slughorn’s returned to his mind, and he reflected that he’d been absolutely right about what Draco looked like after a shag.

Harry decided that he had to know precisely what Draco tasted like. He had to know the satisfaction of having Draco’s come floating around in his belly, weird as that was. He tugged him up and pushed him back until Draco fell backwards on his bed, spread out and flushed from, in Harry’s opinion, a job well done.

There was no time for messing about, so he sent a strongly-worded thought at Draco’s clothing, and they vanished themselves from his body and reappeared folded neatly in the chair by the bed. Draco’s lips parted, his teeth gleamed in the candlelight, as he grinned.

“All that wandless magic, and you use it to undress me,” said Draco.

Harry shrugged as he crawled onto the bed above him. “Nothing better to do with it.”

And then he lowered himself down to take Draco in his mouth. One day, he might bother with finesse, but for now, he’d rather bother with tasting Draco instead. Draco arched up into his mouth, his own falling open in surprise. His eyes clenched shut, and his breathing accelerated. “Harry—” he gasped out, and the sound of it was almost enough to persuade him into another go, though it hadn’t even been a full minute yet since he’d come.

Everything was amazing. Draco made amazing sounds, moved in amazing ways, said amazing things like, ‘Harry, Harry, Harry,’ and ‘Don’t you dare stop you fucking stupid brilliant Gryffindor, or I swear to Merlin, I’ll—yes!’

It was all brilliant, and Harry had to see him fall apart again, had to know that it was happening because of the things Harry was doing. He pulled away and replaced his mouth with his hand, stroking fast and hard. He propped himself up and stared at the gorgeous look of abandon on Draco’s face.

“Come on, Draco,” he murmured breathlessly. Draco’s heart was beating so fast, Harry could see it pounding beneath the skin of his neck. “I want to watch you come.”

That was all it took. Draco arched shamelessly, moaning loudly: hot liquid splashed against Harry’s belly. He clenched his abs, startled and aroused by the feeling of it. Fuck, but Draco was hot when he lost it. He watched it all play out, feeling like he’d just experienced something far greater than orgasm.

Harry flopped down beside him. He ached to throw an arm around his chest, pull him close, and fall asleep, but he was terrified, so he didn’t. He kept four inches between them, and tried not to look like a creeper by watching Draco’s face as he came down.

“Good job, Potter,” Draco murmured.

“Ah, thanks.”
Draco’s breathing deepened, and it was another fifteen minutes before Harry realised he’d fallen asleep. In Harry’s bed. Somehow, Harry knew that was not something Malfoys did. He should wake him up, let him go back to his own room so they could pretend like it hadn’t happened. Like Draco would probably want.

But Harry was selfish, really. It was a Gryffindor thing. And a Slytherin thing. And so he let Draco sleep, and watched him while he did. Severia crept in sometime later, hopping up to his open pants drawer to sleep, but still he couldn’t find sleep himself. Draco was in his bed, and Harry didn’t know how to handle that.
12. Projection

*The process of turning the base Metals into gold*

Snape found him later that night, when Harry was too wound up on Draco and Alchemy to sleep. He slid into the Caravaggio above the desk with barely a rustled robe, only the orange glow of his oil-painted lamp flicking on alerted Harry at all.

“Do mine eyes deceive me?” asked Snape. “A Potter working at Potions in the middle of the night. It’s gone four in the morning. Why are you awake?”

“It’s only twenty per cent mica schist,” Harry said, instead of answering. He’d had to do something to distract him, since sleep wouldn’t come; thinking about Draco’s stupid rock had been the method. “Another thirty-five per cent feldspar, seventeen per cent marble, twelve of basalt, eleven of biotite, and two of other bits and bobs. Only three per cent quartz. But I looked at Draco’s, and it was at least sixty, sixty-five per cent mica. Which means, he was able to transfigure a stone to a non-majority mineral, and when it reverted, it went to mica instead of feldspar.”

Severia peered into his cauldron, and wrinkled her nose at the steam coming up. She seemed to be inherently aware of the times he planned to go to the lab now, and refused to be left behind, cosy pants drawer or not.

Snape was quiet for a long time. When he spoke, he said, “What are you doing with that sulphuric acid, Potter? You know you can’t heat it more than—”

“I know,” said Harry. He cast three different stasis spells on his cauldron and a Potions-adjusted Impedimenta just in case the stasis spells didn’t hold off the explosion.

“Potter!” Snape said, alarmed. He’d moved to the back of his painting as if that would save him if acid exploded onto the canvas. “Are you mad?”

“Yes,” said Harry, peering closely at the web of wards he’d erected around his cauldron. He scooped up Severia and put her in the corner, behind another set of wards. She meowed loudly, in annoyance, but he figured if she had a problem with it, she shouldn’t be letting Peep into his rooms when he was away.

“There will be an explosion,” Snape warned.

“Come on, Professor,” Harry said. “I haven’t exploded anything in weeks. You said I’d get to explode something at least every week.”

“It wasn’t an advert, Potter; it was a prediction, based on your previous level of potions aptitude!”

“Well, I want to explode this. Sorry.”

“You are making me ill,” Snape declared, turning away in overdramatic disgust.

Harry pursed his lips. He glanced at him long enough to show his disinterest before returning to his
wards. He might be stupid enough to create a huge explosion, but he wasn’t stupid enough to risk hurting his kneazle. Snape could always find another painting to haunt if it came down to it.

“You’re a painting.”

“And yet your particular brand of nuisance transcends death and canvas.”

“You’re going to be so jealous you never thought of this while you were alive,” Harry said.

“Potter,” Snape growled. “You are truly magnificent. I’d once thought that you could not be surpassed, and I was right. You cannot. But you have surpassed yourself, today, and I am a vindicated man. I am ready to die now. When I reach Hell, and I meet your father there, I will greet him, and I will say, ‘Potter, I taught everything I knew to your son, little Potter, and he nearly became a Potions Master. But your genes won out, stubborn as they were, and he’s dead now. He blew his stupid fucking head off in a pointless explosion!’”

Snape was still ranting in the background as Harry threw a ward up over his frame.

“Stop this at once!” Snape said. “I’ve taught you better than this stupidity.”

Harry grinned. “Nope. You’ve taught me enough to know why this is brilliant.” He’d lain awake for hours, watching Draco breathe, and turning this over in his mind, tracing out every possible outcome, every possible route. Abruptly, Harry lowered the flame.

Snape paused, interested despite himself. Hesitantly, he returned to the front of the painting, peering down into the cauldron below. “At a slow, red fire, Calcination will occur,” he observed. “You are within degrees of it.”

“Yep.”

He fished Draco’s gneiss from his pocket and levitated it to his cauldron, wrapping a protective spell around it to prevent acid from touching it just yet. The flame was still orange, not quite cool enough for his purposes. He lowered the heat again until it was a sulky, red smoulder. He released the levitation spell on the stone and it sunk below the surface, untouched.

Snape sneered. “Potter, do you know what will happen if you let that sulphuric acid remain heated too long? It will—”


“Then what are you doing, you imbecile?”

“Calcination,” Harry said, watching intently. He bit his lip, waiting for the wards to change colours with the process. “There are minerals in there that act like flux. I figured it out when Draco said the stone had reverted to mica instead of feldspar. It’s not just metamorphic. It’s polymorphic. All the gneiss around here, in Scotland, it’s like...it’s like it wants to change...all the time. It’s going to calcinate, Professor...like organic things.”

By the end, even Professor Snape was interested, and they watched the cauldron, almost unblinking. Harry was tensed with excitement and anticipation. This was the first step, he thought excitedly. This was the secret beginning of the Magnum Opus.

It was hours later before the wards burst bright red, signalling the level of calcium oxide had reached the threshold Harry set. There was a rustle of fabric from Snape’s frame, and Harry knew he was just as antsy as Harry now, even if he’d never say it. Harry approached the cauldron, carefully peered inside. Through the red haze of the wards, he could see what was left of the stone
floating on top of the acid in it’s little protective bubble.

He exhaled in a rush. It was dusty, powdery white, and in the middle, a bright, clear pile of quartz crystals. Purified by fire, as Alchemists had sought to achieve for millennia.

“Sulphur burns blood-red, at high enough heat,” Snape said then, and Harry nodded because, yes, he knew that. He’d read it last year, when he first began the insane mission of taking up Potions for life.

“The Philosopher’s Stone was blood-red, too,” Harry said instead.

“I remember,” Snape said, and for once, his voice was quiet, though no less intent than it ever was. Harry wondered, briefly, if Snape had ever attempted to reach the elusive Third Degree of Alchemy, as only Nicholas Flammel had ever done before, or if he’d been satisfied being a Second Degree Alchemist forever. Harry could not imagine Snape ever being satisfied with less than perfection, but likewise could he not imagine Snape trying something so foolhardy as this.

“I’m going to drop the shield around the quartz and ash,” Harry warned him. “Be ready to run to another frame if the wards around your frame start to shake.”

It was a testament to Snape’s curiosity that he only nodded, instead of lambasting Harry for how incredibly, Gryffindorishly stupid this was. Just to be safe, Harry picked up Severia and put her outside the room, in another warded pen, before he returned, took a deep breath, and removed the localised *Protego*.

The potion hissed dangerously. Harry added another couple of wards, suddenly unsure of his spellcasting for the first time in his life, and then, before he could change his mind, raised the heat on the burner as high as it would go. The flame soared upwards, burning red then orange then yellow, and still that wasn’t high enough. The hissing grew louder and louder, and the reddened wards trembled under the great pressure.

Harry bit his lip. In for a knut, in for a galleon…or quite possibly his life. He swished his wand, and the flames burst white hot and then blue. The cauldron began screaming with pressure, but it still wasn’t hot enough.

Pushing everything he had into the spell, he slashed his wand upwards, and with it, the room went blood-red and blindingly bright. In the distance, Harry heard Snape exclaim, but he didn’t have time to think about that as the first ward around the cauldron tore open and a gale of heat and wind and magic slammed out in all directions.

Harry was thrown backwards, his wand falling away somewhere, and had barely enough time to call out, ‘*Protego!*’ before he struck the wall. His body jerked with the impact, even with the shield charm around himself. He slid to the floor as the bright red light faded from the room.

Harry lay there, panting and chilled from the sudden loss of heat. The classroom was eerily quiet. He pulled himself to his feet, and winced. His wrist was definitely broken, and he was fairly certain his ankle was, at the very least, sprained. A glance at Snape’s frame showed it to be intact, though the scene was faded now, and had a reddish tinge. Snape was not in sight.

He limped over to the cauldron, breathing heavily.

“You’re alive.”

Harry exhaled in a rush, looked gratefully up at the portrait. Snape was back, not destroyed by the explosion. His expression was blank.
“Yeah. My wrist is broken, though.”

Snape did not seem overly fazed by this. His gaze cut downwards, into the cauldron, and his expression remained unchanged. Harry was almost afraid to look. And then Snape looked back up at him and Harry felt his heart pound frantically at the careful neutrality shown there.

His eyes sunk closed for a moment, and only afterwards, when he’d calmed himself, did he look down into the cauldron. The acid was gone, all consumed in the transformation. What was left was an oddly-shaped stone: milky, ashy white in the centre, and sharp, bright, blood-red outside.

“Dissolution,” said Snape, quietly.

Harry nodded, unable to speak. In his cauldron, in this makeshift lab, only corridors from where Draco slept, there now sat the beginnings of the Philosopher’s Stone.

He, Harry—second only to Neville in Potions ineptitude—had completed the first two steps of the Alchemical process. Absurdly, he began to panic. He looked, wild-eyed to Snape, and found that Snape was still looking back at him with that same thoughtful expression. Harry couldn’t look away. For the first time, he desperately wished Snape was still alive, because this was intense and profound and significant, and he needed to know that someone understood the magnitude of what had just happened, and maybe sleeping with Draco earlier hadn’t helped at all because this entire day was quickly becoming too much, too overwhelming, and Harry had no idea what to—

The door opened. Draco came in carrying Severia. “Harry,” Draco bit out. “It’s six in the fucking morning. What the fuck are you—”

Harry looked at him, terrified, and not knowing why. All of the sudden, the pain from his wrist and ankle were too much. Or maybe it was just too much seeing Draco again and not having Draco be bitter about sleeping with Harry or falling asleep in his bed, but instead about Harry not being there when he woke up.

It was just too much altogether. Harry fainted.

-x-

Madam Pomfrey clucked. “I thought we were passed this, Potter.”

Harry scowled at his swollen wrist. It wasn’t fair that he was being refused a quick healing because she wanted to lecture. “It was an accident. My apprenticeship involves conducting experimental potions. Explosions aren’t unusual. I took standard precautions.”

She clucked again.

Draco sneered, and said, “At six in the morning, without letting anyone know where you were?”

“Genius waits for no man,” Harry muttered. “Besides, Professor Snape was there the whole time.”

“And you!” Pomfrey said, turning on the man now occupying the watercolour seascape behind Harry’s bed. He’d never seen the professor look quite so pastel. “I’m surprised at you, Severus. This behaviour I expect from Potter—”

“Hey!”
“—But not from you,” she finished sternly. “Is the entire world going mad? Letting an apprentice experiment with potions at indecent hours, when no one would know they were missing at all if something happened. He could have died from some, some…” She waved a hand about, searching for a word, “fume. It’s a blessing Malfoy was up early to check on a Transfiguration project…”

“I’m sure,” Snape said, bored. Harry craned his neck to look up at the painting. Even upside down, he could see the arch look Snape was shooting Draco.

“Can someone just please fix my bloody wrist?” Harry said. Where was Hermione when you needed her? Australia.

They all turned to look at him. He crossed his arms, gingerly, and stared them down. Finally, Pomfrey exhaled in a rush of air, and removed her hands from her hips long enough to set his wrist. It snapped, literally, back into place, and Harry managed to withhold everything but his initial yelp of surprise, but Merlin fuck had that hurt.

Draco eyed him dispassionately, the evil wanker.

Madam Pomfrey moved down to his ankle and prodded about much more than was necessary, before she repaired the ligament and siphoned off the bruising. Harry bit his lip the whole time, but refused to let any of these people hear him make one noise of pain. He had his pride after all.

Finally, he was released, and Draco condescended to escort him up to the Great Hall for an early breakfast. Only a few of the students were up by this time and none of the staff. They climbed up to the head table and Harry flopped into his usual chair, exhausted.

He was just digging into his eggy toast when Draco said, “So. A Philosopher’s Stone.” His hand disappeared into his robe pocket, and when it reemerged, he was holding an oddly-shaped, blood-red stone. Harry blinked at it. He’d almost convinced himself that it had all been a hallucination brought on by the explosion.

“Not quite,” he said. “It just a red rock right now.”

Draco lifted one eyebrow, and returned the stone to his pocket before any of the students could see it. “This is why you wanted that gneiss.”

“Yeah.” Obviously.

His mouth flattened. “This is our project. Why didn’t you take me with you?”

Harry stilled. Were they really going to have this conversation? Was he really going to have to say that thing that was hovering between them, unspoken? “You were sleeping,” he said carefully.

Maybe it was Harry’s imagination, but he thought Draco’s cheeks pinkened. What would he have thought, waking up naked and alone in Harry’s chilly dungeon room? Relief, Harry had expected. But now he wondered: had it really been disappointment?

“Why weren’t you?” Draco asked.

A pregnant silence passed between them, with Draco looking perfectly collected, if annoyed, and Harry thrashing about in panic somewhere in his head. Finally, when it had gone on too long, and Draco still hadn’t relented, Harry admitted: “I had too much on my mind to sleep.”

Draco finally looked away, busying himself with pouring himself a cup of tea and only then
stirring in the milk. Posh git. “You were right,” he finally said. “About the catalyst, and the opposites, and balance. Have you always been clever?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Yes, Malfoy,” he said patiently. “I’m not stupid, just lazy.” And largely influenced by Ron during my developmental years, instead of by you.

Draco nodded, accepting this easily. “What was different about this one piece of gneiss? The explosion woke me up, so I know it was big. Could have easily been fatal, if not for your annoying magical strength. So, death or near-death is apparently required to make an object that gives eternal life. It’s macabre, but it’s balanced. Why that particular stone though?”

Harry froze. A thousand puzzle pieces were slotting into place. He searched his memory for any instance of another wizard having a crow Animagus, and came up with nothing. That didn’t necessarily mean anything, but, well, he and Hermione had read lists of hundreds of animals that other people achieved when they became Animagi during that lonely Christmas without Ron.

And because half of Harry was a crow, he’d seen the way crows saw. He’d watched little dead things crawl all over Draco, who was fully alive in a way Harry hadn’t been since he was eighteen months old.

