survival is a talent

by ShanaStoryteller

Summary

In the middle of their second year, Draco and Harry discover they’re soulmates and do their best to keep it a secret from everyone.

Their best isn’t perfect.

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Harry glares. He opens his mouth, and feels the beginning the snake’s language pass his lips, and this isn’t what he wants, what’s the point of insulting Malfoy if he can’t understand him –

Malfoy’s eyes widen. He slaps his hand over Harry’s mouth, “Potter, what the hell–”

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Notes

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See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter Notes

Title is from this quote: "I told her once I wasn’t good at anything. She told me survival is a talent.” ~ Susanna Kaysen, from Girl, Interrupted.

Not everyone has a soulmate. Perhaps one in ten people are born with the tell-tale soulmark, a black ring somewhere on their body.

That black ring is more permanent than any tattoo. It can’t be marred or moved by magic or muggle means, and will remain unchanged no matter the trauma done to it.

Until two soulmates touch.

Then it becomes something else entirely.

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“Serpensortia!” Malfoy shouts, and a great black snake erupts from the end of his wand. The rest of the dueling club backs away from the platform, and the snake sways from side to side threateningly.

Malfoy is smirking at him like he’s won, and Harry isn’t going to stand for that. He confidently walks forward, and the smirk slides from Malfoy’s face. The snake rears up against him, but he’s not worried.

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He stops talking and his face pales. Harry has a horrible suspicion that he knows why. There’s a terrible burning sensation along his right hip, exactly where his soulmark is. Malfoy grimaces, and he presses his free hand against his own hip.

Soulmates always have their marks in the same place.

“Good show boys, good show!” Lockhart saws, edging forward nervously. “I'll just vanquish that snake, shall I? Really, Mr. Malfoy, you shouldn’t have summoned such an awful beast.”

That snaps them out of it, and Malfoy takes a step back and away. He throws Lockhart a disgusted look, then points his wand at the snake, “Reditus.”

It vanishes just as it came. Lockhart’s shoulders slump in relief. “Oh, very good, Mr. Malfoy. Very good.”
Malfoy steps gracefully off the stage as if nothing has happened, as if Harry’s hip isn’t on fire, as if he doesn’t feel as if he’s just been branded. But he’s not about to grab Malfoy and demand an explanation in front of everyone, so he shuffles back over to his friends and hopes he doesn’t look like he’s about to sick, because that’s certainly how he feels.

“That was a fourth year summoning spell,” Hermione says, sounding a mix between impressed and jealous. “It wasn’t very sportsmanlike of him to use it.” She scowls and shakes her head so her bushy brown hair falls over her shoulders, nearly blending into her dark brown skin.

“Right,” Harry says weakly.

Both Ron and Hermione give him a strange look, but then Lockhart and Snape are calling a fifth year Hufflepuff onto the stage so their attention is pulled away from him.

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Harry gets changed for the night in the bathroom, heart pounding. Where before he’d had a small black circle on the edge of his hip, he now has a flower about the length of his wand that starts just under his waist and brushes the top of his thigh. Thanks to the long hours Aunt Petunia forced him to spend in her garden, he recognizes it.

It’s an iris, a deep purple with a stripe of vibrant yellow down each petal. It’s gorgeous, the petals perfectly formed and more beautiful than any real iris he’s seen. He hadn’t know a flower could suggest arrogance until now. He has to swallow down the sudden burst of hysterical laughter, because he’s afraid if he starts he won’t be able to stop.

His soulmate is Draco Malfoy.

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Harry’s not the only one with a soulmark in their year. Dean and Seamus are even soulmates. They’d found out before they were even sorted, and once they’d touched the black rings on the back of their calves had transformed into an oak and maple tree respectively. Lavender Brown had a soul mark, a black ring just below her wrist. He’d seen others, people flaunting them in the hopes that someone with a mark in the same place would see.

He’d never hid his mark, but he hadn’t flaunted it. It seems Malfoy hadn’t either. Harry hadn’t even known he’d had one.

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The next day he’s walking back from another agonizing night helping Lockhart answer fan mail when someone grabs his arm and jerks him backwards into an abandoned classroom. He reaches for his wand, but before he can get it he turns around and sees it’s Malfoy. The door slams shut behind them and he demands, “Did you tell anyone?”

“No,” he says, and at least Malfoy isn’t ignoring him. Wait, no, he wants Malfoy to ignore him. Right? Maybe. “Did you?”

“Obviously not,” he says, running his hand through his hair. “What a bloody mess. Why couldn’t you have just taken my hand in first year? We would have known right then and there, but no, you just had to be difficult. Now look where we are!”

Indignation wells up inside him. “Oh, so this is my fault? Sorry, you’re the git who’s running around petrifying muggleborns, so this is definitely your fault.” He’s not a hundred percent certain what
‘this’ is, but he is certain that he’s not taking responsibility for it.

Malfy scoffs, “Oh, that’s rich coming from you. You speak *Parseltongue*, Potter. If anyone’s the heir of Slytherin, it’s you.”

“I speak what?” he asks.

“Parseltongue,” Malfy repeats. When Harry just keeps blinking at him, he says, “Snakes. You speak the language of snakes. Are you trying to lie to me right now? I heard you. You’re lucky I stopped you, otherwise half this school would be calling for your head about now.”

Harry stares at him for a long moment, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

After several long seconds spent pinching the bridge of his nose, Malfy lays it all out for him – that Parseltongue is a trait of the line of Slytherin, that Voldemort could do it, that it’s considered a dark trait, and that if people find out he can do it, they’re definitely going to assume he’s the heir to Slytherin. “Aren’t you the heir?” Harry asks, mind whirling.

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“Of course not! If I was descended from Slytherin, I wouldn’t be *hiding it*. All of the founders lines have died out, or, well, we thought they did. Clearly we were all wrong.”

He swallows, “So – I mean, I’m not doing this, I’m not hurting anyone. But if I speak Parseltongue, does that mean *I am* related to Slytherin?” Am I dark, he thinks but doesn’t say. The Dursleys have been telling him he was a horrible person his whole life. What if they were right?

For the first time some of the irritation drains out of Malfy. “Don’t be stupid,” he says, but it’s the nicest he’s sounded all night. “You’re a Potter. It’s in your blood.”

“What are you talking about?” he asks. He’s getting tired of asking that question.

Malfy grabs his hand and holds it up. His hand looks ghostly pale compared to Harry’s. “Britain has maybe a dozen species of snakes. India has over two hundred and fifty. Which wizards do you think developed the ability first? You have more of a claim to Parseltongue than either Salazar Slytherin or You-Know-Who.”

He almost sounds nice. Harry licks his lips and blurts, “Can I see your mark?”

Malfy stiffens and pulls his hand away. Harry’s about to take it back when he says, “Only if I can see yours.”

“Sure,” he says, and winces when his voice comes out too high.

It seems to relax Malfy though, who smirks at him before pushing his robe aside and tugging down the waistband of his pants.

There’s a cluster of three bright marigolds on his hip. One red, one orange, and one yellow. Harry wants to touch them, but that would be pushing his luck. Instead he does the same, allowing Malfy to see the iris etched into his skin. The yellow stripe on the petals is the same yellow as the marigold on Malfy’s hip.