“The beetle,” he said. “It walked on that one, and it changed it. It made it…I don’t know. It made it alive, or not-dead at least. I think it took away everything that was deathly about it, and made it amenable to life.”

Draco looked at him like he was mad. He probably was. “What beetle?”

“The spirit beetle,” Harry said. “In the forest, they were all over you, but they weren’t interested in me at all.”

Alarmed, Draco said, “What?” He started looking all about himself, as if they were still on them.

Harry shook his head, still trying to process everything he’d just realised. “They were spirits, and they followed you the whole time. Remember—remember when you were in my head, and I was showing you how to transform? They were everywhere, those little blue spirits. Did you see them?”

Draco nodded, eyes wide. “Potter, what are you saying?”

“I didn’t know until that day in the forest, but I can see them now, even when I’m human. They were all over the forest, and all over you. You had runespoores around your neck and dead thestrals nuzzling your hands. They were so attracted to you. And I know why now—because you balanced the magic. They were wholly dead, and you were wholly alive, and when they were near you, everything balanced. That beetle, it crawled over the gneiss, trying to get closer to you, and you noticed it as soon as it did. I thought at first that they were going to hurt you, and I didn’t want to scare you, so I got you away and didn’t say anything. But they weren’t going to hurt you. They helped, if anything. The beetle took everything deathly about you into itself so that you’d be better able to balance it, and it did the same to that gneiss. It was purified, and that’s why it was capable of being transformed into the Stone.”

Draco blinked at him. “Fuck, Harry.”

“Malfoy, stop swearing at the head table, for Merlin’s sake,” said Neville, sitting down beside
Harry.

They both jumped, startled. Harry resumed eating his eggy toast. Neville struck up a conversation about the upcoming Quidditch draft, and Harry nodded along, but inside, his heart was pounding. Draco’s hand came and rested on his thigh, squeezing reassuringly. Inside his head was a repeating exclamation of nonsense because Draco was touching him not at all like a mate.

He looked over at him, and just knew he looked stupid and startled. But Draco smiled at him, a little silted at first, like he was unused to the expression. Unfortunately, it did nothing to reassure Harry at all. Only made him realise that he really super loved Draco’s smile, and he would be desolate without it.

-x-

“Separation is the third operation,” said Draco, from the floor. His feet were propped up on the hearth, toes flexing in the warmth. The stone tumbled slowly in the air above him, catching the firelight and refracting it all over Harry’s sitting room. Somewhere behind him, Severia was making noise as she tried to catch the light.

“It’s the letting go,” said Harry, who was feeling rather more philosophical after the intensity of that morning, with the explosion, and Draco touching him in a non-sexual way.

Draco hmmed at that, and they were quiet for a bit longer, until he said, “It’s cloudy in the middle. Impure.”

Harry nodded, though Draco wouldn’t be able to see it from this angle. “How do we separate it from the quartz?”

Draco frowned, reached up and tapped the stone with his wand. It emitted a soft, even hum that resonated all through the room. “You’re right…” he said, wonderingly. “I’ve never seen red quartz before, but it’s definitely resonating like it.”

“It’s the sulphur,” said Harry. “I saw it before it transmuted. It was crystal clear.”

“We need to destroy the impurity, and then reconjoin the quartz with the calcined ash. What destroys things?”


“Panacea,” Draco murmured. His toes stopped flexing. “It’s incorporated during this step.”

“Oh,” Harry breathed, realising something entirely different. He rolled to face Draco, and Draco copied the movement. For a moment, it felt like this was normal, and usual, and something that Harry could depend on. This was the part where he became his own Alchemy, where he understood the beauty hidden in the transformation. Separation was when all the components created during Dissolution came apart and expunged what they didn’t need, to make themselves pure and ready for Conjunction, free of inclusions and elements of dis-ease. It was the letting go, and the making ready. And for Harry, it was when he finally, finally accepted that love didn’t just go away, and it wasn’t awful, and he could let it overwhelm him without letting it destroy him.

“Heat can remove inclusions,” Draco said. “If we heat it again, it might destroy the cloudy parts.
He leaned in and kissed Draco, and Draco let him. He made a needy sound in the back of his throat, and Harry rolled over on top of him, exploring his mouth again. He pulled away after a moment, long enough to say, “You’re forgetting, Draco. We don’t want to destroy the bad parts. We have to encourage them. **Balance.**”

Draco pulled back, scrunching his nose distastefully. “I feel like you’re trying to tell me something.”

“I’m more than just a Potions prodigy, Draco,” Harry said airily. “I’m a man of Philosophy, as well. You’re going to have to deal with it.”

“Oh?” said Draco, nipping at his lip. “Why is that?”

Harry lay down on top of him, pressing his ear to Draco’s chest and listening to his rapid heartbeat. “Because if I wait long enough, you might fall in love with me, too, and then you’re going to realise that I’d never hold you back or try to cage you, and you’re not going to want to leave me, either.”

Draco exhaled in a rush, but the denial Harry half-expected never came. Instead, they lay there quietly, and Draco’s heartbeat didn’t slow down for a long, long time.

-x-

**Dear Harry,**

*Mum wanted me to write and see if you were coming to the Burrow for Christmas this year. Well, she wanted me to write and *remind* you that you’re coming, since we both know that no one else really has a say in the matter. I’ve got a couple weeks off and Lavender’s coming with. I have something I want to tell you, so maybe we could meet in Diagon this weekend for Christmas shopping?*

*I sent an owl off to Hermione, but I guess she’s still in Australia?? It’s been two weeks, already. I thought she and Malfoy had that spell sorted before they left. Anyway, Mum made me invite Bulstrode as well because I guess they connected over Celestina Warbeck, of all things. So if you and Malfoy are talking again, I reckon you could bring him. Dad said something nice about how “upstanding” he seemed at the Ministry trial over the summer, and that got Mum in a tizzy over “what a fine, young man” he’s apparently become. It makes me want to sick up.*

*Anyway—see you at the Leaky on Saturday? Say, around noon?*

*Ron*

-x-

Ron was wearing a Weasley jumper, but it had a large B knitted into the front, instead of an R. Harry grinned as he wound his way through the pub from the floo. Even making a decent salary, Weasleys had a way of upcycling unlike any other. Harry supposed that with all the training, Ron didn’t fit so well into his old jumpers anymore.

He noticed Harry’s approach and waved happily. “It’s Bill’s,” Ron said, upon catching Harry’s smirk. “I figured it was better than wearing Charlie’s, since my middle name starts with B, you know?”
“Right,” Harry said, grinning. They stared at each other awkwardly for a moment, and then Harry couldn’t take it anymore. He threw his arms around Ron and hugged him, not at all concerned with how gay they looked. Ron hugged him back, which was an even bigger surprise.

It was here, a week before Christmas, that Harry realised his platonic marriage to Ron was never in danger at all, it was just that there’d been a different sort of piece missing, one that Ron couldn’t ever fill, and Harry needed both him and Draco. They might have difficulties, but any friendship did, and it wasn’t fair for him to compare Ron as a child to Draco as a man. Seeing Ron now, wearing his brother’s Weasley jumper in public, without so much as a blush, showed just how much his self-esteem had grown, and now…well, now, Harry was pretty sure that Ron wouldn’t be worried about coming in second to the Boy Who Lived, either.

“It’s really boring without you,” said Ron, when they pulled apart. He finally noticed Harry’s robes, and snorted. “Merlin, you look just like Snape. Bloody hell, are you ever going to cut your hair? Tell me you aren’t growing it as long as Snape’s.”

Harry recalled the way Draco had threaded his fingers through it just that morning, and decided that Ron could bugger off if he didn’t like it. “Maybe just to my shoulders,” he said.

Ron snorted again. “Whatever, mate. Listen, I need to get something for Ginny and George.” He wrinkled his nose. “Mum’s making me get Percy a present, too. He’s coming for Christmas this year, and she’s going nuts trying to make sure everything’s perfect. I was thinking of regifting that colour-coded planner Hermione gave me in fourth year.”

Harry perked up. “Oh, maybe I can give him the one she gave me. Two is always better than one, right? I was going to chuck it in the fire, but I always felt guilty every time I was about to do it.”

“She’ll be pleased it got a good home,” Ron said, hopefully.

They stopped at the broom shop first because—well, because they were young, Quidditch-obsessed men, not to put too fine a point on it. Harry stared in awe at the new Firebolt model, which burst into real flames when flown. He decided that he’d had quite enough of flying through fire for one lifetime, regardless of the declaration: ‘Guaranteed safety spells on every model!’

Ron bought himself a new tin of broom wax, and they wandered a bit, having no idea how to choose presents for friends and family, even after years of practise. Harry picked up an Arithimantically-aligned broom compass for Millicent, for lack of any better idea.

“This really isn’t my speciality,” Harry admitted, after another fruitless hour. “Maybe we should start with Hermione.”

They headed to Flourish and Blotts without requiring any discussion, but the shop was huge, endlessly filled with books and people, and one step inside the door had them both quickly backtracking. “Maybe we shouldn’t get her a book this year,” Ron suggested.

“Agreed. What else does she need?”

“Dunno,” said Ron. “Maybe one of those fancy Dicta-Quills so she can finally write that bloody book about the Hunt for Things That Cannot Be Named.”

Harry laughed, but it was still a good idea. “Brill. You get her that, and I’ll get her one of those Easy-Edit writing journals.”

That sorted, they moved on to various and sundry Weasleys. He and Ron ended up going in together on a Precise Prose Quill for Percy because they were sort of expensive and Mrs Weasley
would’ve been really miffed if they’d actually regifted old homework journals to him. He’d be really pleased with it, Harry suspected, since they edited everything one wrote with it to be as dry and academic as possible.

Harry picked up some new Quidditch gloves for Ginny and an indestructible cauldron for George, who, Ron said, had recently destroyed his last one with a new prototype. He’d have to muggle London for Mr Weasley, who he’d recently decided definitely needed a PlayStation and that new Dance Dance Revolution game. It was more a gift for Harry, really, since he desperately wanted to watch Mr Weasley playing it. He’d picked up a fishing net with a dreamcatcher woven into it for Luna and a pack of rare seeds for Neville. He had two overflowing bags worth of sparkly toys and kneazle-nip for his little munchkin, Severia. He’d even got Millicent something.

“What should I get your Mum?” Harry asked, scrunching his nose.

Ron shrugged. They walked passed a haberdasher, and he said, “A knitting pattern?”

All things considered, Harry thought with a sigh, that probably wasn’t a bad idea. He pulled Ron into the shop and they looked around, identical grimaces on their faces.

“May I help you?”

Harry cleared his throat. “Have you got any…erm, I don’t know. Fancy patterns? Or yarn? Or…something?”

The shop witch raised wild, grey eyebrows. “Who are you shopping for, dear?”

“My Mum,” said Ron, and gestured helplessly at his grey Weasley jumper. The B was done up in a flourish that waved about like a flag in the wind.

“Ah,” said the witch, knowingly. “Come with me, I’ve just the thing.”

Fifteen minutes later, he and Ron exited the shop, confused and vaguely disturbed. Harry had never realised how deep knitting could get, nor did he think he’d ever wanted to. Yet, he was pretty sure that Mrs Weasley would like the bright yellow flying yarn, and Ron had picked her up a new set of non-clinking knitting needles. He had no idea what one knitted with flying yarn, but the witch had assured them both, with a disturbing wink, that Ron’s Mum would know.

After that, only Draco was left, and, Harry reckoned, for Ron, Lavender. He had absolutely no idea what to get Draco. He was poncey and elitist so clothing was right out since Harry would never have good enough fashion sense to get something he liked. He had even more money than Harry, so expensive nonsense was out, too. Since he was terrified of entering Flourish and Blotts, it was a ‘no’ to books as well. What did he like? Quidditch. Transfigurations. Potions. Harry—probably, sort of. Sex? Maybe Harry could get him flavoured—

No. Merlin, no.

What else? He definitely liked being free. Harry grimaced just thinking the word. What could he give him that would show Harry didn’t want to stifle him?

“What’re you getting Malfoy?” Ron asked, somehow reading his thoughts.

It startled Harry enough that he couldn’t hold back the shocked, “What? How did you know I’m getting him anything at all?”

Ron shrugged. “Aren’t you? You’ve picked up something for just about everyone else, and you’ve
not talked about him at all, even when I mentioned Hermione saying he helped her out with her Animagus form. That’s weird for you. You always have an opinion on Malfoy.”

“Yes, but…what?” Harry said again. “When did you get so perceptive?”

Ron blushed. “I just thought you were friends with the pasty git, is all.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “Right. Yeah. We are. I don’t know what to get him.”

“If it were me,” Ron said, “I’d get him a one-way portkey to Antarctica.”

Harry snorted, unable to prevent the laugh that burst forth. He had no desire whatsoever to send Draco to Antarctica, but…well, maybe there was something in that suggestion. Something completely different from what Ron intended. Harry diverted back to the Quidditch shop. There was, in fact, something Harry could get him, something that he wouldn’t be able to get on his own, something that would hopefully show Harry had no intentions of caging him.

The shop owner looked pleased when he and Ron re-entered. Harry approached the desk, and, inwardly cringing, tossed his head casually, to flick his overlong fringe away from his forehead. He could practically feel Ron’s eyebrows soaring up.

“Mr Potter,” the man said, beaming. “What a pleasure.”

Harry smiled, as charmingly as he could. “Are you selling tickets for the World Cup this summer?” he asked.

“But of course!”

Harry grinned, leaned forward conspiratorially. People always liked when they felt like Harry Potter was giving them special attention. “How about private seats down with the English National Team?”

The shopkeeper whistled. “There are a few here and there, I’ve heard, but they aren’t really for sale to the general public, you understand.”

“I just want one,” Harry said. “For my friend. Kilgore’s his favourite player. And if you can get me in contact with whomever I need to talk to, or help me get one, I’ll buy my next broom from your shop, and I’ll let you pick which one I get.”

The shopkeeper’s mouth hung open for a moment, and then he snapped it shut. “I know the captain this year,” he said. “I’ll write him, and see what I can do.”

Harry beamed. “Brilliant. If you can help me get tickets before Christmas, I’d be really grateful. I can be reached by owl, anytime. Whatever I need to do.”

“I’ll do my best, Mr Potter. Merry Christmas.”

Harry waved, and he and Ron returned to the street. A light snow had begun to fall, and it stuck to Ron’s hair, which was kind of fetching, Harry could admit, in a completely bromancey sort of way. Ron was fit, but he was not Harry’s idea of fit. After so much exposure to red hair, he’d rather desensitised himself to the appeal.

“Just one?” Ron asked. Harry was grateful he chose to ask about that instead of the fact that Harry had just used his name to try and score something that regular people couldn’t get. He still felt sort of sleazy about the matter, but Draco was bloody hard to shop for. “Who’d want to go to the World
Cup alone?”

Harry smiled to himself. “Draco would.”

“Draco,” Ron repeated, slowly.

Harry shrugged. It would be a testament of exactly how much Ron’s perception really had improved if he figured it out.

Much like the shopkeeper, Ron whistled lowly. “Merlin, Harry,” he said. He stared at him, eyes wide, and nearly walked into an old witch carrying a little basket of dissected slugs.

“Yep.”

Ron faced forward again. They carefully didn’t look at each other. “Well,” Ron said.

“Yep,” Harry repeated.

And that was all that was said on the matter. Ron cleared his throat. “I suppose this is a good time to bring up Lavender,” he said.

“Oh?” said Harry. They were still carefully not looking at each other. Matters of the heart were entirely too much to bear when they were about your best mate. It was gross, frankly.

“Yeah, I already got her Christmas present, you see.”

Harry had a feeling he could guess where this was going, but when Ron pulled him to the side, into the mouth of an alley, and fished into his pocket, Harry realised he hadn’t really been prepared at all. Ron snapped open the little box, displaying it carefully close to his body, Auror instincts making him wary of unscrupulous people who might try to mug them for it. The ring was sparkly, and big, and…bright. Merlin.

“It’s ruby,” Ron said nervously. “She likes those, ‘cause they’re red. And the, the erm, halo—that’s what the jeweller called it—those are amethyst. I picked those because they’re the colour of lavender. It’s a bit, well, loud, but Lavender likes that sort of thing, you know? You think she’ll like it? Merlin, I should’ve gone with something more traditional, like emeralds and sapphires, but—bugger it all. Harry. Say something.”

It took Harry a moment to find his voice. And not because the ring was red and gold and purple, but because he’d just realised that his best mate was planning on getting married, and Harry had only got off with another person for the first time a few weeks ago.

“Mate, she’ll love it.”

It was, after all, overwhelmingly Lavender.

Ron exhaled in a rush, slipped the box back in his jeans pocket. “Good. Okay. Brilliant. I—I just wanted to make sure. I felt like I couldn’t do it, until you gave me an idiot check. I trust your opinion, you know? Even if you’re rubbish at women.”

Harry felt warm all over, despite the snow. “Getting better at men, though.”

Ron scrunched his nose; all his freckles merged together for the duration. “Right, well. Why are all my friends gay?” he then wondered, as they made their way back towards the other end of Diagon. “First you, and now Hermione’s gallivanting off with Millicent Bulstrode. And Slytherins at that,
the both of you. It’s not right, Harry, the things you put me through. I’ve been imagining a hundred years of Christmas dinners with Malfoy ever since we left the broom shop, and Harry, it’s not a pretty sight. Are you sure you’re up for it? With his colouring, he’s going to be a right eyesore at a hundred-twenty. All that white.”

Harry laughed, and shoved Ron with his shoulder. “I’m sure, I think. No red and purple rings, though. Besides, I’m bisexual, really. Remember Ginny? And Cho?”

“Ugh, how could I forget? Disasters, all around.”

They had dinner at the Leaky, and Ron paid. It was only as weird as Harry let it be, since Ron didn’t seem to give it a second thought. This, too, was like Separation, Harry thought. They’d taken their friendship, and sorted out all the diseased parts, and left only what was healthy and good. Now if only he could figure out how to replicate it in the lab.

-x-

Narcissa wrote Draco on Sunday. Harry watched the big, grey eagle owl land daintily in front of the coffee carafe in the staff room, where McGonagall was debriefing the first year apprentices on the end of their Yule term. Severia and Peep jumped up, batting at its tail, and Harry was embarrassed that his kneazle had picked up such annoying habits from such an annoying cat. He swept her up, sending McGonagall a guilty look, and settled her in his lap for vigourous petting.

“Malfoy, personal mail afterwards,” McGonagall said.

“Yes, Headmistress.”

“Now, as we approach the last days of Yule term, I remind you all, once again, of the necessity of maintaining your studies during the holiday. It wasn’t all that long ago that apprentices weren’t allowed to leave their masters and mistresses for more than a day at a time, in order to ensure maximum knowledge retention. Don’t make me regret the leniency that Hogwarts extends you, in the name of holiday goodwill.”

She eyed them all sternly. Everyone watched her back, somewhat more warily, except for Luna, who was twirlry her wand in the air in front of her, eyes glazed, focused somewhere in the middle distance. Peep wound all around Neville’s legs, leaving white fur on his brown robes. Hermione and Millicent still weren’t back, and Harry was beginning to worry that this Christmas was going to be a repeat of last year’s.

“When you return, do remember that you will begin the second phase of your apprenticeships, and the rigour of your studies will increase significantly. You will begin teaching the first year classes of your chosen subject, under supervision. You will be evaluated at the end of the Eostre term on your knowledge of the subject and the students’ success in your class. This is on top of your requirements for meeting your Master’s prescribed curriculum and satisfactorily completing your inter-subject project. This is, I will be frank, the time when most apprentices decide that they are unsuited to a lifetime of academia. If you make it through next term, I have every confidence that you can achieve your Mastery. But do not take this holiday as a chance to slack off. Use it to get as far ahead on your studies as you feasibly can. You will sorely regret it if you don’t.”

“Well, that was uplifting,” Harry muttered to himself, as they all filed out. Severia had fallen asleep, and now he was relegated to being her transport. She nuzzled against his robes, and didn’t
leave any fur on them, unlike white cats, who would not be named.

“The truth is always uplifting, even when it’s not what you want to hear.”

Harry jumped, upsetting Severia’s nap. “Luna.”

“Hello, Harry,” she said. “Are you going to the Burrow for Christmas this year? The Weasleys invited my dad and me. We’re very excited to try Christmas goose; it’s such an unusual culinary choice for a holiday, don’t you think? We always have spaghetti. It’s much more festive.”

“Definitely,” said Harry, who rather liked spaghetti anytime.

She beamed at him. “I got you a Christmas present. I think you’ll like it more than your boggart.”

Harry paled. “What do you mean?”

She looked at him funny. “Well no one really likes their boggart, do they? But they do typically like Christmas presents.”

“Oh, right,” he said. “I got you a present, too. I think you’ll like it much more than your boggart.”

“That’s great, Harry. My boggart is myself without any friends, so as long as you don’t give me that, I’m sure it will be wonderful.”

Well, that rather put a damper on things. *The truth is always uplifting, indeed*, he thought wryly.

Draco swanned out then, clutching his letter in his hand. “McGonagall gave me three extra assignments for the holiday,” he said. “I suppose I should be grateful that I won’t have an excuse to fuck around, but really—”

“Language, Malfoy,” Neville said. He tipped his head towards a gaggle of second year Slytherins, snickering at them, as he passed by. They were all trying not to look scandalised, while in fact being exactly that.

“Merlin, you’re like my mother, Longbottom,” Draco muttered. “Hello, Lovegood. Have you seen that nargle nest on the fourth floor bannister?”

Luna’s eyes lit up. “You saw it, too! I fed them yesterday. Well—see you at Christmas, Harry, Draco.”

When she was gone, Harry lifted an eyebrow at Draco. “You’re brilliant for being nice to Luna.”

“I’m not nice,” said Draco, as if the very idea were insulting. “But there really is some sort of nest up there. I think it’s mutated doxies, unfortunately.”

Harry chuckled, and they began the short walk to his rooms in the dungeons, of mutual accord. At his portrait hole, Draco stopped and waited instead of going in, and Harry’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Not going to open the door?” he asked.

“It’s *your* rooms, Harry,” Draco said, rolling his eyes. “I’m a guest. You’re so neanderthalic sometimes.”

“Right,” Harry drawled.

Severia shifted in her sleep, stretching out as if she owned the place—the place being Harry’s arms—which she probably did. But Harry had a feeling they were both trying to pull the wool over, so
he set her down on the floor. She blinked sleepily at him for a moment, and then, with whatever the cat-equivalent was to a shrug, she pressed her front paw to the portrait. The gentleman in the Botticelli reached down and scratched at his canvas by her cheek. She obligingly rubbed against it, mewed once, and the portrait swung open.

Draco smirked at Harry over his shoulder as he swept inside, navy blue robes fanning out behind him, not at all unlike Snape’s. Damn it, Harry had worked hard to copy that billow with his own robes, and it wasn’t right that Draco could do it, too, and probably better.

Once inside, a kitchen elf brought tea and, weirdly, spaghetti. Harry shrugged, and dug in, as it was going on suppertime anyway. He clumsily swirled spaghetti around his fork as he watched Draco pop open the seal on his letter and scan it with a furrowed brow.

All this time, he thought at Severia. The little beast really had been opening the wards for Draco—or was it the door, not the wards?

“Are you a squib or not?” he asked, in some exasperation. She stared up at him from the floor, patiently waiting for him to give her some of his wizard food, which was no doubt better than kneazle food. Her eyes narrowed at the question, but she didn’t deign to reply.

Draco made an annoyed sound, and tossed the letter in the fire. When Harry caught his eye, he was scowling. “What?”

“My mother’s going to Greece with Pansy’s mother for Christmas. I hate Greece. All that…sun.”

Harry snorted. “You could come to the Weasleys with me. Ron invited you, sort of. Hermione and Millicent will probably be there, too,” he added, trying to sweeten the deal. It was a lost cause though, and he’d really only mentioned it because Gryffindors like to explore all hopeless options. He swirled up another bite of spaghetti, but nearly choked on it when Draco spoke again.

“Okay.”

Harry stared at him. Draco transfigured his into penne, a much more manageable pasta, but smirked again at Harry when Severia popped up into his lap and delicately took a saucy piece from his fork.

“Always a good idea to make friends with those who can be useful to you, Potter, whether they be wizard or kneazle. Don’t you think so?”

Harry shot his traitorous kneazle a baleful look as he swirled his own spaghetti around his bowl. Transfiguring it was a brill idea, but he’d be damned if admitted it. “Okay?” he repeated, just to be sure.

Draco shrugged, but suddenly seemed uncomfortable. “Yeah, fine. Look, I was thinking about the Separation and Conjunction bits. Uncle Sev made that healing potion in third year, the one that worked on everything he tried. He didn’t try it on one particular thing, though. It was always too dangerous.”

“What thing?” asked Harry, for now, allowing Draco his shady sidestepping. He had a feeling he knew the reason for it, and it made him want to explode like a bad potion. Or a good potion, maybe, considering Harry’s fondness for explosions. It was a lot more difficult to open one’s heart up in the light of day—or whatever approximated it in a dungeon beneath a murky lake.

“I was thinking about this book I read on legendary potions that summer. There was once a time when the word Poison wasn’t generic. It was the name of the first potion that killed everything,
always, and no one ever found an antidote to it. Then all the other potions came after it, and were
called things like Liver Poison or Blood Poison, and it became so ubiquitous that it lost its original
meaning: Universal Poison.”

Harry’s head echoed with a wordless sound of excitement. “The opposite of Panacea?” he said.
Draco smirked. “Think so, maybe.”

“Where would we find that? Surely the recipe’s been lost or destroyed by now.”

“Then it’s a good thing I saw a bottle of it locked up in Uncle Sev’s personal supply room a few
years ago.”

Harry chewed on his lip, thinking. “Is Miguela using the same one as Snape used?”

“She’s using his student cupboard for classes, but his personal store was connected to his rooms,
and those are still unused.” He smirked again. “McGonagall couldn’t break the wards, or convince
the castle to betray the wards of a former headmaster.”

“But Snape likes you,” Harry said. “And I’m pretty sure he sort of likes me now, too, since he’s
been calling me ‘moron’ instead of ‘Potter’ a lot lately. You think he’d let us in?”

“Maybe,” said Draco, but then his expression shifted to something like worry. “I think it would
really depend on how much he trusted you not to kill yourself with it.”

Harry deflated. “He half-expects me to kill myself brewing Pepper-Up for Madam Pomfrey.”

Draco made an annoyed sound. “We’re going to have to ask. And hope that his curiosity as an
unfulfilled Alchemist will outweigh the value he places on your life.”

“Oh, that’s no problem,” Harry said. He hopped up. His spaghetti bowl disappeared, leaving
Severia mid-lick against air. “Let’s go find him. He’s probably skulking near Hufflepuff. He likes
to stalk the first years from frame to frame when they leave the Den after dinner for the library.”

Draco eyed him strangely. “It’s really odd that you know so much about Snape’s habits, given your
history.”

Harry dismissed this. “Nah. It says a lot about us, I think. I’m in a constant state of war with
myself, about whether I want to impress him or make his portrait life as frustrating as possible, so
we tend to keep tabs on each other.”

-x-

They found him near a group of second year Hufflepuffs on the opposite end of the dungeons, and
Harry tried not to feel annoyed at the hero worship he received from the students for saving them
from the discomfort of Snape’s escort.

“Still alive?” Snape said, pushing an old wizard aside as he entered a quaint domestic kitchen
scene.

Harry decided to dangle the carrot close. “Maybe not for much longer, if you can help.”

Snape rolled his eyes. “Don’t be pert, Potter.” Then his curiosity overcame him, and he said, “What
are you planning?”
“We need your Poison, Uncle Sev,” said Draco. “With the capital P.”

Snape’s eyes widened. “Absolutely not.”

“But, Professor, it’s not like you need it anymore, and we’ll be really careful.”

“McGonagall would have me burned if you killed yourself.”

Harry scowled. “I’ll wear my dragonhide gloves, a ventilation mask, safety glasses, and lab robes. It’ll be perfectly safe.”

“Accidents happen, Potter. Especially with Gryffindors. Do you not understand that there is no antidote? If you accidentally ingest any of it, you will die. Probably painfully. I can’t say that I ever had reason to confirm that theory, but it is an educated guess.”

“But there might be an antidote after we study it…”

Snape was interested again. The academic in him would always win out over silly things like ethics. “Panacea?” he asked lowly. Harry nodded, and Snape glanced around, trying to see from his frame if they were alone in the corridor. “Draco, you told him about my work?”

“Yes.”

Snape scowled. “Alchemy will be the death of us all,” said Snape, as if he weren’t already dead. He fixed his eyes on Harry. The paint glittered with his anger and his curiosity. “We can’t discuss this here. Meet me by my rooms.”

He disappeared from the frame and Harry turned to Draco, beaming. “He’s going to do it.”

“He hasn’t given in yet,” Draco said.

Harry shook his head, still grinning. “You don’t know him as well as you thought, Malfoy. He’s given in.”

Then he snagged Draco’s hand and took off running, forcing the other man to follow. They made it to the other end of the dungeons in short order, but Snape was already tapping his painted foot against the painting over his door. It echoed weirdly, as the painting was completely subject-less, and in fact, completely colourless: It was 3x6 feet of black oil paint. Slytherins could be so paranoid sometimes.

“Draco, don’t touch anything. I’m afraid I can’t adjust the wards to you at this point. Only my sworn apprentice can handle anything without painful repercussions. Now, Potter. I am going to let you into my rooms, and you are going to behave yourself. You will not rummage through bookshelves. You will not swim through pensieves. You will come in, shut the door behind you, and tell me what the fuck you are thinking.”

Draco sat stiffly on the settee, and Harry slumped into what he suspected had once been Snape’s favourite armchair. The sconces had flickered on as soon as Snape unlocked the door for Harry and Draco to enter, and a fire lit in the hearth. Not a bad set of rooms, really. Lots of potions books, obviously. There was probably three years’ worth of back issues of *Ars Alchemica* stacked on the floor by the settee. It sent a weird chill down Harry’s spine.

“It’s all about opposites, Professor,” said Harry. “They create the Azoth. Every Alchemy needs an Azoth.”
“Potter, whatever the Azoth was is lost to history, or can you not comprehend that Alchemists have been searching for the catalyst throughout history, and Flamel never told his secrets?”

“It’s change,” said Harry. “Two opposite things have to take on the characteristics of the other, like when those texts wrote about sulphur becoming mercury. Sulphur was stagnation and mercury is constant flux; when they become one another, the Philosopher’s Stone can be created.”

“We still don’t know how to create that change, though,” said Draco. “And I don’t fancy the idea of you drinking Poison in order to find out.”

“I won’t be drinking it, honestly,” Harry said. He frowned. He’d spent way too much time around Hermione without Ron to temper it, recently.

He wondered if Snape had continued living down here during his tenure as Headmaster, or maybe if he’d come down here to get away from the utter rot that was his life those last few years. He wondered if he’d been reading the—yes, that one on top was the May, 1998 issue—when he realised Harry entered the castle, and the battle began.

Feeling macabre, Harry picked up the top magazine. The cover story was titled, ‘Un-Love: Eleven versions of Amortentia from eleven different countries, and the one ingredient that changes in every culture.’ The magazine’s spine was bent open in the middle of the article, as if it had sat that way for a year and a half.

“Potter. I told you not to touch anything.”

“Did you ever finish reading this article?” Harry asked.

Snape frowned, said nothing for too long past comfortable. “No.”

Harry bit his lip. “Do you want me to read it aloud for you?”

“No,” Snape said, but Harry wondered if he might’ve got a different response had Draco not been with them. There was a certain pride among Slytherins, and perhaps among godfathers and godsons. He tucked it away in his robes anyway.

“Look, Uncle Sev, are you going to give us the Poison or not?”

“What will you do with it?”

Harry didn’t bother to look up from the stack of magazines. The February, 1997 issue had a really stirring account of what one experienced upon ingesting both a flame-retardant potion and an ever-lit match. Merlin, what people would go to in the name of research.

“We’re going to pour it over the stone,” Draco answered for him. “And then I’m going to transfigure it.”

“Into?” Snape asked. Harry could practically hear the raised eyebrow.

“The opposite of universal poison, obviously,” said Draco. Harry smirked. Now who was starting to sound like Snape? Or maybe, Draco was starting to sound like Harry sounding like Snape. It made him feel warm and happy and also a little disturbed.

“Obviously,” Snape said. Harry heard his robes shifting. “Draco—you will make sure that Potter wears all of the safety gear?”
“Of course,” said Draco, scandalised. “Do you honestly think I’d risk Potter’s stupid arse when the Ministry is just looking for a reason to have done with Mum and me like they did Dad?”

Harry frowned down at the page, and did his best to seem invisible. Draco liked his stupid arse well enough the other day. But what really concerned him was the other bit. Would the Ministry really try to kill Draco and Narcissa?