“My parents have dragons on their arms,” Malfy says, staring. Harry blinks. He hadn’t known Malfy’s parents were soulmates. “It’s how I got my name.”

His name. Draco. Which Harry supposes he should start using, considering. “Are you going to tell them?”
“Absolutely not,” he says, pulling his pants back up. Harry does the same. “Trouble is brewing, and you’ve made your position very clear. Telling them you’re my soulmate will only make things harder for them.”

“So what?” Harry asks, stung. “We just pretend like nothing happened?”

“Precisely,” he nods, and Harry’s hands clench into fists. “We pretend like nothing has changed. We’re still enemies, and we still hate each other.”

“Fine,” he spits, trying to dredge up enough anger to cover his hurt. He reaches for the door, and he’d been so worried his soulmate wouldn’t want him, his whole life he’d gone back and forth between being grateful for his mark and being afraid of it, and now everything he feared is coming true.

Draco grabs the back of his robe, “Hold on! I said pretend, you idiot. Like it or not, we’re soulmates, and that matters. We pretend to be enemies, for both our sakes. But – but in private, like this, we don’t have to be. Not anymore. Not if you – not if you don’t want us to be.”

He turns back around, and it’s the first time Draco seems anything less than confident. There’s a flush high on his cheeks and his grip on Harry’s robe is a fist.

Draco’s a bastard. He’s arrogant, and rude, and he called Hermione a mudblood. He talks about the muggleborns getting petrified like it’s a good thing, and every time he opens his mouth talking about blood purity Harry has to resist the urge to shove his fist in his stupid smug face.

But he’s his soulmate. He can’t be all bad.

“Yeah,” he swallows, “I’d like that.” He hopes he isn’t making a mistake.

Draco gives him a tentative half smile, and Harry can’t help but return it.

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Draco’s been on the edge of a panic attack ever since he felt that stabbing pain on his hip in front of everyone, but he feels almost calm now. There’s a plan, they have a plan, and he’s smart. He’s the smartest in their year besides Granger, and he still scores higher than her in practical magic. He can do this.

Then his soulmate proves that he’s deranged when he cocks his head to the side and asks, “Do you hear that?”

“Hear what?” Draco attempts to ask, but before he gets a chance Potter – no, Harry bolts out of the room and runs down the hall.

He hesitates for a moment, then resigns himself to the fact that with any luck he’s going to spend the rest of his life running after his foolish, moronic Gryffindor soulmate and hurries after him. Harry’s pressing his ear against the wall, and Draco has a flashback to the last family reunion when he’d found Luna looking for something called nargles. Harry and his cousin are never allowed to meet.

“You really can’t hear that?” Harry asks, and then he’s running again, once again not giving Draco an opportunity to answer.

Wonderful.

He follows after, and ends up running right into his back. “Harry! What are you doing—” Draco looks over his shoulder, and swallows. Without thinking, he grabs for Harry’s hand.
Before he can become too mortified at his actions, Harry squeezes back. “Well, at least we know neither of us is the heir.”

In front of them are the petrified bodies – for lack of a better word – of Nearly-Headless Nick and Justin Finch-Fletchly.

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Harry had sent Draco away before reporting the attacks, certain that everyone would think he was the heir. Draco had tried pointing out that he didn’t care, but Harry had made him leave anyway.

They continue to meet at night, and it quickly becomes clear that this isn’t sustainable. “Blaise really is going to start thinking I have something to do with all this if I don’t stop disappearing in the middle of the night,” Draco grumbles, sitting opposite Harry with a chessboard between them. “You are awful at this, you know.”

“I know,” Harry sighs, “Ron tells me so. Often. Also Neville caught me leaving twice this past week. He doesn’t think I’m the heir, but he definitely knows I’m up to something. He tried mentioning it to Ron, but luckily he just thought Neville was talking about the Polyjuice potion.”

Draco freezes. Harry realizes all at once that not only did Draco not know about the potion, but it’s completely unnecessary since he can ask Draco any questions he has just as he is, and he knows for certain he’s not the heir now. Not that he’s told Ron or Hermione that. “The what?”

“Huh,” Harry says. One of Draco’s knights brandishes a sword at him. “There are probably some things I should tell you.”

He almost mentions something about the strange house elf that’s been following him around, Dobby, because Draco seems like he’d know about that sort of thing. But he already thinks he’s crazy because of the hearing voices thing, he doesn’t want Draco to think he’s even stranger for being stalked by a house elf.

After spilling everything, Draco looks grudgingly impressed. “Granger really is as clever as they come. That’s a difficult potion.” He snaps his fingers and his chess set starts packing themselves away. “Regardless, you better let me take a look at it. My practical potions grade is higher than hers.”

“What’s the point?” Harry asks, “We don’t need to use it.”

“You have a nearly complete polyjuice potion, and you’re just going to what? Throw it out? Absolutely not. We’ll stick a preservation charm on it and store it away.”

“We haven’t learned any preservation charms that strong,” he points out.

Draco rolls his eyes and banishes the chess set away. “Luckily, there’s this little thing called the library.”

Harry really wishes this whole soulmate thing wasn’t a secret, if only so he could throw Draco and Hermione at each other and save himself the headache.

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They can’t think of a way to convince Ron and Hermione not to go along with the plan. Draco inspects the potion, and, finding no flaws, tells Harry to use the smallest possible amount. “I’ll sneak back in and take care of the rest. Just tell your friends you dumped it, and I’ll keep it in my quarters.”
Harry crosses his arms, hesitates, but says, “Why your quarters? What are you going to do with it?”

Draco wants to feel offended, but honestly he’s just a little bit relieved Harry isn’t a complete idiot. Just because they’re soulmates doesn’t mean either of them have changed really, even if they’ve been doing their best to stay away from touchy subjects. Which is incredibly difficult, considering the circumstances. “Nothing. I’ll give it back to you next time we meet, if you want. But make sure you keep it safe, and don’t tell your little friends about it.”

Harry’s face tightens, but agrees. Draco finds Harry to be far less irritating when he listens to him. So things go as planned, mostly. He sneaks into the girl’s bathroom and charms and bottles the remaining polyjuice potion, then goes prowling the hall where he told Harry he’d meet them. He only finds the two of them wandering the halls, and can’t ask after Hermione because he’s not supposed to know who they are in the first place.

He answers their questions, and it’s nothing that he hasn’t told Harry already. Then they’re running out of there before their hour is up, and Draco shakes his head. He’s never seen Crabbe or Goyle run before. Also, neither Crabbe or Goyle are that stupid. They just pretend to be because they prefer to be underestimated.

Blaise had gone home for the holidays, so he has their room to himself, and he doesn’t have to sneak past him each night. The last day of the holidays, however, Millie is sitting up in the common room when he walks through, her cat on her lap and a book in her hand. She stuffs it under a cushion when she sees him. “What are you doing?” she snaps. Her anger can’t hide her fear.

“Was that a muggle book?” he asks, frowning.

She looks away, refusing to answer him. He can leave, she won’t say anything about him being there because if she does he’ll be able to say he saw her reading a muggle book. He can just walk away and pretend like nothing happened, and she’ll be grateful for it.

This moment feels important. It feels like it matters.

Does he care if Millie is reading a muggle book? Does it really matter? Her mother is a muggle, after all. She’s only a half blood. He forgets that a lot, because she’s a Bulstrode, part of the Sacred Twenty Eight. She’s cutting and has a terrifying knack for transfiguration. She may be the daughter of a pureblood family but she’s not a pureblood herself. “Is your dad worried about you?”

He didn’t mean to ask that. She must be just as surprised as he is, because she turns to look at him. “What?”

“You know, with the,” he waves his hand to encompass the supposed monster that’s going around attacking students of questionable pedigree. She keeps staring at him, and he doesn’t know what he’s doing, why he’s even asking. He thinks he must be losing his mind when he says, “My mum is worried, and I’m as pure as they come. She’s trying to get my dad to shut down the school, but he won’t hear of it.”

Millie’s lost some of the fear, and now just looks guarded. “If your mum is so worried, why did you stay behind for the holidays?”

His first instinct is draw up the walls around himself, to wear arrogance around his shoulders like armor and use harsh words to cut her to ribbons. But he swallows it down. In the low light of the crackling fire, in the hours between midnight and dawn with Millie staring at him like she’s never seen him before, he pushes down his first instinct. “They’ve been fighting since summer. They never fight. I didn’t want to deal with it, so I decided to stay for the holidays.” He licks his lips and repeats,
“Is your dad worried about you?”

She smiles. He thinks it might be the first time he’s ever seen her smile. “Terrified. But it’s not like it’s much safer for me at home than it is here. It’s one thing to have a bastard child with a muggle. It’s another thing entirely to claim that child as your own and give her your name.”

“You’re parents were married,” he says, even as he’s turning this over in his mind. It seems so hard, and he feels like it shouldn’t be.

Millie is the daughter of a respectable pureblood family. She’s a Slytherin, and a good one at that. She gets them a decent amount of house points from McGonagall, of all people, and she shows up to cheer at every Quidditch game.

“For that short time before my mother died,” Millie agrees, face blank once more. “Just a few days after I was born. Just a few days after my father gave me his name.”

One thing to have a half-blood with the name Bulstrode. Another thing entirely to have a muggle woman with the name.

Blood should remain pure. Muggles and their ilk have no place in their world. But – Millie grew up without a mother, and she’s just as likely to get attacked as Granger or any other halfblood or muggleborn. Millie, who’s one of them. Who knows their customs and wears their colors and would punch anyone who tried to say she was anything less.

“That’s not right,” he says. It comes out sounding almost like a question, and he’s a Malfoy. He’s not unsure about anything. “That’s not right,” he repeats, firmer this time. He’s going to be horrendously late to meet Harry, but this is important.

This is possibly the most important conversation he’s ever had.

“No,” Millie says softly, eyes wide with surprise. “I’ve never thought it was.”

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Harry’s been waiting for almost an hour, and Draco’s never been late before. He can’t decide if he should be angry or worried, because either Draco’s blown him off or there’s a good reason he’s late, like he’d gotten attacked by a monster from the Chamber of Secrets.

He’s just made up his mind to go back to bed and worry there in peace when the door opens and Draco slips into the abandoned classroom they’ve been meeting in. “Where have you been?” Harry demands, scowling. Draco swings the door shut and turns around. He’s paler than normal, and his blue eyes are sharper, more focused. Harry’s never seen him like this before. “Draco?”

“We need to figure out what that monster in the Chamber is and stop it before it manages to kill anyone,” he says. His hands are shaking.

Harry stares. “I – I thought you didn’t care about the muggleborns. I thought you wanted the Chamber to get rid of them.”

His mouth twists into a grimace. “I did too. I don’t – muggles are filth, and they shouldn’t have anything to do with us. I still believe that. I just don’t want anyone to die over it, is all.”

On the surface, it’s not a big thing. Neither Ron nor Hermione would be impressed by it. But Harry can’t imagine Dudley turning an about face on anything like this, can’t imagine what the other Slytherins would do or say if they knew Draco felt this way.
It would probably be weird if he hugged him right now, but he kind of wants to anyway. He restrains himself and says, “Okay. So we’ll work together, so no one has to die over it.”

Draco’s shoulders loosen, like he was afraid that Harry would tell him no, that he wouldn’t let him help.

He thinks he likes him a little more for thinking that and coming to him anyway. Maybe Gryffindors haven’t cornered the market on bravery.

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Of course, this is all easier said than done. Now that school is back in full swing, it’s getting harder and harder for them to find times to meet. Neither of them can afford for their respective roommates to get even more suspicious, so they start carving out time in the middle of the day to sneak away to their favorite unused classroom. It’s the hour before lunch, and Draco slams a book down in front of him and scowls. Sometimes Harry thinks Draco might just be a prettier and meaner version of Hermione. “What is that?” he pokes the large and dusty tome warily, like it might bite him.

“The Complete Index of Magical Creatures by Newt Scamander,” he answers, glowering.

Harry blinks, “Isn’t that the same person who wrote Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them?”

“Yes, obviously. Except that was just a pamphlet that he wrote on the fly one day, in comparison. This is a total guide to every magical creature on the planet. What he didn’t personally experience, he consulted with on experts equal to his own intellect. It was banned by the Ministry almost as soon as it was printed for endorsing the deregulation of dangerous creatures and promoting ideas that could cause harm to the public.” Draco glares at the book like it’s betrayed him. “I’ve read it cover to cover, and there’s not a single viable candidate for Slytherin’s monster. Nothing with the ability to petrify people lives lone enough to be from the founders’ era, and most things that do petrify people do it so they can eat them. Since no one’s been eaten, it probably wasn’t any of them.”

“If it was banned by the Ministry, how do you have a copy?” he reaches for the book, glancing at Draco for permission.

He shrugs, and Harry flips it open to a random page. “Well, my family’s library kept a copy, obviously. It’s the most accurate and thorough investigation of magical creatures to date, regardless of the ‘irresponsible propaganda,’ as my mother calls it.”

Harry looks up sharply, “Did you ask one of your parents to send you this?”

“What do you look like an idiot? Of course not! I just summoned it. I’ll banish it back tonight when no one will be in the library to notice it reappearing again.”

He’s missing something. “You summoned it? How?”

“With a spell,” he snarls, and Harry considered taking this priceless tome and smashing it into Draco’s face. “You’ve seen me to do it, don’t be obtuse. I summoned my snake the same way.”

“That was your snake? I thought it was just a random one.”

Draco sighs. “Do you ever pay attentions in charms?”

“Are you going to say something useful, or did you just come here to mock me?” he asks. “We haven’t even covered summoning spells yet, I don’t know how you know any at all.”
He shrugs, “I don’t see why I can’t do both. Also Flitwick went over the introductory wand movements weeks ago. It’s a lot harder to summon things you haven’t seen or touched before – that’s fifth year spell work, and it’s tricky. Serpensortia is a general snake summoning spell, but if I’d just cast it without a specific snake in mind who knows what would have shown up. It could have been anything, from anywhere, since I can’t control non-specific summoning yet. I didn’t want that, so I summoned Abigail.”