Well, more reason to make this bloody stone. Then let them try to fuck with Harry’s love.

“Potter.”

Harry looked up. Snape was regarding him soberly. “I will say this only once, and you will never repeat it to anyone.” Harry nodded. “I will give you this Poison for this experiment, not because of your whining, but because you have shown yourself to be an…excellent Potions student since embarking on this foolhardy journey. I have been surprised at your talent, and your restraint. Do not make me regret this. I do not wish to spend eternity in a frame with you. I have enough to deal with avoiding Dumbledore.”

“Brilliant!” said Harry. “You’ll undo the wards for me?”

Snape huffed, as if being in Harry’s presence for too long was unbearable. Harry was quite sure it was, for him. “Yes.”

He disappeared from his frame (the interior one was also solid black) and Harry heard movement behind the first door down the hallway. It clicked open a moment later, and blue-green light filtered out against the smooth stone floor. Harry pushed it open carefully, and stood momentarily speechless, staring at the array of carefully sorted potions and exotic ingredients, shimmering under the highest quality Everlast Stasis spells. There were unicorn hairs as brilliant as if still attached, and dragon teeth still glistening with saliva, and auroch tails as fresh as they were when they went extinct. Harry had never seen such a beautiful sight, other than Draco, of course.

“It’s there,” said Draco, coming in behind him. He tipped his head towards the corner where Harry couldn’t, at first look, even see the bottle behind the glare of wards. They were so thick and fierce that the excess of magic exposure made him nauseous as he got closer.

Draco grabbed his wrist. “Harry. Put on your gloves, idiot.”

Harry pulled them from his pocket and slipped them on, then did up his robes and cast the appropriate safety spells over them to make them lab-standard. He figured he should probably not just walk the halls carrying a vial of live Poison, so he looked about, and found one of Snape’s travel bags hanging from the door.

“Goggles, Potter. I’ll release the wards when I’m satisfied you’re protected. You will take the phial, and return immediately to your lab. I will reset all the wards here and meet you there.”

Harry nodded. “Right.” He’d forgotten his safety glasses, of course. He could have kicked himself. He’d been doing so well, and then at the first sign of excitement or danger, he bollocksed it all up.

Draco cleared his throat. Harry turned to to find him holding out a pair of top quality glass goggles.

“Thanks,” Harry breathed, and slipped them on. Snape finally dropped the wards, one by one. The vial became more visible as each layer fell, until finally, it was just a normal bottle with a cork lid and wax sealing. Harry picked it up and slipped it carefully into the travel bag. “Let’s go.”
His hands were shaking from adrenaline by the time he and Draco got the doors locked and wards up around the classroom. He’d never felt so wound up before, not even when he’d… not even when he’d died.

He’d had Animagus meditation to guide him through then. Now, he didn’t have anything.

“Bugger it,” Harry muttered, and set the bag on the work table before turning away.

He slumped down the wall until he was sat upon the floor, and propped his arms up on his knees, needing the moment to get his head on again. “Poison,” he murmured to himself. Then repeated it, “Poison, Poison, Poison,” until it didn’t seem like a real word anymore, much less something that would kill him quicker than Avada Kedavra.

Then the trembling lessened, and finally subsided. He took a deep breath, feeling suddenly exhausted, probably mentally. Draco was standing in front of him, frowning severely.

“You don’t have to do this.”

Harry grinned at him, wryly. “If I don’t, then you’ll just do it yourself.”

Draco looked away, and that was all the confirmation Harry needed. He shrugged. “Probably. Slytherins and greatness, you know. It’s bred in.”

Harry smirked. “Whoever said Slytherins were cowards, I wonder? You lot’ll do anything for your name in a book.”

Draco sneered, and turned away. “Only if it’s a good book.”

Snape arrived then, in the red-tinted Caravaggio. “You’ve secured the room?”

“Of course,” said Draco.

Snape nodded. Everything about his countenance was tense, alert. Like a deer listening for the hunter. Harry might’ve thought he was just afraid as they were. “Outline the procedure for me, Potter. I want to be certain you’ve thought this through.”

Harry did so. Snape did not seem overly reassured by the process or the fact that Harry had indeed come up with a thorough plan, but he didn’t tell them to stop, which was probably about as good as could be expected.

“Begin then,” he said, and settled in to watch, his eyes intent.

Draco suited up to help, and soon they were both standing over a cauldron with the stone and the Poison laid out before them. Harry hesitated. “I was going to use distilled water, since it’s the purest, least reactive base, but…” He trailed off, frowning. It just didn’t seem right. It felt too easy. How many other Alchemists had attempted the very thing? Using the purest base to give the stone the properties of eternal health?

“That won’t work,” said Draco, biting his lip with one of his canine teeth. Harry stared at it, mesmerised. “We don’t want to neutralise it or destroy it, and the water might do that.”

“Aqua fortis,” said Harry, and nodded once, more to convince himself than to convince Snape or Draco. It was the best base for separating and refining, and that was precisely what they wanted to
do: separate out the diseased, cloudy areas, and refine the stone into one of pure ‘health’, without,
somehow, discarding the cloudy bits. Which meant they would first have to make it a stone of pure
disease, and then transform disease into health. Merlin, what a mess.

“Right,” Draco said. He summoned Harry’s stash of the stuff from his kit. It started bubbling as
soon as he tipped it into the cauldron, and they both stood back, small frowns on their faces, as
they waited for it to reach a suitable temperature range.

It didn’t take long. It seemed to Harry that both their bodies tensed further then.

“Shall I put in the stone?” asked Harry. There was a part of him that would probably always want
Draco’s opinion on a delicate potion. It was the part that remembered who’d truly shown Harry
how to love potions like Draco did. Their hands were pressed against the table only inches apart;
Harry slid his over until their little fingers touched, and felt more confident from that tiny touch.

Draco sighed, frustrated. He summoned Harry’s copy of the *Emerald Tablet* and began flipping
through the pages. Harry’s eyebrows shot up. He’d not used his wand for that. “Fuck, I don’t
know.” The cauldron chirped to alert them that the heat was rising too much, and the pressure of
making a decision snapped him out of his indecision. “Stone in first,” Draco decided.

Harry levitated it in, careful not to splash. It didn’t react to the aqua fortis at all, and after a
moment, when all was still pacific, Harry reached for the Poison. “There’s about five ounces of
the stuff,” he said. “I reckon we should save at least one ounce so we can reverse brew it. You know,
in case we ever need it again.” Like in case they bugged up this stone, somehow.

“Two ounces,” Snape suggested. “I am not certain, but given that you’ve used one-half litre of base
and the stone looks as though it will displace about 30 millilitres of water, that is the amount I
would use. Add it slowly.”

Harry nodded. He set up a tiny ward around the vial and used his wand to slowly peel off the wax;
he wasn’t certain what would happen if the heat from melting the wax off touched the Poison.
When all the wax was gone, he set his wand aside. There was no good spell for summoning out the
cork top—not without jostling the vial, anyway.

There was nothing for it; he’d have to do it manually, like any other potion. He reached into the
ward, and grabbed the Poison. His dragonhide gloves were too slick—it nearly slipped out of his
hand at first.

“Potter,” Snape said tightly. “Do not kill yourself.”

“I’m trying,” Harry said, voice as tense as his shoulders. Draco made a pained noise, and stepped
back. He couldn’t get a good grip on the cork; the gloves were too stiff. “I’m going to have to take
off this glove. I can’t grab the top to pull it out.”

“No!” said Draco. “Are you mad?”

“Obviously,” Harry said. “I’m trying to make a Philosopher’s Stone.”

“Potter, that is out of the question.”

“Well, what the hell do you two expect me to do then? I’ve been scrabbling at this fucking cork for
five bloody minutes, and I can’t even get a good grip on it. It’s in there tight, and it’s not coming
out with an *Accio*, even if I was stupid enough to try one. I need to pull it out, and I need to take this
glove off to grab hold of it. So, untwist your fucking knickers and get the fuck out of the way,
because I’m going to do it.”
Snape snorted, disgusted. “I hope you’re watching this, James Potter. This is your goddamned son.”

“I’ll bloody well tell him myself if this kills me,” Harry growled, even as he was shaking his right hand to wandlessly banish the glove to the table.

“Harry, this is really stupid,” Draco said neutrally. “This is, in fact, one of your stupider ideas. And recall that you willingly walked to the Dark Lord, so there are many contenders for stupidest-shit-done by you.”

Harry eyed him narrowly. He was well-past being in the mood for this. “Back off, Draco. And put up a bloody shield charm.”

Draco did so, but made sure everyone knew he was furious about the whole thing. The angrier Draco got, the quieter he got. And he was practically breathing the words by this point. A shield charm flew up between Harry’s outstretched hands and the two men.

He took a deep breath, wrapped his fingers around the cork, and pulled. It popped free. The liquid inside sloshed dangerously. Harry held his breath. It didn’t spill over. He released his breath in a rush, and carefully set the cork aside, inside-up.

“Scourgify my hand, please, just in case,” he said. “Then can you help me get that glove back on?”

Draco did so, and once both hands were re-gloved, Draco retrieved the jigger, and Harry carefully tipped in one ounce of Poison. Draco poured it into the cauldron, and they repeated the action with a second ounce and Harry recapped the vial. As soon as the second ounce was in, the ingredients began to react violently. Harry had barely enough time to jerk Draco away before the entire cauldron began to hiss and steam.

“Now the sorting spell,” said Harry, exhaling in relief. “To separate out the impurities.” He was getting rather good at this spell. Ever since Snape first assigned him the task of locating the spells that would identify, quantify, and separate out minerals in a composite, it felt like that one assignment had changed the entire course of his life.

He cast the spell, and the hissing stopped. The steam evaporated at once. The room was left in a deathly, echoing silence.

“Did it work?” he asked.

Snape peered down into the cauldron as best he could. “I cannot tell.”

He was just going to have to check himself, then. “Okay,” he said. “Shield spell again?”

Draco obliged, and once it was firmly in place, Harry approached the cauldron. He half-feared that as soon as he peered over the edge, it would blow up in his face. It didn’t. He looked into the cauldron.

Inside, there were about two litres of pure, crystal clear water. No aqua fortis at all. “Holy shit.”

Draco came over then, and looked in. “It’s water…”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “The nitric acid from the aqua fortis…it released the hydrogen and oxygen molecules that make up water.”

“Where’d the rest go? The nitrogen, right?”
Harry nodded absently, still feeling somewhat dazed that his separation spell had worked on a cauldron full of molecular fucking compounds. It was insane. It was amazing. “A nitrogen and another oxygen would’ve been left. I think they got absorbed. Look, there.”

He pointed to the centre of the cauldron, where their red stone sat on a pile of something like sludgy sand. Both the stone and the sand looked sickly and dull. “It’s combined with the Poison and the impurities.”


They both looked to Snape for confirmation, and found him staring back intently. His mouth was parted slightly; he didn’t even seem to realise he was doing it. Suddenly, he shook his head, once, as if disbelieving his own thought. “It’s Separation,” he agreed. His voice rasped oddly. He cleared his throat, added, “I never achieved this step in the process. You have…surpassed me, in this.”

Harry’s stomach dropped. Something in those words made the whole thing seem real in a way it hadn’t before. It made it seem a thousand times more dangerous than before.

“We have to recombine them next,” Draco said, after confirming with Harry’s notes. “Conjunction.”

They had to recombine the sulphur-infused quartz, the Poison, and the calcined ash. The question was how. Harry wanted to use fire, but he had no idea what ingredients composed Poison, and that was just asking for death.

Harry glanced up at Snape. “Did you ever study Poison, when you were attempting Panacea?”

Snape pursed his lips. “Once.”

“Any idea what’s in it, then?” asked Draco, and Harry looked at him gratefully, and—inappropriately—aroused. It was so bloody hot when Draco was on the same wavelength as him. It was like they were quartz, resonating at the same frequency.

“I found traces of angel trumpet, hemlock, oleander, mercury, arsenic, antimony, lead, and thallium. However, I’d barely begun analysing it when I learned that the Dark Lord was searching for a sample of the very thing. I could not risk him discovering through Legilimency that I owned any, and was forced to put it aside. Out of sight, out of mind, as they say.”

“So, nothing too serious, then,” Draco said, dryly.

Harry closed his eyes as he thought, trying to recall everything he’d ever read and absorbed about potions making. In his head images flew by; every reaction he’d ever read about or experienced with both distilled water and aqua fortis. Then he went through all the ingredients Snape listed, and tried to remember how they reacted with one another and the two bases.

There were too many variables. Fuck. He pulled on his hair in frustration. They really needed to know what else was in that Poison, but it could take years to analyse properly. Especially when they had no idea how old it was, or if any decomposition reactions had already occurred. And now that there was live Poison out in the open, they needed to neutralise it as soon as possible.

“We’re going to have to use fire,” Harry said. “It’s the one constant in Alchemy. I don’t want to risk attempting Conjunction with any acids when we don’t know what else is in the Poison.”

Draco’s eyebrows lifted. “We’ve no idea what fire will do, either, idiot.”
Harry waved him off. He was getting a headache, and, frankly, he just wanted to go back to his rooms, tie Draco to his bed, banish his clothes, and suck him off all night, until he had nothing left to come.

“We have to do something,” Harry said. “It’s way too dangerous to be left like this.”

On that, neither Draco nor Snape could disagree, so they both just stared at him mutinously.

“Thank you,” Harry said, sneering. Draco put up the shield charm again, furiously wordless. “Incendio!”

It didn’t catch. “Incendio!” Harry said again. Nothing.

“I am afraid it will take a much stronger flame,” Snape said quietly. “I’d suspected, but…it is often best to start with the least dangerous option.”

Harry swallowed. What did that mean? “Flame whip?” he asked, hopefully.

“No,” said Snape.

Draco’s sharp intake of breath said that he’d figured it out, too. He turned and walked away, as if distancing himself from Snape’s portrait would make the facts any less true. He shook his head, blond hair flying.

“No,” said Draco, but his voice was hoarse when he said it, and Harry knew exactly—exactly—what he was feeling then.

“I can’t stop Fiendfyre,” Harry whispered. “I don’t know how.”

“I do,” Snape said, “but it is not easy.” He sounded like the words were being pulled from his mouth like teeth, every syllable painful and unwanted. He was dead, and even he was frightened of it. Perhaps fire became even more terrifying when one was highly flammable paint and canvas, though he’d not seemed at all bothered by Incendio.

“Fuck,” Draco said. “Fuck.” He was pulling on his hair, little blond strands coming out in his fingers, and all Harry could think of was the feel of Draco’s horrified breathing against his neck, and the stomach-churning sounds of Crabbe dying, and the ten sharp bruises on his waist that had taken four weeks to fully disappear.

“Professor, there has to be another spell.”

“If there is,” said Snape, “I do not know it.”

“We could burn the whole bloody castle down.”

“Ward the doors,” said Snape.

“And trap ourselves in!” Draco said. “Are you mad?”

“Fine, Draco!” Snape said. “Do as you wish! Carry the fucking Poisoned stone around in your fucking pocket if you so desire. It is your life...at least for the brief second between when your skin touches it or breathes in its dust and when your entire nervous system disintegrates between your bones.”

Draco shuddered, and retreated to the corner of the classroom.
Harry glared at the portrait. “How do you end the spell?”

“It can only be performed wandless. Wild magic does not respond to wands.”

Harry nodded. He could’ve figured that himself. “And the incantation?”

“None,” said Snape. “Pure will. You must destroy it utterly. It will take everything you have.”

He laughed humourlessly. “Of course.” He turned around. “Draco, go out. I’ll get you when it’s over.”

“Fuck off, Potter,” Draco said, and stayed right where he was.

“Bloody hell, Draco. I want this fucking well over with. I’ve got a goddamned migraine and this fire terrifies the shit out of me and I want to go to bed, but I can’t, because I’ve done something extremely stupid and dangerous, and I’ve got to fucking fix it first, so if it’s okay with you, get the fuck out so I can sort this.”

“I’m not leaving.” To demonstrate, he flicked his wand in an annoyed arc and a set of sharp, shimmering wards snapped into place. “Proceed.”

Harry could have screamed in frustration, but it was going on midnight by this point, and the last thing he wanted to do was attract the attention of students or faculty. It was at this point, however, that he realised he didn’t know the incantation for Fiendfyre.

“I’ll do it,” Draco said, like he was Harry’s very own quartz.

He didn’t have the energy to argue anymore. He needed to save everything he had to stop this hateful spell before it grew too big. The memory came to him, of his visit to the Room of Requirement during eighth year. It was still burning. If he couldn’t stop it this time, they would burn forever, too.