Harry keeps staring at him.

Draco huffs and holds out his wand. “Serpensortia!” The snake appears in a much more controlled manner than before, sliding from the end of Draco’s wand and winding up his arm. It’s not angry or hissing this time, and Draco walks forward with his arm outstretched. “This is Abigail. She’s a great spoiled princess who does nothing but lay around all day.”

“There do you think I learned it from?” she hisses, curling her head around Draco’s wrist.

Harry startles. Draco’s eyes meet his, and widen in understanding. “You can understand her?”

“Yes. She called you spoiled,” he says, and doesn’t realize he’s not speaking English until Abigail’s unwinds herself enough to look at him.

“A Speaker!” she says, delighted. “Excellent. Tell my human that the garden mice are too chewy, and I won’t eat them anymore. It’s either the juicy ones from the forest, or from that place he got my rock with the warming charm on it, those ones are delicious, even if they all taste the same. And that I don’t like his new sheets, I don’t care if they’re silk. The cotton blend was much nicer to curl up in. His mother keeps putting me back into my tank, and I don’t like it. They should just leave the lid off and I’ll come and go as I please. I only interrupted one dinner party after all, and I didn’t even bite anyone, so I don’t see what the fuss is about. I like the wool from my human’s old sweater that he put in my tank, does he have any more? If not, I want another sweater entirely. This one doesn’t smell like him anymore, so it’s just getting in my way."

“Well?” Draco demands, “What is she saying?”

They’re both looking at him with equal expressions of impatience, and Harry can’t help it. It starts out as a giggle, but soon he’s laughing so hard he’s clutching his stomach and trying to catch his breath.

Draco banishes Abigail back to her tank, and then leaves him alone in the classroom, still laughing.

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Draco thinks he’s doing a pretty good job about hiding all his secret meeting with Harry from his friends. He keeps thinking that until Blaise corners him in their room and says, “You’re not involved in any of this, are you? I didn’t think you were, and you’re horrible at keeping secrets from me besides. But you’re sneaking around doing something, and you haven’t told me and you haven’t told Pansy. So what’s going on?”

Blaise is too clever for him to lie to, and he only has two secrets to his name. Both are likely to get him disowned, so he goes for the one that doesn’t involve his soulmate. Not changing in front of Blaise has been a nightmare. He has no idea how Harry’s managed it, considering he shares his room with four other people while Draco’s found it hard enough to hide it from only one.

“Did you know that Millie is a half-blood?”

This clearly isn’t what Blaise was expecting. “Of course, everyone does.”
“There are six more in our house now, and two muggleborns.” he says. “I checked. Which makes it a total of nine Slytherins who could be killed.”

“You’re the son of a Malfoy and a Black. You have nothing to worry about,” he says.

Draco glares, “Yes well, not everything’s about me. I don’t think Millie or anyone else should end up dead just because of how they were born. A girl died last time the Chamber was opened. Muggleborns being petrified for half the year is – whatever, it’s a little funny, if I’m being honest. But I don’t want anyone to die.”

His heart is pounding in his chest, because Blaise has been his best friend since they were kids, and he has no idea what he’s going to do now. They were raised to believe blood was the most important thing. And Draco’s not saying it isn’t important, because it is, but – maybe living is more important than purity. Maybe life is more important.

Blaise keeps silent for an uncomfortably long time, arms crossed. Finally he sighs and says, “I can’t believe you admitted that not everything is about you. I should have let Pansy be here so she could witness that.”

The relief nearly leaves him giddy. He grabs a pillow off his bed, and hits Blaise over the head with it. “You absolute git. Are you going to help me or not?”

“I suppose I better,” he cracks a grin, “You’re useless when you’re alone.”

The truth about Harry is crawling it’s way up his throat, so he grabs the pillow and continues beating Blaise with it until he loses his cool façade and gives into the inevitable pillow fight.

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“You’d think this would be easier, what with all of us working on it,” Draco mutters, looking down at the scroll of notes that he, Blaise, and Pansy had put together. Laid out next to it is the one Hermione, Ron, and Harry had done.

Between them, there’s countless hours of research, and not one single piece of useful information.

That’s how things stay, until Harry drags him into a dimly lit corridor after Transfiguration. “Are you mad?” Draco hisses. “Anyone could see us!”

“This is important,” Harry says, and then tells him everything about the diary and its mysterious contents.

Draco gets more horrified by each word coming out of his soulmate’s mouth. “Harry! Are you stupid, suicidal, or both? Don’t answer that. Whatever that diary is, it sounds like dark magic.”

“Aren’t you listening? Hagrid opened the Chamber!”

“You are stupid,” Draco says in wonder. “Have you seen that great oaf? He wouldn’t hurt a pixie. If one landed on him for too long, he’d adopt it. Additionally, he’s half giant. He didn’t open the Chamber belonging to Salazar Slytherin. If what you saw is true, and that’s a big if because you shouldn’t trust dark magical artifacts, then it was a set up.”

Some of the color has returned to Harry’s face. “You think he might be innocent?”

Honestly. “I think Hagrid has a long list of offences against him, first and foremost being a halfbreed abomination, but he’s no murderer. I don’t believe that Hagrid killed that girl for a second.”
Harry crosses his arms. “I kind of want to hug you and punch you at the same time.”

Draco glances to the entrance of the corridor that someone could walk down any moment and find them. “Probably for the best if you did neither. We need to destroy that diary. Do not write in it again.”

Harry rolls his eyes, “Yes, dear.”

If Draco kills his soulmate, at least he won’t have to deal with his attitude.

~

Of course, they don’t get a chance to try and destroy the diary become someone breaks into their dormitory and steals it.

Harry’s expecting Draco to yell at him. Instead he gets a peculiar look on his face and starts pacing. “Do you think,” he starts, bites his lip, and goes back to pacing.

He tolerates this for a couple minutes before going, “Do I think what?”

Draco’s actually broken the skin on his lip when he turns and says, “Do you think the heir of Slytherin is in Gryffindor?”

“Why would you think that?” he asks, but as soon as the words leave his mouth he knows the answer. The Fat Lady wouldn’t have let anyone but a Gryffindor through, and there were no signs of curses or other tampering. “Bloody hell.”

Draco gives a tight nod and goes back to pacing.

He wants to say that a Gryffindor would never do that, that no one in his house would be trying to murder other students. But he would have said no one in Slytherin would be willing to help muggleborns and halfbloods, but he’s looking at the proof that that isn’t true. If he’s wrong about one, then it’s possible he’s wrong about the other.

What a mess.

~

It’s quiet for the next few months, and they don’t make much progress.

Then Hermione Granger and Penelope Clearwater are found petrified.

Penelope Clearwater is a pureblood.

His mother sends him a flurry of letters, saying that she wants to take Draco out of school, saying that she’s pushing his father to do something about this, saying that Draco should listen to the professors and not wander.

He can’t listen to her, of course. He sneaks out just before dawn and goes to the broken girls’ lavatory with the crying ghost in it, the only place he and Harry can hope to meet without getting caught.

Harry appears not long after, looking exhausted and covered with scratches. “What happened to you?” Draco asks.

“Spiders,” he says, as if that makes any sort of sense at all. “Dumbledore is gone, and Hagrid has
been arrested.”

“Where the bloody hell did he go, at a time like this?” he demands. Then the rest of that statement catches up to him, and he thinks of his mother’s letters. “Oh. My dad–”

“Was behind it all,” he snaps, “I hope you’re proud.”

Draco steps back, stung. “My father isn’t on the board of governors alone, you know. It takes a unanimous vote to remove the headmaster.”

“And I’m sure they thought it up all on their own,” he continues bitterly. “So Hagrid will go to jail for a crime he didn’t commit – again, according to you – while Hermione lays petrified, and your father what? Pats himself on the back?”

“Shut up about my father,” Draco snaps. “Students are dropping left and right, why shouldn’t Dumbledore be removed? He’s clearly not doing anything that matters. Otherwise your precious mudblood wouldn’t be petrified right now.”

Harry grabs the front of his robes and slams him against the wall. “DON’T CALL HER A MUDBLOOD!”

“Don’t talk about my father,” he sniffs, retreating behind his cool pureblood mask. “I know you don’t have any personal experience with this, but most people don’t take well to disparaging remarks about the people who bore and raised them.”

Harry goes white, and Draco almost wants to apologize. But Harry started this, and he might be his soulmate but that doesn’t mean he gets to talk shit about his parents. He lets go of his robes and steps away. “I was such an idiot to think you were any better than the rest of them.”

He doesn’t know where to start with that. That Harry is most certainly an idiot, that the rest of them, as he calls them, are his friends and family, that Draco is trying, dammit. He doesn’t get a chance to say any of it, because Harry walks out of the bathroom and leaves him there alone.

~

They’re not speaking. If Draco wanted a chance to put this whole muggle-loving mindset behind him, the time is now.

Except he’s still worried about Millie and the other Slytherins with muggle blood, and even the kids from other houses if he feels like being brutally honest with himself, which he doesn’t. He still doesn’t want anyone to die. Soulmate or no soulmate.

It’s been a week since their fight, and he’s idly playing with Abigail in his bed, letting her crawl all over his hands and moving them around and farther apart so that she has to keep sliding around to keep from falling onto the mattress. He’s doing his best not to think of Harry, which means he’s thinking of nothing but Harry, and he turns his mind back that first meeting after they touched, where they showed each other their soulmarks. Of course, Harry managed to ruin even then when he ran out of the room like a crazy person straight to a petrified Mrs. Norris, claiming he heard voices –

“Mother of Merlin,” Draco breathes, looking down at Abigail. “It’s a snake.”

Blaise is meeting with Sprout about his final project, and Draco doesn’t want to waste any time trying to find Pansy. He summons his owl and sends off a message to Harry to meet him in that awful girls’ bathroom. Harry might hate him right now, but Draco’s finally figured out what this monster is. He doesn’t know of any snake that can petrify people, but that doesn’t matter. If it’s a
snake, there’s a chance Harry can stop it.

Snape isn’t keeping a close eye on any of them, is trusting their self preservation instincts will keep them safely in the common room. But he can’t send something this important in a letter, and Harry needs to know.

“Where are you going?” Millie asks as he strides to the door. There aren’t many people in the common room, but they all look up at her sharp question.

He glares at her, “None of your business.” He keeps walking towards the exit, but a strong hand grabs his elbow and yanks him back.

“It’s not safe!” Millie says, “You’re a pureblood, but Clearwater is too, and she got attacked anyway. You can’t go.”

There’s no time for this. He yanks himself free of her grip and says, “If I wanted your opinion, Bulstrode, rest assured I would ask for it.”

He runs out before anyone else can stop him. Once he’s in the corridor it’s harder, professors patrolling seemingly at every corner. It takes him too long to get to the bathroom, but when he does there’s no one there. He checks every stall, but there’s just the ghost girl wailing.

Was Harry not able to get away? Didn’t he get his message? Or, worse, was he simply ignoring it?

Draco paces. Harry needs know, and he has no way of sneaking into the Gryffindor common room to tell him, since he let Harry keep the polyjuice potion. He could send Luna to do it, she has friends in Gryffindor. But then he’d have to send his cousin to walk the corridors when there’s some sort of snake that’s trying to kill people, and there’s no way his mother would be okay with that. Then again, she’d probably be less okay with him walking those same corridors, but he can’t help that.

There’s the soft sound of footsteps behind him. “Finally!” he exclaims, turning. “What took you so long?”

It’s not Harry.

It’s a blood soaked girl that after a disorienting moment he places as the Weasley sister. “What happened to you?” he demands, stepping forward but not actually touching her. He can’t see any wounds. “Were you attacked? Was it the snake? We need to get you to the hospital wing!”

He grabs her hand, and it’s cold as ice. He lets go of it immediately, a sense of unease filling him. She slowly turns her head, and her expression is blank. He takes a step back, and something is wrong. Something is very wrong. “I guess I’ll have to change the message,” she says, tilting her head to the side. Her lips curl into a cruel half smile. “You know too much. You’ll have to die with her.”

Draco reaches for his wand, but she’s faster. The last thing he sees is a bright red light.

He’s just thankful it’s not green.

~

“We’re too late,” Harry says, standing with the rest of the students looking at the blood dripping down the wall.

*Their skeletons will lie in the Chamber forever.*
“Who’s missing?” Dean calls out. “Who’s that message talking about?”

McGonagall’s face goes pinched, and she folds her hands together. Her eyes glance at Ron then cut away. “It’s referring to Ginny Weasley and Draco Malfoy. Their parents have already been contacted.”

Harry’s hand goes to his hip, digging his fingers into his soulmark, and a thick, cloying fear fills his throat. He’d gotten Draco’s message, and he’d meant to go, but he’d promised Ron he’d visit Hermione with him, and then they found the message about the basilisk, and he’d forgotten about it.

This can’t be happening.

Not Draco. Not his soulmate. And Ginny – she’s his best friend’s sister.

He looks at Ron, and sees the same determination on his face.

They won’t sit by and do nothing.

~

“That bloody snake,” Ron snarls, “Malfoy is involved, I knew it! He probably took her down there himself. Probably had a big laugh about it, pretending he was innocent to everyone, and then dragging my little sister down there to be murdered. I’m going to wring his skinny neck, the disgusting, arrogant leech. I hope he does die in that Chamber.”

He shouldn’t say anything. Draco wouldn’t want him to say anything.

“SHUT UP!” he shouts. “He’s not – he didn’t! Don’t – he’s in trouble too, and we’re going to help him too. He didn’t do this Ron. He – he didn’t.”

His best friend is staring at him like he’s never seen him before. “What’s gotten into you? Of course he did! Malfoy’s a bigoted bastard, of course he did this!”

Harry is so angry he can’t speak. There’s a mix of guilt and worry churning inside of him, and he doesn’t know how to articulate any of it. So instead he jerks the waistband of his pants down and pulls up his shirt. The rich colors of the iris contrast against his skin, and Ron knows he has a soulmate, he’s seen the little black ring on his hip. He knows what this means. He reaches forward and with shaking fingers delicately touches the edge of a single purple petal. “Malfoy?”