Draco slashed his wand, murmured an incantation that Harry was grateful he couldn’t hear. The cauldron immediately lit up in furious gold flames. The fire screamed.

Draco made a pained sound. Harry took his hand, and squeezed hard. Had the stone Conjuncted again? It should’ve made a sound like glass cracking under pressure, but it was hard to hear it over the screaming. They took a couple of steps closer, legs trembling from adrenaline.

Behind the flames, Harry could make out Snape’s portrait, and the man himself staring avidly at the reaction. The flames had nearly reached the ceiling now, and Harry had no idea if Conjuction had been achieved yet, but if it hadn’t they would find some other way, because he could not stand to be in this room with this fire another second.

He closed his eyes. His feet were grounded firmly. He pulled, and his magic came, rushing up from his toes and surging into his fingers. He threw it at the cauldron, and the fire swerved backwards at the impact. When it steadied again, it was half as tall, but it had noticed them now, and the flames reached out for them, calling their names, screaming and writhing.

As one, they jumped back, and Harry stumbled against one of the rickety, old student desks. Draco grabbed him before he could fall, and they turned to face the Fiendfyre again.

“Again, Potter!” Snape yelled.

Harry nodded. His face was bloodless, but the heat was so great that he was sweating. He pulled up
his magic again, and shot it towards the burning cauldron. It was prepared this time, and only another third of its flames were destroyed. Harry could barely breathe from his terror, and it was not helping his concentration at all. And he was tired, physically and magically. He tried calling up another blast of magic, but the attempt left him dizzy and disoriented.

He stumbled forwards, and the Fiendfyre reached out. He watched, dazed, as hellish fingers curled towards his face, seeking life and soul. He’d almost welcome it at this point, he was so tired.

And then Draco yelled, and jerked him backwards, away from the flame. He swung his arm, and a burst of fierce, white light shot from his fingers, and slammed into the cauldron. It flung it from the table, into the wall beyond. The sound of iron clanking against stone rang through the room petrifyingly loud.

When it stopped reverberating, the fire was gone, and the only sound was Draco’s furious panting.

Harry pulled himself to his feet. Dizzily, he stumbled into Draco, and was immediately crushed within his arms.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” Draco whispered.

“What?” Harry croaked.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” he repeated. “Don’t you fucking die, you stupid, idiotic, half-witted twat.”

Harry swallowed, nodded. “Okay.” Draco’s arms tightened momentarily, and then released him. He remained upright through sheer bloody-mindedness.

He approached the upended cauldron warily. The lip was deformed and melted. Harry kicked it away, and it clanged as it rolled over the stone floor.

Beneath it, the stone sat smouldering.

It was re-compressed into a single, snitch-sized, blood-red stone. It was beautiful and translucent, but it was still Poisoned, and even Conjunction had not fixed that. Even Fiendfyre had not fixed that; or maybe, that was precisely what was supposed to happen.

-x-

-Harry-

Mill and I are taking the 7am international portkey out of Sydney on Friday morning. We have stopovers in Jakarta and Cairo, then we’ll take the 3pm to London, assuming we don’t get delayed at Customs. We’ll floo directly to the Weasleys from Arrivals; could you have the elves pack up our things and bring them with you? I’m bloody knackered, and we haven’t even left yet. Don’t forget Peep. I know he’s a little shit, but Mill will kill me if you leave him behind. See you soon.

-Hermione-

And not a bloody word about whether they’d fixed her parents or not.
Ron opened the door when they and Luna apparated into the Weasleys’ back garden, already beaming; Ginny right behind him. His smile barely faltered when he saw Draco standing stiffly behind Harry, trying to hold a terrified Peep as far away from his dark-coloured robes as possible. Severia and Crookshanks, for their parts, sat cleaning their paws, and behaving, on top of Harry’s levitated trunk. As it turned out, Luna also had a cat: a yellow tom, named Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore-Grindelwald, which she abbreviated to Alperwu.

Ron scrunched his nose. “Merlin, it’s like a cat carnival.”

Mrs Weasley’s voice came drifting out. “Is that Harry, Ron? Let the boy in! He needs to eat!”

“Better come in, then,” Ron said. He opened the door wider so they could float their trunks in.

Mrs Weasley launched herself at Harry as soon as he was through the door. “Oh! You’re skin and —” She paused as her hands reached his shoulders. “Well! I’m glad to see they’re feeding you up there. Oh, and here’s Luna. Dear, you look as lovely as a raindrop. Your father tells us that you’ve really impressed Filius with your work.”

Luna handled the hugging with much more ease. Even her cat wound its way about Mrs Weasley’s legs during the event. Then she was passed off to Ginny, and the two disappeared up the stairs, chuckling about who knew what.

“How are you liking your studies, Harry? Arthur and I expect great things from you, young man. A cure for lycanthropy perhaps?"

Nothing too strenuous, then, Harry thought wryly, but refrained from saying so. “Snape lets me brew Pepper-Up sometimes, when I haven’t blown my eyebrows off recently.”

Behind him, Draco snorted. It attracted Mrs Weasley’s attention, and then she was off, wrapping him, too, up in a hug. He met Harry’s eyes above her head, and he looked bewildered and faintly terrified.

“Better get used to it, Malfoy,” Ron said, chewing on an apple. “This is your life for the next three weeks.”

“Come in, come in,” Mrs Weasley said then, bustling Draco off to the table. “You’re entirely too thin, Draco. We were just finishing lunch. Have a mince pie. Or do you rather yorkshire pudding? There’s leftovers from last night.”

Draco was silent and uncomfortable. Harry took pity on him and sat down beside him, sliding the mince pie halfway between them. It was entirely too much for either of them separately as it was not a normal-sized mince pie, but might do well enough if they split it. Harry smiled at him from beneath his lashes as he took a bite, and it seemed to relax Draco enough to follow suit.
In the few days since the Fiendfyre, Draco had been unnervingly quiet and introspective. He spent most of his day working on his Transfigurations research on the other end of Harry’s settee. He’d narrowed his eyes at Harry anytime he mentioned going to the lab to work on his Potions projects, until Harry had given in and read through Snape’s back issues of *Ars Alchemica* to pass the time.

Slytherins might not be cowards, but it appeared that they didn’t bounce back from abject terror quite as quickly as Gryffindors.

Ron sat down across from them and began on round two. “Is that Hermione’s trunk you brought in? When’s she coming?”

“Today,” said Harry. “Her and Millicent are flooing in sometime after three.”

“Oh the poor dear,” said Mrs Weasley, wiping her hands on a dish towel. “Did she say? About, you know?”

“Nope. Nothing.” On this, Harry was annoyed. He desperately wanted to avoid another debacle like last year’s Christmas, and it was bloody hard to do that when he didn’t know what Hermione’s mood was going to be. She was too efficient with her words sometimes.

“Bugger,” said Ron. Mrs Weasley gave him a stern look. “Well hopefully she gets here before Lavender, so we can at least get that sorted.” He grimaced. “I suppose I’ll ask Lav not to come if it turns out for the worst.”

“What a sweet girl, Lavender,” Mrs Weasley said, mostly to herself. She returned to her cooking.

It was Christmas Eve, and she was in a fine mood. The kitchen smelled delicious, and it was torturous to smell—as much of it was only prep-work for tomorrow’s Christmas dinner, and therefore unavailable to Harry at present.

The hearth was half-full of bubbling cauldrons, and when Mr Weasley flooed in from work, he barely missed landing in the bread sauce.

“Happy Christmas Eve!” he said, stepping out.

He ruffled Harry’s hair as he passed, and stopped short at by Draco, who’d only recently begun to untense. “What’s this, a new face! Happy Christmas—good heavens, you must be the Malfoy boy.”

“Yes, I am,” said Draco, stiffly. He held his hand out, though it looked as if it pained him to do so. “Very pleased to meet you.” It was the most he’d spoken altogether in three days.

“Likewise,” Mr Weasley said, not missing a beat.

Ron grimaced into his pumpkin juice, but, on the whole, was faring rather better than Harry had expected. It was either Christmas spirit, Auror training, or the fact that he’d invited Lavender, and he didn’t want to open himself up to return fire.

They retreated to the living room shortly after; Harry pulled Draco aside when the Weasleys had gone through, and said, “You okay?”

Draco’s mouth was set firmly, but he nodded once. “I should’ve gone to Greece.”

Frankly, Harry was surprised he hadn’t, but he’d never been one to look a gift thestral in the mouth. “Well, I’m glad you’re here,” he said. *With me*, he didn’t say.
Draco glanced away, very briefly. When he looked back, his expression was neutral again. “As long as Millicent shows, it’ll be fine.”

The Celestina Warbeck started up then. Harry and Draco shared a mutual grimace.

“You can tell yourself you came because of the project,” Harry said, smirking a bit. He was desperate to unravel the tension between them, but he had no idea how. He was tired, and sort of regretting ever being so pretentious as to assume they could do Alchemy, and complete the Great Work.

Draco rolled his eyes, and turned towards the living room, but stopped when the floo flared to life. There was a startled yelp and a clanging sound that sent Harry’s heart into overdrive, as memories of a cauldron full of Fiendfyre roared through his mind. He turned at once, already calling his magic forth, and flipped his hand, sending a spell to stop the gravy cauldron before it tipped over; Hermione’s travel bag had knocked it swinging.

“Oh, thank Merlin,” Hermione said, stepping out. “I’d forgotten about the limited hearth space at the holiday. Oh, Millicent’s coming next, bugger.” She floated out the two most cumbersome cauldrons, and held them aloft while the floo activated again, before replacing them, once Millicent had exited.

“Thank fucking Merlin, you’re here,” Draco whispered. Neville would’ve been pleased with his progress of not swearing so loudly in public.

Millicent wrinkled her nose. “Draco, you look vaguely terrified. Have the Wasps lost Kilgore to Puddlemere?”

Draco scoffed. Harry was certain he was the only one who saw through it. They would never hear an iron cauldron clang again without seeing that demented fire. “As if she’d play for such a boring team.”

The living room door opened and Ron stuck his head back in. “Hermione!” he said.

She squealed, dropped her things, and ran to hug him. Neither of the Slytherins seemed to find this at all tasteful, judging by their expressions.

“Well?” Ron asked, when he’d sat her on her feet again. Harry froze. “How did it go?”

Hermione took a deep breath, and then her face broke out in a grin. “It worked! Millicent figured it out! They’re bloody pissed off, but they remember me, so who cares? They’re flying in for Christmas to stay for a week. They’ll go back to Australia for another few months to get their practise in sorted, but then—”

“Hermione!” Mrs Weasley said, coming in. “I just heard the most unladylike things coming from your mouth, young miss! What’s got into you!”

“My parents remember me, Mrs Weasley!” Hermione said, beaming, and not at all bothered by the chastisement. Mrs Weasley’s face crumpled, and she held out her arms for Hermione.

“Oh, thank heavens!”

Harry took Draco’s hand in the chaos. No one was looking, and he could risk this little pleasure, he figured. “There’s still time for Greece, if you really want to.”

Draco’s eyes were fixed on the scene before them, which, now that Mr Weasley and Ginny had
entered, resembled an attack of redheaded piranhas over a bushy-haired chicken bone.

“Think I’ll stay,” he said. His hand squeezed Harry’s once, then released.

The loss of contact left Harry feeling a little bereft, but it was nothing compared to the soar of contentment he’d felt when Draco’s fingers willingly meshed with his. He stuck his hands in his pockets, to keep himself from being tempted, and curled his left hand over the stone. It was fever-hot, even through all the indestructible wards.

He liked having Draco here. It felt like Conjunction, and he thought that maybe this was just as real an Alchemy as the stone in his pocket. Whether or not it was safer, was yet to be determined.

-x-

On Christmas morning, Harry woke to the streaking orange glow of a Cannons chaser zooming around on the poster on the ceiling. Which wasn’t surprising, since he’d fallen asleep to the same sight, not six hours ago. He groaned, and rolled over, shoving a pillow over his head to block out the nuisance.

Grey eyes were looking back at him from the cot adjacent. It was too early for reasoning skills; Harry couldn’t tell if the glint in them was amusement at his predicament or murder premeditation. Ron snored on, oblivious to all.

“Morning,” Harry whispered. His voice was croaky, but he really didn’t care. This was, in fact, the first time he’d ever woken up next to Draco. It didn’t even matter that they were in separate beds. It was the best Christmas present Harry could have ever received.

Draco’s hair was mussed. It looked far too fetching to be fair. His nose scrunched as he tried to fight off a yawn, and lost. “Morning,” he said, just as quietly. “I had a nightmare that the Cannons won the league.”

Harry grimaced. If that happened, then there would just be more promotional material made, which would likely end up equating to more *Lumos*-in-the-dark posters. “Merlin help us all.”

They stared at each other. It felt like eighth year, with Draco on Neville’s bed, when they were friends reaching across a brief divide to shake hands. Harry reached out and Draco took his hand. He laced their fingers together and let their hands fall to hang between their cots. “I still choose you,” said Harry.

Draco smiled, bit his lip.

“Boys!” Mr Weasley knocked on the door. They dropped their hands; Harry sighed. The knob turned and Mr Weasley peeked in. “Happy Christmas,” he whispered. “Ready for breakfast?”

“Be right down,” Harry said. “I’ll wake up Ron.”

Mr Weasley lifted his eyebrows at that, as if to say, ‘better you than me,’ and slipped out of the room. Harry rolled out of bed and pulled on a shirt. It was Ron’s, but that never stopped him before.

“Up you get, mate,” Harry said, prodding Ron’s ribs with one icy-cold toe. Ron moaned sleepily, and rolled over. Harry prodded him again, this time with all five icy-cold toes. This time, Ron yelped, and sat straight up. Harry grinned at him. “It’s Christmas.”
“Brilliant!” said Ron, as if he hadn’t been sleeping two seconds before. He was up and dressed faster than Draco.

Downstairs, Ginny, Hermione, Luna, and Millicent were already crowded around one end of the table, sorting out waffles and eggs with aplomb. Charlie was in from Romania with a very rakish-looking young man, whom he sleepily introduced as Claudiu. Breakfast was long and drawn out and pleasant. By the time George arrived with Angelina shortly before eleven, Draco seemed to have relaxed again. Every now and then, when no one was looking, Harry reached for his hand and held it for a few seconds.

They had a pick-up game of four on four Quidditch after lunch. Millicent was a ferocious beater, and even though they’d never worked together before, she, Angelina, and Ginny, performed as if they’d always been on the same team. Harry, Draco, and Charlie were perhaps at a disadvantage, since all three of them had only ever played seeker and Claudiu had never played competitively, but it was still good fun. Even though Ron and the girls creamed them. Repeatedly.

Bill and Fleur flooed in an hour before supper, and sat in the garden with Hermione and Luna to watch them play. Harry was exhausted by that point, and they were really doing little more than flying about and half-heartedly tossing a quaffle among them. But Draco had relaxed significantly, and it was worth the sore thighs and fingers for that.

Inside, Mrs Weasley served them all a mince pie and mulled wine. Harry and Draco took theirs and sat cross-legged in front of the hearth in the living room, trying to get warm after four hours in the cold. Their knees touched, and that, more than the fire, warmed Harry’s insides.

“It’s so lovely to see gaps being bridged,” said Mr Weasley. He smiled beatifically at Millicent and Draco. Perhaps he’d got into the wine somewhat earlier. “Really captures the spirit of Christmas.”

Harry shifted uncomfortably. So far, they’d been able to mostly avoid this conversation by mutual agreement, especially given that Mrs Weasley had issued the invitations to begin with. But with wine came truth, and all that. It was, Harry reckoned, bound to come up sooner or later.

“I admit I’m surprised to see you here, Draco,” said Bill, watching him closely. He sipped his mulled wine.

Draco’s face paled. “I—”

“I’m glad, though,” Bill interrupted. He smiled. “It’s good to have you.”

Draco deflated. “Thank you.”

And just like that, it was over. Harry let out a relieved breath. Around them, conversation picked up and carried like a warm hum over the living room. Harry sipped his wine, warmed his fingers by the fire, and felt the tension draining from his shoulders. He loved the Weasleys. He even loved Ron. How could he’ve ever thought he didn’t?

It seemed that it was only minutes before the floo activated again and Lavender stepped out, followed by her mum, who was carrying a huge plate of pies and pasties. The quiet murmur of sleepy, happy voices changed to something much louder and more exuberant when she ran to hug Ron, and began chattering happily about all the things she’d been doing during her time off from the Aurory.