Harry nods once, wound so tight he feels like he might snap. He swallows past the lump in his throat to say. “He’s – he’s kind of awful. But he’s nice too, sometimes. He didn’t take your sister. He’s been trying to help us figure this out for months.”

Ron nods, still looking at the soulmark but clearly not seeing it. “The dueling club?” he asks, “When he put his hand over your mouth. Was that the first time you two touched skin to skin?”

“Yeah,” he rubs the back of his neck. “I know I should have told you, but he wanted to keep it a secret, and I guess I did too. But he’s not the heir. He doesn’t want anyone to die.”

“Well,” Ron says, resigned, “I guess we better save him too then, since he’s your soulmate and nice sometimes.”

~

Lockhart ends up being a complete, spineless coward who they have to march to the Chamber at
wandpoint. Harry runs his fingers over the snake symbol carved into the sink, and he has a sneaking suspicion about what he has to do. He looks to Ron, “Don’t freak out.”

Ron raises both his eyebrows. “You have a wonderfully reassuring personality. Have I ever told you that?”

Harry rolls his eyes, and concentrates on the snake, tries to imagine it moving, thinks of the shifting scales and flickering tongue of Abigail as she wrapped herself around Draco’s arm. “Open,” he hisses.

Lockhart gasps and Ron swears. The sink lowers, then disappears, leaving a large pipe and a long way down. “Off you go,” Ron says cheerfully, and pushes Lockhart down the pipe. Then he turns to Harry, “How long have you been able to do that?”

“My whole life, I think,” he says honestly.

Ron nods, then points his wand at Harry and wags it in a fair approximation of his mother’s disapproving finger. “Any more secrets you feel the need to tell me? Any more secrets, period?”

“No,” he smiles, “that was the last of them.”

“Good,” Ron nods, “you’re my best mate. No more secrets. Okay?”

“Okay,” he agrees, then he and Ron jump down the pipe together.

Ginny and Draco look dead, lying there pale and unmoving. Harry wants to run to them, wants to shake them until they wake up, wants Draco’s bright blue eyes to glare at him. He wants his soulmate.

They were so cruel to each other, the last time they spoke.

This can’t be the end. This can’t be how their story ends.

Draco wakes up slowly, the stunning spell wearing off sluggishly. First he’s aware that he’s lying on a cold, dirty floor. Second that people are talking, and after a moment of concentration he realizes it’s Harry and whoever the Heir actually is, since it’s obviously not Ginny Weasley.

He wants to scream at Harry to run, but he can’t, not yet. He’s still under the effects of the stunning spell, and it will be several more minutes before it wears off fully. By the time the mostly-corporeal form declares himself to be Lord Voldemort, Draco can feel his muscles again, even if they’re sore and heavy as lead. About the time that the dark lord wannabe summons a basilisk (and why did none of them think of basilisks, just because they don’t typically petrify their prey doesn’t mean they can’t, he feels like such an idiot) the spell has worn off enough that he can roll painfully to his feet.

“YOU’RE A PARSELMOUTH!” he shouts, despairing not for the first time that his soulmate is this much of moron. “SPEAK TO THE BLOODY SNAKE!”

“Draco! You’re awake!” Harry says joyously, then nearly gets eaten by the giant basilisk. Draco screams. Harry tries hissing at it, and it merely lunges and almost swallows him whole. “It’s not listening!”
Tom laughs, delicately twirling Harry’s wand between his fingers. “She’s loyal only to me, you simpletons. Mine was the first voice she heard since Slytherin himself. She won’t betray me.”

Draco reaches inside his robe. He still has his wand.

If Tom’s life force really is connected to Ginny’s, he won’t be able to hurt him without hurting her. But he can help Harry.

He pulls his wand from robes. “Serpensortia!”

A rattlesnake comes from his wand. Tom’s laugh takes on a decidedly mocking edge. “Oh, please, summon all the little helpers you desire. I won’t even stop you.”

Draco grits his teeth, then forces himself to relax and breathe. He holds out his wand, straining his memory and focusing on every overly detailed paragraph of Scamander’s Index. “Serpensortia! Serpensortia! Serpensortia!”


Harry hisses in between running from the snake, and they all go to him, but are no help against a basilisk.

He can do this. Charms is his best subject. “Serpensortia!”

A thirty foot python comes crackling to life, and it’s strong enough to knock the basilisk off course. It dances according to Harry’s shouted instructions, and is just big enough to be annoying but small enough to slither away.

“Serpensortia!” he shouts, and a forty foot anaconda joins the fray.

These aren’t what he’s trying to summon. This isn’t what he wants.

“Serpensortia!”

An improbably large ashwinder slides across the floor, leaving scorch marks in its wake. It must have come from a volcano.

“Impressive,” Tom says, looking at him in a way that makes his skin crawl. “Perhaps I should have taken your magic instead.”

That’s disgusting. “You’re not taking anyone’s magic,” he says, stalking forward to place himself between Tom and the Weasley girl. “You’re not going to do anything. You’ll never leave this Chamber.”

There’s an edge of pity when Tom says, “Your summons are well done, and they are proving to be distracting. But the basilisk will kill them soon enough, and then Harry Potter. Then you.”

“No one,” he grits out, holding his wand so tightly he’s afraid he might snap it, “is going to kill Harry Potter. And certainly not you, you filthy half-breed mudblood.”

The anger that twists Tom’s face is absolutely worth it. Draco throws out his arm, wand held straight and firm, the promise of victory singing in his veins. “SERPENSORTIA!”

For a moment, nothing happens.

The out from his wand springs what he’d been trying to summon all along – a wild wyvern.
A cross between a serpent and a dragon, it’s about half as tall as the basilisk is long. It’s a terrifying, wild beast that should never be approached in any circumstances.

But Harry opens his mouth, and that strange slithering language comes out.

Not long after, the wyvern and basilisk are locked in a battle to the death.

It’s taken too much magic out of him, and it’s all Draco can do to stay on his feet and not collapse onto the Chamber floor. “You were saying?” he asks, raising a single eyebrow in his best imitation of his father.

~

The wyvern is amazing. He’s biting and clawing at the basilisk, and Harry gains a moment of inspiration and shouts, “The eyes! Blind it!”

It changes its attack, and mere minutes later the basilisk shrieks in pain as it’s deadly eyes are pecked out by the wyvern’s talons. Tom’s yelling in anger, but Harry can’t focus on that. He sends the ashwinder to slither across the basilisk, and wherever they touch the basilisk’s tough scales are burned away. It means the smaller snakes that Draco summoned are actually helpful. They can climb onto the basilisk’s back and bite directly into its muscles, and the creature shrieks in pain.

The basilisk flings its massive body around in attempt to dislodge the other snakes attacking it and escape the wyverns attacks. It hits the walls of the Chamber with thunderous strength. The wyvern seems to think that’s an excellent idea, because it begins hitting its body against the ceiling as well. Harry doesn’t understand until a large piece of the stone work ceiling falls and lands on its head, disorienting it enough that it only sways confusedly for a moment. The ashwinder takes that opportunity to crawl even further up its body, leaving blistering bleeding flesh wherever it touches.

The wyvern continues with its plan, throwing its massive body against the ceiling, and soon the stone of the ceiling begins to crack and fall.

“TAKE COVER!” he screams, and realizes when only Tom reacts that he hadn’t said it in English.

~

Tom is corporeal enough to run. Draco looks up, and he has the time to throw himself out of the way. But he’s standing next to Ginny, and if he runs he won’t have to worry about Tom killing her because she’ll be crushed to death, and if they survive this it will be up to him and Harry to carry back her mangled corpse.

He doesn’t want anyone to die.

Draco throws his wand straight up in the air. He’s the best charms student Hogwarts has had in years. He’s exhausted and hurt and tired, but he can do this. He’s a Malfoy. “PROTEGO!”

The soft blue light of the shield erupts from his wand just in time to stop them both from being crushed by a large piece of the stone ceiling. It cracks and breaks over his shield. Draco grits his teeth and is forced to his knees from the force of it, still holding the shield above them as more bits of ceiling come crashing down on them.

The Weasley girl has gained some color, and her eyes are moving rapidly behind her eyelids. Draco looks to the diary besides them, then up, and Tom is pressed against the side of the chamber. The farther he is from the diary, the less power he has, the less he’s able to pull from Ginny. They need to destroy the diary.
He doesn’t have enough breath in his lungs to shout, so he picks up the diary and holds it up. He doesn’t know where Harry is, if he can see them or even if he’s still conscious, but it’s their only hope.

It takes Harry a moment to figure out what Draco is waving about with his free hand, but as soon as he does he understands what he wants. He can’t get to them with the pieces of ceiling falling everywhere, so he gives a set of whispered instructions to the rattlesnake.

It darts around the falling debris and hurries to Draco’s side. It discovers a problem when it can’t get through Draco’s shield, and there’s an terrifying second when Draco cancels his charm so he can throw the diary to the snake and then recasts it just in time to prevent a stone fragment the size of his head from landing on Ginny.

Once he has the diary in his hands, Harry has no idea what to do with it. He doesn’t have his wand, and Draco had mentioned something about burning it before, but there’s no convenient fire around him.

He momentarily forgets about the diary when the wyvern gives a triumphant screech that nearly deafens him. The basilisk sways once more, before falling to the floor with enough force to shake the whole chamber. Its head is bloody and right in front of him. It lies there, alive but unconscious with its mouth open and panting.

Harry’s eyes fix on the basilisk’s fangs glistening with venom, and he has a terrible, wonderful idea. Tom’s scream of defeat as he fades to nothing is so worth the absolute terror of sticking his arms into the basilisk’s mouth and shoving the diary through one of its fangs.

Ginny is mostly awake by the time Harry makes his way over to them. Draco is pale and sitting on the ground, looking like it’s taking all his energy not to fall over. Harry wants to touch him, wants to grab him and yell at him and say he’s sorry and shake him until he stops feeling afraid.

But Ginny’s brown eyes are looking between them both in confusion, and Draco gives a little shake of his head. Whatever they have to say to each other, it will have to wait. “It’s all right,” he tells Ginny, helping her up and wincing when she throws herself into his arms and clings to him, shaking. “You’re fine, we’re all fine.”

“Just brilliant,” Draco groans, and Harry doesn’t try and stop the smile that steals across his face since Ginny can’t see it. “Say your goodbyes so I can get rid of them.”

Harry turns around, and all the snakes Draco had summoned, including the Wyvern, are behind him, watching and waiting. “Thank you,” he hisses, and doesn’t react to Ginny stiffening against him. “We would have all died if it wasn’t for you.”

“Yes,” the ashwinder says while the Wyvern makes a breathy sound that Harry interprets as laughter. The more common snakes just incline their heads.

He turns away and looks to Draco when he says, “Go ahead.”

Draco raises his wand. He takes a deep breath, steadying himself. “Reditus!”

With a crackle of magic, the snakes return from where they came. Draco’s face goes ashen, and it
physically hurts Harry not to go over and help him. Unexpectedly, it’s Ginny who goes, “Are you all right?”

“Fine,” Draco grits out, forcing himself to his feet and making a useless effort to brush some of the dirt from his robes. “Let’s go.”

“What about that?” Harry jerks his head to the still living basilisk.

He shrugs. “Either it will die, or it won’t. Not our problem. Grab the diary, and let’s get out of here before it decides to wake up and eat us out of spite.”

~

Harry hadn’t come alone, as Draco discovers when they reach the entrance to the Chamber and Ron is there waiting for them. He hugs his sister and Harry, and gives Draco a complicated look that Draco returns with a glare. Harry definitely told him something.

Getting back to the surface ends up being easier than they’d feared, since with a bit of Pareseltongue floating stairs appear to take them to the top, an out-of-it Lockhart included.

“I’ll take him the infirmary,” Ron says with a disgusted look towards Lockhart. “You lot should head to Dumbledore’s office.”

“Why?” Draco asks, wrinkling his nose. All he really wants is a shower.

“Our parents are probably there by now. McGonagall contacted them,” Ron says, and Draco considers just sliding back to the Chamber.

They walk to Dumbledore’s office, and it takes longer than it should, the three of them pained and exhausted. “Do you know the password?” Harry asks when they’re standing in front of the golden griffin.

“This is a bloody emergency,” Draco snaps at the statue, “Our parents are up there and we have a cursed diary and I am positively covered in something unidentifiable and gross. Open up.”

Harry sighs, “I really don’t think—”

The entrance slides open, revealing the spiral staircase to Dumbledore’s office. Draco throws him a smug look, and leads them up the staircase. He pretends he doesn’t see Harry rolling his eyes.

They hear sobbing before they open the door, and Ginny pushes past them and into the office, crying, “Mum!”

Draco and Harry walk in after that to the sight of Molly and Arthur Weasley clutching their daughter. Dumbledore sits at his desk with McGonagall and Snape on either side. Draco’s parents are seated opposite the Weasleys, not a hair out of place or anything more than polite disinterest on their faces. “Mother. Father,” he says, swallowing down his nervousness. For some reason he can’t think of, Dobby is cowering behind his parents’ chairs. He knows no one but them can see him, but he can’t think of why he’s here in the first place. He makes a note to ask about it later.

His mother sniffs and takes out her wand, “You’re positively filthy, darling. Did you forget how to cast a scourgify charm?”

There’s no way he’s going to admit he doesn’t have enough magic to cast so much as Wingardium Leviosa, so he gives an elegant shrug that he’d learned from her.
She tuts at him and twists her wand in a complicated pattern. The dirt and grime falls from his clothes and skin onto the floor, and she banishes that with another swish of her wand. “Much better.”

There’s tension in them still, from the too stiff line of her mouth to the unnatural stillness of his father. They’re not alone, he can’t throw himself into their arms like Ginny did with her parents, but he wants to. More than that, he wants them to stop being worried about him, but he can’t think of how to reassure them while they’re standing in a room with Dumbledore and the Weasleys.

“My, my,” Dumbledore says, eyes twinkling. Draco wants to pluck them out just like the wyvern did the basilisk. “It appears you have an interesting story to tell us, Harry.”