Then Percy arrived, and then came Andromeda with Teddy. Hermione apparated out briefly, and returned by floo with the recently restored Mr and Mrs Granger, fresh off their flight from
Australia. They were uncomfortable for only a few minutes before Mr Weasley rounded them up and engaged them on the mechanics of the new television he’d acquired and made to work on magic. The Burrow was full to bursting, but Mrs Weasley seemed in her element, handing out mulled wines and ciders and eggnogs like they were going out of style. They settled down to supper shortly thereafter. It was good, and warm, and happy, and Harry felt like he’d been floating along all day, and that was a nice reprieve from the everyday stress of an apprenticeship and near-death experiences.

After supper, Mrs Weasley pushed another glass of mulled cider in their hands, and shooed Harry, Draco, and the others back to the living room for presents. Mrs Weasley got a very coy look on her face when she unwrapped Harry’s flying yarn, and Mr Weasley was ecstatic with his game. He set off right away trying to figure out how to set it up on the telly, and Harry let him have at it for a while. If he hadn’t figured it out in twenty minutes, he’d go and help. He’d got Teddy a new colour-changing teddy bear, and it was already syncing up with Teddy’s own hair colours. Hermione loved her gifts from him and Ron, and Ron was very pleased with the autographed (and Lumos-in-the-dark) poster of the Cannons’ new season team line up. Harry managed a smile for him. He’d willingly contributed to his own inability to sleep. Friendship was so difficult sometimes.

The gift Harry was really waiting to be opened, however, sat in front of Draco’s crossed legs, untouched. Harry nudged him with his shoulder. “Open it,” he said quietly.

The others were all chatting happily with one another, and he’d take any careful moment he could find. Draco glanced at him sideways, frowning. “What is it?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Open it, stupid.”

Draco frowned some more. Finally, he sighed, and reached into his pocket, pulling out a small package, which he sat in front of Harry on the floor. “You first.”

“Same time,” Harry offered.

“Same time,” Draco agreed, albeit reluctantly.

Harry took the little green paper-wrapped package from him, and was surprised by the weight of it. Shrunken, then. Only when Draco picked up the parchment envelope with his name on it, did Harry begin to peel back the paper. Inside, was a little wooden box. He flipped the lid on it and peered inside. There was a tiny cauldron, no bigger than the palm of his hand.

It was super adorable, as far as cauldrons went. He pulled it out carefully, admiring the fine details and the sturdy bottom. It must have weighed at least twenty pounds, though.

“It’s shrunken,” Draco said. Harry glanced at him to find that his blond eyebrows were lifted in a manner which suggested Harry to be an idiot. Harry tapped it with his wand, and the cauldron grew until it was a standard #2, made completely of the pinkish-grey gneiss they’d become so intimate with. He beamed. It was brilliant.

“I transfigured it,” Draco said. “To replace the one we melted.” Then he shrugged, as if he were suddenly uncomfortable, but was determined to show that he didn’t care. “I don’t know if any dead beetles have crawled over it, but I suppose it wouldn’t be a bad idea to take it out there and let one of them try. It may be useful yet.”

That, Harry thought, was a brilliant idea, too. “I love it,” he said. “Now I can brew sal ammoniac potions, too, since I’ve got handmade a stone cauldron.”
Draco grinned crookedly. He slipped his finger beneath the seal on the envelope Harry’d given him, and reached in. There was a sheet of black parchment with animated fireworks. He flipped it open. There was a single, silver-foil ticket inside. Harry heard his startled intake of breath.

“The World Cup,” he said.

“Yep,” said Harry.

He flipped it over and read the back, detailing the things afforded with said ticket. One hand reached over and gripped Harry’s knee hard. “It’s for pitch-side seating, with the team…Hermes is playing for England this year, Harry.”

“Obviously,” Harry said.

Draco turned to him. “There’s only one, though. Where’s yours?”

Harry smiled softly. “I’m not going. This is just for you.”

Draco looked away again. “Because I’m afraid of being caged,” he guessed.

Harry didn’t have to answer, but he did anyway. “I’ll never cage you. I want whatever you’re willing to give me, and if you ever want to leave, I’ll love you enough to let you go, and let this be enough.”

Draco made a short sound in the back of his throat. His fingers clenched against the edges of the ticket. He cleared his throat. “Thank you. It’s…brilliant.”

Harry beamed at him. Draco hid a smile behind his glass as he sipped on his mulled wine again. “I’ve never had this drink before,” he said. “Dad thought it was common.”

That sounded about right for Lucius Malfoy, Harry reckoned. “And now that you’ve had it, what do you think?”

Draco shrugged, and swirled his glass, sending a little orange rind spinning. “It’s…nice. My mother used to say there was life in wine. I wonder what she’d say about adulterated wine.”

“I wouldn’t trouble her with that,” Harry said. “Maybe just cast Fiendfyre on the glass to Separate out the common parts.” As soon as he said it, he stiffened. “Sorry, I—”


Harry did.

“It’s wine,” Draco whispered, a moment later. “Aqua vitae, it’s wine.”

Harry lifted his brows. Even he knew that. “Distilled wine, really.”

“Even better. It’s purified. And it’s wine; it’s fermented.” He glanced around the room, then casually flicked his wand, erecting a muffling charm. “That’s what we need for the next step.”

The next step was Fermentation, a process that started with decay and putrefaction, and ended with rebirth of the spirit, quite literally in the case of wine, and thus the reason wizards called alcoholic drinks such. It was, according to Harry’s notes, a process both metaphorical and alchemical: first came death and decay; only after it could life renew. Harry rather thought he was a living example of Alchemy, as he’d done the very thing one night in the Forbidden Forest.
The room erupted in laughter all around them, startling Harry and Draco both. Harry turned and found more than a dozen people, red faced, looking at him. “What?”

“Mum was telling them about when you and I went to Australia, the first time. And when you, you know.”

Harry flushed. “I was trying to help!”

Everyone started laughing again, and Harry could practically feel Draco’s curiosity, like it was a tangible thing. Like fuck he’d explain this one. Unfortunately, Hermione seemed to find that this was an appropriate time to get him back for snitching her Animagus form.

She grinned at Draco, and said, “He said to my dad, ‘Don’t you recognise us? We’re famous!’”

Draco snorted, bumped his shoulder into Harry’s. Harry grinned at him, reluctantly. He shrunk his cauldron and tucked it in his pocket. He had precisely the right way to break it in.

It was nice just sitting here, in front of the fire, and listening to so many people being so happy together. Mrs Brown and Mr Lovegood were having a very unconventional and robust conversation about printing with edible ink; Mr Weasley, with the help of Mrs Granger, had finally got the PlayStation working and were fumbling through their first attempt at Dance Dance Revolution. It was more perfect than even Harry’d hoped when he went out to muggle London to buy it. He could already see Mr Weasley improving and hoped in time that he would get into the really acrobatic moves, for all family gatherings.

It was really late before the Grangers, Mrs Brown, and Mr Lovegood left for their own homes. Harry, Draco, and Ron were all yawning hugely by the time they stumbled into bed. Even the stupid lit-up poster above his bed didn’t keep him from passing out, dead asleep, within minutes.

-x-

“Lavender still wears negligee to bed,” Hermione announced the next morning, flopping down on Ron’s bed, and shoving him towards the edge to get more comfortable. He groaned and stuffed a pillow over his head. “Did you know?”

“Better get off his bed,” Harry advised sleepily. “She might come in and screech at you. Does she still do that, too?”

Hermione removed herself immediately from Ron’s bed and replaced herself on Harry’s instead. Harry should’ve seen that one coming. “I don’t know,” she admitted, “but I’ve no inclination to find out. Merlin, I didn’t think it was possible to sleep five women in Ginny’s room, but somehow, it happened.”

“I’m sure it didn’t hurt that you shared a bed with Mill,” said Draco, into his pillow.

“Hello there, Malfoy. Awake, are you?”

“Unfortunately. Why are you?”

Hermione sighed philosophically. “I didn’t share a bed with Mill. We’re being respectful.” All three men snorted. She elbowed Harry in the ribs, and he stuck his head up long enough to glare as best he could without his glasses. “Why aren’t you three up yet? Lavender’s already downstairs making breakfast with your mum, Ron. Did you know this would happen?”
“I’m sleeping,” he said.

“I’ve no idea how you can with those neon quaffles zooming around on your ceiling,” she said. “Harry get up. I can’t go downstairs alone. Lavender’s making me feel inadequate, and I refuse to bow to gender stereotypes.”

“So hire a fucking house-elf to cater a full English. Then have it make me some fucking tea, since you’re determined to wake me up,” Draco said.

By this point, sleep was a lost cause. Harry briefly considered smothering Hermione with his pillow, but in the end decided that would take too much energy. He dragged the blanket off his face, and rolled to face Hermione. She looked at him expectantly. He hoped he had morning breath.

“Oh good, you’re awake.”

Apparently, not bad enough morning breath. At that point the door opened again, and Mill, Ginny, and Luna came in, all three eyeing Harry’s bed with thinly-disguised interest. Great.

“Hermione I thought you were seeing Millicent,” Ginny said.

“As did I,” Millicent agreed. She went to sit on the edge of Draco’s bed, wordlessly handed him the Sporting section from the *Prophet*.

“Harry when are you going to start seeing someone?” Ginny asked.

Harry froze. Hermione felt it, and looked at him oddly. “Oh—never, probably,” he said.

“Never?” Ron asked, finally turning his head to blear at them. He raised an eyebrow, smirking sleepily in Harry's general direction. “Why? Haven’t any fit blokes caught your eye by now?”

“I’m interested in the answer to this as well,” Draco said. His hair was mussed again. It reminded Harry of that one night, when he’d sprawled on Neville’s bed and made Harry choose him.

“Ron, Harry’s *bisexual*, not gay,” Hermione said, as if this were a conversation they’d had more than once. Harry really hoped it wasn’t. “Don’t presume he’s *only* looking at other men.”

“But he prefers men,” Ginny said. “Don’t you, Harry? That’s why we didn’t get back together, didn’t you know, Hermione? He never even wanted to have sex.”

“He’d better not have,” Ron muttered.

Hermione was staring at him again, and given she was only six inches away, it was more disconcerting than usual.

Ginny looked to Hermione as if sharing something profound, and said, “We like the same Quidditch players. It should’ve been a dead giveaway.”

“Yes, but—”

Harry groaned, and flopped back against the bed. Whatever happened to holiday spirit and all that rot? “Dexter Loupe is fit as fuck,” he said, in his own defence.

He looked to Ron for support, and Ron shrugged. “I suppose. If you like having bollocks near your face and stuff. I don’t really think I would, though. I’m grossed out enough by my own after a day in Auror training, and I know where they’ve been, you know? Can you imagine what Loupe’s
would be like after a three hour Quidditch game?"

This was entirely too much for Harry. His face felt like it’d been set on Fiendfyre.

"Potter!" The voice was muffled, as if buried beneath a pile of socks and pants, which, in fact, it was. "Potter, come here immediately!"

Was there no mercy in the world? None at all? He rolled over and reached blindly about in his bag. His fingers closed around a frame, and he tugged it out. Snape glared at him from an 8x10 canvas. "I do not want to know a single thing about your sex life, or lack thereof, Potter! Stop this at once!"

“Oh my god,” said Ginny, cackling. “You carry around Snape’s portrait!”

“Ms Weasley,” Snape said, deadly quiet. “If you would like for that incident I witnessed during your fourth year to remain clear of Dumbledore’s ears, and given his habit to gossip, the entire Ministry, then I suggest you desist.”

Ginny sobered at once. “Yes, Professor. Sorry.”

“I have to,” Harry said, glaring at said portrait. “He’s making me work on my projects during break. Do you think Snape believes in Christmas spirit?”

“I do not,” Snape affirmed, in case there were any question.

“I wish I had a portrait of Professor Flitwick to carry around,” Luna said. “He’s rather handsome, isn’t he? But he isn’t dead, so it wouldn’t work anyway. It’s okay, since he’s very easy to find when I have questions about my projects.”

There was an awkward silence. Then Draco said, “I wish I had one of McGonagall, actually. She’s not easy to find.”

On that note, Harry decided it was time to end this. He had a better way to keep Snape quiet. He rolled out of bed and offered his free hand to Hermione. “Ready to face Lavender’s cooking?”

“I suppose,” Hermione said.

Harry scrounged for a shirt on the floor and came up with a blue one that said Yes, the carpet matches the curtains, and slipped it on, though he did eye Ron with some degree of horrified curiosity. Ron shrugged, and having had enough, Harry tucked Snape’s portrait beneath his arm and lead Hermione from the room. The rest of them could sit in there and laugh at his sex life all they wanted.

Downstairs, Lavender was pouring Mr Weasley some tea with her wand while instructing Mrs Weasley on how to make homemade phyllo pastry. Harry and Hermione took their usual seats at the awkward end of the table, and watched, feeling equally inadequate.

“Morning Hermione, morning Harry,” Lavender said, as she set a spoon to stir Mr Weasley’s tea. Fleur, sitting two seats down next to Bill, and Angelina next to George, both sent Hermione horrified looks, to which Hermione grimaced in response. Bonding over inadequacy, Harry could well understand. He set Snape’s portrait on the table and refused to meet George’s eyes afterwards.

“Breakfast is just about ready,” said Lavender.

Fleur and Angelina winced, as if the words were painful to hear.
The others filed down the stairs then, and filled in the extra seats. Charlie and Claudiu ambled in not long after, but all the chairs were taken by then, so they ended up leaning against the counter, looking well pleased at the huge plates Lavender handed them. They tucked in right away, and Harry rather wished he’d had the idea to stand up to eat, since Lavender took the last seat between him and Ron, beaming at him as she floated the last two plates to him and Hermione.

“Everyone, dig in,” Mrs Weasley said, beaming. “Lavender’s made just about the whole thing, so be sure to say thank you!”

Lavender smiled, blushing. One half of her face dimpled, and one half still had four sharp slashes up her cheek and another two down her neck. Harry rather thought it made her look even more fit than she’d been at Hogwarts. He did have a bit of a thing for the bad-boy/bad-girl look. Draco and Millicent, par exemple.

He took a bite, and stopped. Next to him, Hermione froze. All around the table, bodies were tensing, as if a wave had rushed through them. Harry stared at Ron, horrified, and then found Mr Weasley giving him the same look, and Hermione’s fingers dug into his thigh painfully, and Fleur looked as if she might very well be on the verge of tears, but it could’ve been from hormones, since she was pregnant.

“Is it okay?” asked Lavender, sensing the disquiet.

At that point, Harry—and he was sure nearly everyone else—was feeling a very acute and terrifying sensation. Because it was brilliant. It was the best thing he’d ever eaten in his life; it was better than anything Hogwarts had ever served; it was, horrifyingly, better than Mrs Weasley’s cooking.

And there came the fear-inducing problem of having to tell Lavender it was good, without letting on that it was so good it was better than Mrs Weasley’s. Ron caught Harry’s eye, smirking—smugly.

“No, it’s good, Brown,” said Millicent, who was generally unaffected by discomforting situations.

“I like it,” Luna, also unaffected, added.

“It really is! Very nice!” came chorus of replies, and breakfast resumed. Next to him, Harry felt Lavender deflate in relief, which was great and all, but it still remained one of the most uncomfortable meals of his entire life. And he’d had to eat Hermione’s camp cooking for nine months.

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Later that day, Harry and Draco managed to sneak off to Diagon Alley long enough to buy one bottle of rectified spirits and three bottles of pure red wine. The man tending the till at the off-license gave them a very steady look, as if he knew exactly what they were up to. Harry was quite sure he didn’t. They paid and returned to the Burrow before anyone was the wiser, except for perhaps George, who lifted his eyebrows upon their return.

Harry spent some time being highly visible playing against Mr Weasley on the PlayStation, but Mr Weasley was much better and there was only so much humiliation one man could take. He’d put in his time with the Yule Ball, he rather thought.

Once he was sure no one could say that he hadn’t been around on Boxing Day, they snatched up
Snape’s little portrait, Harry’s little cauldron, and four bottles of alcohol, and slipped out the back door. It was cold and blustery, but there wasn’t any snow this year, so they were able to make it to the area behind the shed without leaving tracks.

Draco got the cauldron fire going while Harry and Snape flicked through copies of various Alchemical texts and personal notes.

“Salt, sulphur, and mercury are all required for transformation,” Snape said. “As they represent the path Divinity took when it created the world. Have you got each of these?”

Harry scrunched his nose. “Salt of the earth—that’s the stone. Sulphur, obviously, infused in it. Mercury’s often represented by aqua vitae, so once we distill the wine, we’ll have that.”

Draco settled the flame and came over to join them. “But the salt and sulphur are from previous steps. With each operation, the meaning changes a little. We have to match it to the effect we’re trying to achieve. We want to transmute gold, therefore, we need to represent salt, sulphur, and mercury in ways that will encourage that.”

Harry chewed his lip. Snape was stuck to the back of the shed with a Sticking Spell, but had already turned to rummage around in his bookshelves for another reference.

“Salt is the body,” said Harry. “The stone’s changed with each operation. I think it’s new, and relevant to this step. We want it to be able to transmute gold after the Fermentation operation, and we’ve already done that metaphorically with the stone itself. It’s gone from common gneiss to pure quartz—not only that, but pure, red quartz. It’s precious now.”

“And sulphur?” asked Snape.

“Sulphur is the spirit,” said Draco. “The spirit we’re aiming for with this operation is gold, thus—” He reached into his pocket and tossed a galleon to Harry. “Gold.”

“Brilliant,” said Harry. He set it on their tiny work table, next to the stone. “And we have the wine for mercury, but we still need to give the gold a reason to change.” He shook his head. “I don’t know how to represent that. What’s the catalyst?”

“The opposite of change,” said Snape. “A stasis spell, perhaps.”

“A stasis spell combined with a forced change,” Harry said. “Maybe it needs to be transfigured.” He’d thought transfiguration came at the end, though.

“Into what?” said Draco, eyebrows raised.

“Something common, something worthless…” said Harry. He trailed off, thinking, but was coming up with nothing. What was worthless? Voldemort. The Chudley Cannons. Life without Draco.

None of which could be distilled in a bloody potion.

“Money,” said Draco, suddenly.

“What?” Harry said. “That’s like the opposite of true.”

Draco shook his head. “No you’re overlooking the most important thing. Money is only as valuable as people let it be. Spiritually, it’s worthless. I was wrong about the galleon being the spirit. It’s the catalyst. The spirit of the transformation is what’s valuable—and that’s life…life with meaning.”
“I can hardly represent ‘life with meaning’ any more easily than I can ‘something worthless,’” Harry said, scowling.

“It’s love, you idiots,” said Snape.

They jerked their heads at his frame, but he was studiously staring at the book laid out on his desk, and refused to meet their gazes. When he finally did look up, his expression was carefully neutral. “Like any potion, the Alchemical process is personalised for each individualised wizard. The reason it hasn’t been made widely available like a standardised Pepper-Up is because there is no standard process. Its magic is in the transformation, not in the product.”

“Oh,” said Harry, softly. He furrowed his brow, feeling wrong-footed. Swallowing, he said, “How do I represent love?”

Snape’s mouth flattened. “What does love mean to you, personally, Potter?”

He bit his lip. Unwillingly, his eyes met Draco’s, and found Draco looking back at him. He swallowed again. There was nothing for it. “It means Draco.”

Draco made a tiny, vulnerable sound.

“Then you must put something of Draco’s essence in the Potion.” Snape did not sound overly surprised.

“Like Polyjuice,” Harry said, still staring at Draco. He’d been unable to look away, in fact. “I need your hair.”

Wordlessly, Draco reached up and plucked out a single hair. He handed it to Harry. Finally, Harry broke eye contact to turn and arrange everything in the cauldron. It was hot enough now that he could add the wine, and did so. All three bottles of it went in, followed by the one of rectified spirits, then the stone, and then the galleon, representing worthlessness, followed. Finally, he added one cup of dried sacred herbs, including mistletoe from the Weasleys’ kitchen door, to encourage the putrefaction process. They watched silently as the wine heated up and began to decay the coin, fermenting it and the herbs like it had once been fermented itself.

Even with the frigid cold December air, the heat of the cauldron and Harry’s embarrassment kept him from shivering. It must have been half an hour before the herbs were completely decayed and blended in with the melted galleon. It smelled like rot and petrichor, and reminded Harry of being in the Forbidden Forest with Draco and seeing him alive.

And through the whole time, not one of them said a word. The potion turned dark and sludgy, with a bubbling milky-white centre that moved and undulated as if it were alive. It was like looking down a tunnel of white light while dying. Harry stared at it, blinking hard. Dumbledore, he thought. And train stations, and having a new reason to live now that Voldemort was dead.

Harry moved to add the final ingredient—the single hair that represented Harry’s love, what made life worth living, what turned it into gold. Draco grabbed his wrist before he could drop it in.

“Wait,” he said.

Harry’s breath hitched. Was he not going to let Harry use his hair after all? “What?”

Draco bit his lip with his right canine tooth. “It needs one of your hairs, too.”

“Why?” said Harry.
Draco looked away. “Because if it’s going to work for me, too, it has to represent my love, as well."

“Oh,” said Harry. They looked at each other, and it was another full thirty seconds before Harry realised what Draco meant. His heart jumped into his throat, and pounded furiously. “What?”

Draco didn’t reply, just reached up with his free hand and plucked one of Harry’s hairs. He held it out over the cauldron next to the one of his own that Harry held. “Ready?” he asked.

Harry nodded mutely. As one, they let the hairs drop into the potion. They sunk to the bottom, and disappeared beneath the thick wine and detritus.

“You need to cover the cauldron now,” said Snape. “The first six operations are pairs, as you’ve no doubt seen. Separation and recombination each time. Now you must distill the mixture until all volatile essences are released and purified.”

Harry nodded. “So—boil and condense, again and again.”

“Capture the vapours,” Draco suggested. “When they precipitate, they may be necessary to the Elixir.”

Harry nodded again. He rummaged in his kit for his alembic, and then attached it to the top of his cauldron. Once secure, he raised the flame again. They settled down on the dead grass, leaning back against the shed wall beneath Snape’s stuck frame. Somehow their shoulders came to touch, and neither of them moved away. It was warm and quiet in their little area, and there was something profound in watching his hair melt into Draco’s.

In twenty minutes, the first round of distillation had completed. Harry separated out the impurities, then emptied the alembic back into the cauldron to start the process again. He sat back down, next to Draco. The backs of their hands were touching. Harry closed his eyes and focused on the feeling.

Half an hour later, the second round of distillation was, too, completed. This time, the solution was even more concentrated than before. Again, he separated out the sludgy impurities, and emptied the purified, condensed vapours back into the cauldron. He could see through the liquid now; the stone sat at the bottom, blood-red and vibrant, even in the murky solution.

“It’s making the Mother of the Stone,” Snape said hoarsely, when Harry transferred the impurities for a third time.

“I know,” Harry said, almost numbly. It was really working, and he had no idea how he’d come to deserve this, or when he’d become good enough to do it at all. When he’d approached Draco with the idea of working on Alchemy together, he’d never really thought they’d succeed. He’d never thought they’d even get to the first operation. It was, he could admit, just a desperate measure used to spend time with him.

But it was something different now. There was an Alchemy in them, too, somewhere.

Harry settled in for another round of distillation. It was close. So close. It might be the final round, he reckoned. This time, when he sat down next to Draco, Draco’s hand slid into his, and their fingers interlaced. Harry’s breath hitched; he said nothing, and they watched the steam rising through the still and condensing at the top. Their essences were mingled together somewhere in that steam, and Harry didn’t know how to handle that. He was currently blocking out everything that had been said today, on account that he didn’t think he would be able to get through this process if he didn’t.
The fourth time was indeed the last one. The liquid condensed at the top of the alembic was purer even than distilled water, and a thousand times more precious. Harry separated the shimmering gold-wine sludge of impurities from the crystal clear pure solution and the blood-red stone still sitting at the bottom of the cauldron.

“Now what?” he said. His voice caught somewhere in his throat.

Draco stood up and came to look at the work table. There was a large flask of shimmering, clear solution, a red stone, and a flask of shiny, thick sludge, not unlike dying blood.

“This is where Transfigurations comes in,” Draco said. He swished his wand once, and the sludge turned hard as stone, and perfectly spherical. He swished it again, and the clear liquid did the same.

Draco said, “Distillation. Three stones distilled into their most perfect formulations.” He pointed to the first one, elixir that was sparkling and crystal clear. “Mercury, the life force.” He pointed to the stone, still blood-red and strong. “Salt, the body.” He pointed to the last stone, made of reduced wine, spirits, and decayed plant matter. “And Sulphur, the spirit.”

“It’s brilliant,” Harry whispered. He reached for Draco’s hand again, and squeezed.

Draco finally looked at him. He smiled, a little hesitantly. “It’s a permanent transfiguration. I’m good at those. Most people’s won’t last more than a few weeks, but I’m not most people.”

Harry nodded. He didn’t need to be told that. “You’re brilliant,” he added, in case there was any doubt. Draco flushed, and they were quiet again, staring down at the three perfect stones.

There were seven operations in Alchemy, and they’d completed six of them.

Snape cleared his throat. “You can’t turn this project in to the Board of Governors. They’ll wring you dry.”

Harry looked down at his cauldron, and then at Draco, who was watching him silently from the ground. “I know that, too.” But what would they turn in for their inter-subject project instead?

“There’s no shame in failure,” Draco said then. “We’ll write about the experience, but we’ll show that we failed at the first step, instead.”

“Right,” said Harry. He took a deep breath. “There’s only one step left. Coagulation.”

Draco nodded. He looked up at the sky. It was getting dark, but…perhaps. “I know what to do.”

“Tell me,” said Harry.

“They’re already separated. We recombine them one final time. I’ve Transfigured their molecular formulations. They won’t melt now, but they will be receptive to change when heated. When they reach the appropriate temperature, you’ll need to charm the Sulphur one into the Salt and then the Mercury around them both. I’ll transfigure them into a single, solid structure, with each layer separate but combined.”

“That is highly dangerous,” Snape said. “The third one will still be highly reactive. It is, in fact, everything reactive from the original mixture condensed into one thing.”

“Alchemy has proved to be a very dangerous undertaking,” Harry said, shrugging.

Draco pursed his lips. “We’ll take precautions.”
Snape rolled his eyes. “Gryffindors and Slytherins. Merlin help us.”

Harry slipped on his dragonhide gloves and placed all three stones back in his gneiss cauldron. Draco raised a number of fierce wards. Once they were both satisfied that things were as safe as could possibly be, Harry lit the fire again.

At first, nothing happened. It wasn’t until the flame turned blue-hot that the explosion occurred. It rushed outwards and slammed into the wards like a bright wall of fire and reaction. The wards were acutely outlined by fire pressing at them on all sides, pushing steadily outwards, with no sign of retracting.

They both stepped backwards, pressing their backs against the shed. Snape was yelling something that Harry couldn’t understand over the sudden certainty that these wards were not going to hold. He took Draco’s hand and Snape’s portrait, and started running towards the field, but they’d only made it a few steps before he heard the deafening roar of the wards breaking and felt the heat of the explosion rushing over his skin.

Harry was thrown to the ground, hard. He skidded several feet, and heard his shoulder crunch somewhere along the way. His vision darkened and he felt dizzy, but Draco landed on top of him, gasping for breath, and he forced himself not to black out. It was just a dislocated shoulder, nothing to worry about. He struggled to his feet, trying to tug Draco with him, but then the second explosion went off, and with it came a rush of sickly, wet vapours. He breathed in, and immediately knew the error of it.

They’d never counteracted the diseased part of the stone, to make it Panacea. And they were breathing instant death. Draco’s face was turning purple, and he was gasping in the most horrifying way, as if his lungs were closed off and his throat was full of water. God, he was asphyxiating. Right in front of Harry’s eyes.

Harry had never known terror like this before. Fiendfyre didn’t come close. Voldemort didn’t come close.

“Draco!” Harry choked out. He could barely breath himself but he had to get Draco out of there, had to fix him. Why weren’t the vapours affecting him as badly? Why wasn’t Snape still talking? Why hadn’t anyone come to see what the explosion was? Oh, god, the Weasleys—if they came outside and breathed the—

Draco’s eyes searched him out desperately. His hands were clawing at his own throat. Harry grabbed hold of him beneath his arms and pulled, hard, as hard as he could, away from the infected air. He barely noticed the agony of his own dislocated shoulder.

Draco’s lips were blue. He was desperately forming words, but Harry couldn’t hear them. He shook his head, and belatedly realised that he was crying, and his face was soaked. “Don’t,” Harry said, and didn’t care that it came out as a sob. “I’m going to save you. Just be still. Don’t use oxygen.”

Draco pressed his lips together tightly, and Harry dragged him, but they were a long way away from the edge of the diseased area, and then—Draco’s eyes dulled, and he started to twitch, and—

“No!” Harry screamed.

He heard the back door of the Burrow slamming open, and dozens of feet pounding out. Oh God, he couldn’t let all the Weasleys run into this air. Choking, he slashed his hand furiously around himself and destroyed every last molecule of the diseased vapours.
He could barely see through all the stupid tears in his eyes, and Draco was still twitching, and he *could not lose him like this*. He could not lose him at all. He heard an agonised keening sound and distantly understood that it came from him. Draco was his love, and he’d sort of said he loved Harry, too, and there would never be anyone—*anyone*—like him again, and—

Harry choked again, and it came out as a sob. He fell down next to Draco and pressed his ear to his mouth. God, he wasn’t *breathing*. Harry lifted Draco’s chin, and then pressed his combined fists down onto his sternum, humming brokenly. His heart beat was non-existent. He could barely remember the song he was supposed to use to keep count, but it didn’t matter because it wasn’t working, even when he leant down, closed Draco’s nose, and breathed everything he had into his lungs.

**Merlin, he was dying,** and Harry would never live again—he couldn’t—no. **No.**

Harry transformed. He didn’t know why, precisely, except that he was losing his mind with panic and it had felt necessary. He’d never been so useless in a dangerous situation before. He felt himself come all over crow, and then he was slammed with a sudden sense of clarity.

Crows didn’t *feel* like humans did. They didn’t *panic* like humans did. Harry cocked his head, distantly took in Lavender sending off a Patronus for a mediwizard and Hermione rushing forward to take over chest compressions where Harry’d left off. She fell to her knees right next to him, and pressed her mouth over Draco’s, and that was good. That was necessary. But something else was necessary, too, and only Harry could do that part.

He looked around. When he saw Draco, he nearly lost his breath again, but he was a crow now, and they didn’t do that sort of thing. Draco stood several feet away, looking on at the scene with groggy confusion. He was blue, and clear, like the beetles and runespoors and thestrals that had once been so attracted to him. Harry fluttered over, landed on his shoulder, and dug his talons in **hard**.

Draco finally seemed to take notice of him. “Harry,” he said drowsily.

He looked drunk, disoriented. Even in spirit form, his lips were blue, and Harry *hated it*. So he flapped his wings and pulled, with his claws still digging into Draco’s barely-there flesh. Draco resisted at first, but Harry was a collector of the dead, and he’d be damned if Draco sodding Malfoy escaped him. He cawed furiously, and Draco scrunched his nose, but did stumble along a few steps when Harry tried to take off again with him still attached.

**Touch,** Harry wanted to scream at him. **God, touch your body again, before you die.**

He looked into Draco’s eyes and tried to will the command into his head like some sort of desperate, backwards version of *Legilimency*. Draco blinked quickly, and seemed to become slightly more coherent.

“Harry,” he said again. He reached up and stroked his fingers down Harry’s feathered back.

Harry pulled him closer to his body. Hermione was crying all over Draco’s face as she breathed into his mouth, and she hadn’t even cried over her parents. Not until she’d nearly got them back again, anyway. *Come!* Harry thought at him.

Draco looked down at his body again. “I’m dying.”

**Not yet!** Harry thought. **Go back, go back, go back.**

He pecked him sharply, and finally—finally—Draco seemed to understand. He took a few more
steps forward, and kneeled down next to himself, watching Hermione perform CPR with a macabre sort of curiosity. He still hadn’t touched, though, and Harry had just about had enough of this. He took off from Draco’s shoulders and flew several dozen metres up in the air. Then he turned and swooped down as fast as he could, like when he was doing a Wronski Feint, and at the last minute, turned his body and let it slam into Draco’s half-there back. The force of the impact knocked him forward, and his translucent spirit sprawled onto his physical body, and sunk inside it.

Harry tumbled to the ground, his other shoulder dislocated now, too. His vision began to darken, and he forced himself to transform, using the pain of change while injured to keep him conscious long enough to make sure.

Next to him, Draco gasped for air. Hermione sobbed in relief. And Harry passed out.

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It was New Years Eve when Draco woke up. He and Narcissa had kept a constant vigil over his bed in Bill’s old room the whole time. She was downstairs now, having tea with Mrs Weasley, and Harry was staring out the window, counting constellations, and remembering that one night when Draco’s touch had change the meaning of the number 88 for him.

On the bedside table, Snape’s repaired portrait sat empty. He was no doubt back with McGonagall again, discussing the danger of allowing apprentices to attempt Alchemy for inter-subject projects. It felt weird having Snape on his side, even if Snape’s way of being on Harry’s side was to roll his eyes and tell McGonagall that Harry was entirely too stupid to ever successfully manage even a fraction of the Alchemical process, and this was proof that he’d never come close.

Harry tossed the Philosopher’s Stone back and forth between his hands. It refracted bright red against the walls. Severia and Crookshanks were jumping around after it, and it almost made Harry smile. He just hadn’t smiled too much in the past five days, and the expression felt uncomfortable now. He rolled his shoulders. Merlin fuck but they still hurt, even after the mediwizard had yanked them back into place. It probably would’ve helped if he’d bothered to take the pain potions he was then provided with. They sat untouched on Draco’s bedside table.

Harry was attuned to the rhythm of Draco’s breathing now. He thought he’d always be aware of it, on some level. It was the most comforting sound in the world, and it kept him calm every day, as he sat up here and stared at walls and windows, waiting. It was because of this that he knew right away when there was a change in it.

He looked down at the bed. Draco was looking back at him. His eyes were tired, but they were grey and alive and mercurial and that was all that Harry needed. “Hey,” said Draco.

Harry felt his eyes begin to burn again, and he had no idea why, because Draco was awake, and that was good.

“Hey,” he said. He was confused by the raw sound of his voice. Maybe he was just confused by his voice, full stop. He couldn’t remember speaking a word since Boxing Day. He reached out to take Draco’s hand in his, which was trembling for some reason. Harry had no idea what to say to him, so he squeezed his hand and turned back to the window. It was something after ten now; the new year was only hours away.

“That’s Draco,” said Draco. His voice was scratchy, as if he’d been strangled. Harry winced. “You can see its tail just there, between Ursa Major and Minor. It’s a circumpolar constellation. It never
goes away, but it’s never very noticeable. It’s subtle.”

“You’re noticeable,” Harry said, swallowing. “Your absence would have been more so.” He turned back to look at Draco again. It was almost painful to see his face. He’d been so sure, so agonisingly sure, that he’d lost Draco. He’d take a thousand dislocated shoulders to make sure it never happened again. Harry set the Philosopher’s Stone on the bedside table, and Draco’s eyes followed the movement.

Draco smirked. “We’re brilliant.”

“We’re stupid as fuck,” Harry corrected. He squeezed Draco’s hand as hard as he could, and Draco squeezed back, eyebrows lifted wryly.

The door opened then, and Narcissa returned with tea for Harry, which she dropped on the floor of Bill’s room when she saw that Draco was awake. She let out a little sob and rushed to his side, flinging her body on top of his. Draco’s breath rushed out in a huff, and Harry’s insides clenched at the sound. He snatched up the blood-red Stone, and slid it back into his pocket before she or anyone else could see.

“Draco,” Narcissa sobbed over and over.

The sound alerted the rest of the household, and suddenly there were a dozen or more people crowding into the tiny room. Millicent and Hermione were first to arrive, and then Ron, and Lavender, Ginny and Luna, who called down the stairs that he was awake. Harry heard Mrs Weasley yelling something into the floo, and then McGonagall was rushing up the stairs, and Snape was back in his frame, and it was, in short, a clusterfuck of Weasleys et al.

Draco looked extremely discomfited, especially as he was still half-covered by his mother, who would not let go of him any more than Harry would his hand.

“Mr Malfoy,” said McGonagall, and she seemed on the verge of losing it, or as if she had done very recently. “I am pleased that I won’t have to interview for a new apprentice.”

Draco smiled at her from somewhere behind his mother’s hair. “Me too, Headmistress.”

McGonagall blinked, and looked away. She allowed Mrs Weasley to lead her downstairs for some tea, letting Mr Weasley, Charlie, and Bill come in and say they were very glad Draco wasn’t dead, and that they hoped he wouldn’t be too put off by their back garden to not come back for Christmas next year. Though it felt like hours, it wasn’t really all that long before most everyone was satisfied that Draco wasn’t going to suddenly die, and left again for him to get some rest.

At eleven-thirty, just Harry and Narcissa remained. They each took a side of his bed and one of his hands, and stared at each other over Draco’s reposed body like a silent battle of wills. Harry refused to leave, and he didn’t much care what Narcissa made of it.

She cleared her throat. “Mr Potter,” she said at last. Harry blinked. He felt Draco’s tendons stiffen beneath his hand. “Your experiment nearly killed my son.”

Harry winced. “I know.”

She stared at him for several more minutes, each one more agonising than the last. Draco said nothing. Finally, she sighed, and said, “But you saved him. At great personal risk, as I understand it. Severus tells me that you remained inside the same lethal fumes with no regard for your own person, trying to get Draco to safety.”
“Correct,” said Harry, deciding it was best to keep his answers as short and objective as possible. He felt Draco’s eyes on his face and refused to blush. He didn’t know how much Draco remembered, but in front of his mother was not the time to discuss it.

“That does not surprise me,” said Narcissa. “I recall another time when you attempted to throw your own life away. Is this a habit of yours?”

Harry smiled down at his lap, entirely self-deprecatingly. “It appears so.”

She was silent for several more moments, but her voice was harsh when she finally spoke again. “Do you intend, therefore, to continue treating something my son holds dear with so little regard?”

Harry’s head snapped up. “Sorry, what?”

She waved her hand frustratedly. “Your life, Mr Potter. My son values it.” She glanced pointedly down at their joined hands. “Will you continue to try to kill yourself, and leave my son unhappy? I will not have it.”

Harry blinked. “What?”

“Harry, honestly,” Draco said. “You sound moronic. Don’t you know any other words?” Harry turned his attention back to the bed. Draco had managed to pull himself up in a reclined position, and appeared to be watching this exchange with some amusement.

“I love him,” Harry said, somewhat stupidly. By the lowering of Narcissa’s eyelids, he could tell that she agreed.

“Obviously, Mr Potter.” She stood, releasing Draco’s other hand. “But what will you do about it?”

And then she was gone. The door shut softly behind her. Harry stared at it for several moments, mind curiously blank.

“It was Death, wasn’t it,” Draco said then. Harry returned his attention to him, and Draco added, “Everything is Alchemy. I figured it out, when I was suffocating. It came to me and it made me calm…I wasn’t sure if I should return to my body because it felt natural, you know? Death’s only a transmutation of Life. That’s why most wizards can’t complete the Great Work. It’s why no one would’ve been able to but you, before. And now me.”

“Because we died,” Harry guessed. In truth, he’d thought of nothing but Draco since Boxing Day, and the reason that they’d finally succeeded in making a Stone hadn’t been important enough to waste time on. Now, he pulled it back out of his pocket and stared critically at it.

“Yeah,” said Draco. “Death is the catalyst. It’s the Azoth that we were missing. It was good that I died.”

Harry’s brow furrowed. He blinked furiously to head off the burning sensation he could feel building up in his eyes again. “I don’t want you to ever die again.”

Draco rubbed his thumb along the back of Harry’s hand. “Now I won’t have to. And neither will you.”

Harry exhaled in a rush. He really wasn’t even sure he wanted to live forever, but—there was a certain draw to it, if Draco would be there, too. Downstairs, the Weasleys started counting down to midnight.
He put the Stone away and moved to lay down on the bed next to Draco. Harry curled himself around Draco’s body, and sighed in relief when Draco’s fingers came up to card through his hair. He closed his eyes and breathed in Draco’s scent as the voices downstairs erupted in cheers. Mr Weasley drunkenly began a rousing rendition of *Auld Lang Syne* and Harry hugged Draco tight.

Whomever one was with at the stroke of midnight was supposed to be the person they were with all year. If one took a sip of Elixir of Life with another person, would that mean they were with that person forever?

“Fuck, I love you,” Draco suddenly said, as if the words were too much to hold in.

Harry made a tiny sound that he was sure he would be embarrassed about later. “You too, you prick. Don’t fucking die.”

“I won’t,” Draco said.

-x-
Epilogue

Epilogue

June, 2002

-x-

It had to be Dumbledore, Harry thought, staring fixedly at the wardrobe. It was just—how did a bloody portrait move things about in a castle? Then again, Harry doubted being dead would put much of a damper on Dumbledore’s scheming, quite frankly.

But that didn’t necessarily mean he had to play along. He narrowed his eyes. Ahead of him, to the left, stood a wardrobe. It glowed faintly blue from within. Ahead of him, to the right, stood a mirror, angled just far enough away that he couldn’t see his reflection.

Harry had stumbled on this room on the way back from his Potioneers’ Guild examination, exhausted and elated that he was within weeks of calling himself Potions Master. He’d done well. He’d done really well. He didn’t need his results to know that. So the question was—what did Dumbledore think he would learn from another viewing of his boggart and heart’s desire?

There was no question that this was not a coincidence. Harry was (nearly) a Potions Master; Potions Masters didn’t believe in those.

He shifted, getting more comfortable in his spot on the floor, leaning against the wall. Should he look in the mirror? Where did Dumbledore get off on still trying to control him? He was twenty-two years old, for Merlin’s sake. He’d already done his dark lord thing, and he’d passed a Potions apprenticeship with a very bored and ornery Severus Snape. He’d more than proved himself.

The door beside him creaked open, and Draco peered in. His eyes fell on Harry, took in his disgruntled expression. He stepped inside and shut the door behind him. “There you are.”

“Here I am,” Harry agreed, scowling at the wardrobe.

He heard Draco sigh from somewhere above and to his right, and then he was moving in front of him, coming around to slide down the wall next to Harry. He rolled his head over to regard him, grey eyes deathly blue in the reflected light. “I’m afraid to ask,” he murmured. “I was sure you’d pass, but you look so angry that I’m beginning to worry.”

Harry breathed a laugh, turned his head to face Draco. Their noses brushed, and the brief connection sent a rush of want right through Harry. He couldn’t help himself. He pushed himself up and swung a leg over Draco’s thighs to straddle him.

“I passed,” he said against Draco’s lips.

Draco groaned and arched up, his hands coming around Harry’s waist to tug him closer. Harry threaded his fingers through Draco’s hair, fingers scratching lightly over his scalp.

“What’s got your knickers so knotted then?” Draco said through a gasp.

“That bloody mirror,” Harry said. “And the wardrobe, too. I don’t like them.”
“They’re dated,” Draco said, peering at them. “But not especially offensive.” Harry nipped his earlobe to bring his attention back where it ought to be, and Draco responded appropriately, huffing out a little moan, and arching his neck invitingly.

“It’s Dumbledore’s doing,” Harry said. “He’s scheming again. There’s a boggart in that wardrobe, and that mirror shows things one ought already know.”

Obviously unconcerned by lurking dark creatures, Draco’s hands came around to unbutton the front of Harry’s apprentice robes, and Harry, thinking this was a good idea indeed, did the same with Draco’s. Their hands clashed more than once, but Harry was rather more inclined towards speed than finesse and so this bothered him not at all.

Finally, Draco was pushing his robes off his shoulders and down his arms. He tugged his t-shirt over his head and bent down again to lick Draco’s feverish skin, delighting in the throaty moan that followed. “Yes,” Draco said. “I was thinking about this all day. About how much I wanted to fuck you after my exam last week…how good it was…wanted you to fuck me after yours.”

Harry growled and kissed his way from Draco’s neck to his jaw before reaching his mouth to kiss his fiercely there. He undulated his hips in Draco’s lap, reminding them both of the way Harry’d ridden him after Draco’s Transfiguration Mastery exam. He’d not known why Draco was so randy afterwards until now, when he was still riding the high of his own shattering examination. “Take off those robes, Apprentice Malfoy.”

Draco smirked against his lips. “Not anymore. Results came today, while you were in exam. You may call me Master Malfoy.”

Merlin, that only made Harry harder. He hadn’t thought it was possible. “Master Malfoy,” he murmured. “I like the way that sounds. Perhaps tonight I shall, but now, Master or not, you’ll do what I say, and I say take off those robes.”

Draco snapped his fingers. The rest of their clothes disappeared. “Vanished to your rooms,” he said. “They’ll be back when you conjure them. I promise I didn’t destroy them this time.”

The alarmed look left Harry’s face to be replaced by one of amusement…and maybe arousal. “You’re better at that than me now. It’s hot.”

Draco laughed breathily. “I’ve another thing I can do better than you now, too. Watch.” Harry scrambled off him, and he stood, flicked open his water bottle to pour some out into his hand. He closed his fist, then his eyes, concentrating. When he opened his hand again, the water was slick and viscous. “The examiners liked this one. Olive oil from water. Wandless.”

Harry’s eyes darkened. He could feel the arousal settling into his body like a hot, dark blanket. “What will you do with that?” he asked softly.

Draco smirked, turned and leaned against the wall, supporting himself on one hand. With the other, covered in oil, he reached back and ran his fingers down the cleft of his own arse. Harry made a pained noise in the back of his throat and took two quick steps forward before Draco stopped him with a word.

“Tsk tsk, Harry. Be patient. Don’t you want to see my Transfiguration Mastery in action?”

“Yes,” Harry growled.

Draco’s slick fingers slid inside, and Harry watched, mesmerised. He had three fingers in before Harry had fully comprehended what was happening, and by then, he was nearly coming all over
himself. He took three quick steps forward and gently tugged at Draco’s wrist until his fingers slipped out. They immediately found Harry’s prick and wrapped around it instead.

Harry threw his head back, moaning. God, this never got old. When he was as slicked up as he could be, he guided himself slowly inside. Draco’s fingers curled against the wall. He breathed in deeply, slowly, and Harry put a hand on his back, rubbing in soft circles, as he adjusted.

Draco rolled his hips backwards, and Harry sunk all the way in with a groan. He reached down and wrapped his fingers around Draco’s hips and began to move. Draco moaned wantonly, his head fell forward between his outstretched arms. The sound of his panting was driving Harry absolutely bonkers. There was no way he’d be able to hold on very long at all. He was already riled up from his Guild examination, and from seeing Dumbledore’s fucking meddling, and from watching Draco tease himself open and ready for Harry so shamelessly.

He clenched his fingers, and Draco reached down with one hand to take hold of his own prick. Harry batted it away with a growl, and replaced it with his own slicked fingers.

“I don’t think so, Malfoy,” he said breathlessly. “I’ll decide when you come.”

Draco moaned again, and pressed his hips back harder, meeting Harry thrust for thrust. Harry could feel him tensing all over, getting closer and closer. He let his fingers slide teasingly over the head of Draco’s cock as he thrust into him maddenly slow, until Draco was whining.

“Fuck’s sake, Potter,” he gasped. “Fuck me like you mean it.”

That, Harry could do. He sped his hand up around Draco’s prick and angled his hips until he knew he was hitting that spot Draco liked. It didn’t take long until Draco let out a startled, protracted moan, and arched back into Harry, as if he couldn’t ever get enough of Harry’s cock.

His muscles spasmed around Harry’s prick, and Harry lost it, spilling everything he had into Draco’s body. They stood there, panting, letting the high of orgasm wash over them. When it subsided, Harry’s hand slid from Draco’s hipbone to wrap around his stomach. He pulled out slowly, and leaned his head forward on Draco’s shoulder, hugging him close.

After a few minutes, Draco cleared his throat. “What’s your problem with the boggart in the wardrobe?” he asked.

Harry shook his head, but being as he was still pressed against Draco’s skin, it made very little difference. He pressed a kiss to Draco's back.

"Nothing, now."

Draco laughed. "Then what boggart-related philosophical thoughts had you so wound up when I came in?"

There was so much there, so many things that he had no idea how to explain. He could drink the Elixir for a thousand years and never have enough time to explain to Draco all the fragmented thoughts running through his head at the sight of the mirror and the wardrobe. They’d caused this.

But there was one thing he knew now, one thing he’d not known when he and Hermione came upon this same room in eighth year. He'd once dearly wanted to just be himself, but if he looked in the mirror now, there would be two people looking back: just them, like a regular mirror. Both his greatest fear and his heart’s desire were the same as they were then—but changed. Transmuted. He’d created a Philosopher's Stone, but this—this—was his Great Work.
“Me without you,” Harry murmured against his sweat-soaked skin. “That’s what it meant. I was never afraid of being myself at all. I was just afraid of me without you. You are my Azoth.”

The End.

End Notes

DO NOT REPOST OR ARCHIVE THIS FIC ANYWHERE. That includes Wattpad, Instagram, translation sites, and literally anywhere that I didn't post it myself. TY (I can't believe I am having to put this notice up again. What happened to fandom etiquette?)

Works inspired by this green sleeves by rrncg

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