Draco stands by his parents while Harry tiredly explains it all, thankfully omitting any mention of Draco. He can’t help but be impressed with Granger – she’d figured it out before any of them. He may be a stronger caster than her, but he can admit, at least to himself, that she’s cleverer than him. Harry mentions Draco summoned the snakes but minimizes his efforts as much as possible in his retellings, which he appreciates. This is going to be an awkward enough conversation with his parents without having to explain his dozens of stupid decisions in detail, especially since he’s not planning to tell him the why of any of it. Not for the first time, Draco’s thankful he and Harry’s soulmarks are in an easy to hide place.

Harry’s just winding down when Ginny pipes up from her mother’s arms, “Malfoy saved my life.”

Draco twists around to give her his most vicious glare. She stares back, unimpressed. “Miss Weasley?” McGonagall asks, uncertain.

“Keep your filthy mouth shut, blood traitor,” he growls, “You were unconscious for most of it. You don’t know what you’re talking about.” He was so sure she hadn’t seen anything, but clearly he was wrong.

Her parents’ faces go thunderous, and her father rises to his feet. “Now see here–”

“I was possessed, not blind,” she shoots back, leaving the safety of her mother’s arms to stomp forward and glare at him. He matches her step for step, until they’re nearly snarling in each other’s faces. “The ceiling was falling on us, and you were right beside me. You had some sort of shield up, and the stones were cracking on top of it.”

“I was protecting myself,” he says, “You just happened to be there.”

Everyone’s looking at him now, and he hates it.

“Tom had enough time to run away, so you did too,” she says stubbornly. “You could have even left me after that, taken your shield and gotten to safety. But you didn’t. You risked your life to stay by my side and protect me. You saved my life.”

“A decision I’m regretting by the second,” he snarls. “You should have been smothered in your cradle, you rotten wench.”

There’s an outcry at his words, Arthur halfway to rising again. Ginny is unfazed. She pokes him in the chest, “Say whatever mean things you want. What you say doesn’t change what you did.”

He liked her more when Tom was possessing her and she was devoid of any personality. They stare at each other for a long moment before he says, “I think I hate you.”

“I’m okay with that,” she informs him.

Could this get any worse? He presses his lips into a thin line and stomps over to Dumbledore’s desk, grabbing the diary and smacking it into Arthur’s chest. “If you truly want to thank me, you could teach your children not to be such blithering idiots,” he says. “You’re the Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Department, and your daughter was possessed by a cursed diary. She should have known to burn it the second it talked back to her. None of this should have happened.” Arthur goes red in the face, but doesn’t say anything. Good. He sighs, and manages to make it sound more irritated than exhausted. “If you need nothing more from me, I’ll be leaving.” He turns to his parents and inclines his head, “Mother. Father.”

He waits for them to nod in return before sweeping out of there without a backwards glance to any of them.

It’s only through sheer stubbornness that he makes it back the Slytherin common room. He takes one step inside, and Millie is running towards him. More people are closing in, he can see Blaise and Pansy struggling to get to him. He ignores them for the moment, grabbing Millie’s forearms and saying, “Don’t worry, you’re safe. The monster won’t be hurting anyone else.”

“What happened?” Millie cries, eyes tracking the places where Draco’s sure bruises have started to surface.

“Everything’s fine,” he repeats, then frowns. “Don’t take me to the hospital wing.”

He passes out before Millie can question him, and can only hope she’ll catch him before he hits the floor.

~

Harry can’t remember the last time he was this furious. Draco had nearly died! His parents were here because they’d been told he was missing and presumed dead, and they reacted like it meant nothing. No tears, no yelling, just blank faces. They hadn’t even touched him.

Dobby was hiding behind Lucius Malfoy’s robes and looking at him pointedly. Which just makes this whole mess so much worse, because it means Dobby works for the Malfoys, it means Lucius orchestrated this whole plot in the first place and it nearly killed his son and he doesn’t even care.

Everyone has left but him, and Dumbledore is still staring at him over his half-moon glasses, but Harry can’t concentrate on that right now. “Is there something you want to tell me, Harry?” he asks softly, “Anything at all?”

He starts to look up at the headmaster, but his eyes get caught halfway there on the Tom Riddle’s diary. Just like when he shoved his hands into the basilisk’s mouth, he has another terrible, wonderful idea. “Not really,” he says. He undoes his shoe, takes off one of his socks, then snatches the diary off of Dumbledore’s desk and goes running out of his office. “I need this!” he calls over his shoulder, and when the headmaster doesn’t try and stop him he takes it as permission.

Narcissa’s disdain and Lucius’s anger when Harry tricks them into freeing their house elf is sweet.

~

Draco spends the next week in bed, and insists he’s simply tired when people try and push him into going to the infirmary. It’s partially true. The only cure for magical exhaustion is rest. He gets an owl from Harry with a short note saying that he’s told Ron and Hermione about them, the latter who’s
back to her normal annoying self thanks to the mandrakes being ready.

He figures all’s fair in love and war, and so he locks the door to his room with Blaise and Pansy inside and shows them the three marigolds that bloom across his hip. “Bloody hell,” Blaise says, wide eyed. Pansy is poking at the mark like she can’t believe it’s real. Blaise’s mother has a soulmark, but it’s still that little black ring at the base of her throat, even four husbands later. Neither Pansy nor Blaise have marks of their own, but they’d known that Draco did.

“If either of you breathe a word of this to anyone, I’ll murder you in your sleep,” he promises.

They both shake their heads, and Draco relaxes a little at their vehemence. “Does this mean we need to start being nice to the Gryffindorks?” Pansy asks.

Draco is sure he looks properly offended by the way she starts giggling. “Absolutely not.”

~

It’s only a couple days before the start of summer break when he and Draco finally get a chance to meet again. Harry has slowly been going mad, what with Draco hiding out in his dorms for a week, and not looking quite back to normal even when he’d returned. Hermione and Ron had been shocked when he listed off all the spells Draco had performed in the Chamber, and neither of them were surprised that he was taking a while to recover.

So now he’s pacing back in forth in the unused classroom, white knuckled and scraping his teeth against his lip. This is the first time they’ve really spoken since their disastrous meeting in the girls’ bathroom weeks ago. The door opens and closes, and Harry whirls around. Draco is standing there, looking at him with that cool mask of his, and Harry knows him well enough to know that it is a mask. “Yes?” he says when Harry only stares at him.

Draco is proper and stiff when he’s not being a bastard, and Harry had a proper and stiff apology planned. But he forgets all of it and flings himself at Draco, wrapping his arms around him like he’d wanted to do so badly in the Chamber and couldn’t because Ginny was there. “I’m really glad that you’re okay,” he whispers, pressing his face into Draco’s shoulder. “I was so scared when I saw that message, when I saw you lying there.”

Draco relaxes and hesitantly returns the hug. “You scared me too,” he says, “what with fighting the basilisk and Tom. Don’t do that again.”

“I’ll try not to if you do too,” he retorts, and smiles when he can feel Draco shaking with laughter. They pull apart, and Harry urges to scrub his arm over his eyes. He’s not even sure why he’s crying anyway. He hesitates, but says. “Draco – your father, he – he,” he stops, torn. He doesn’t want to get into another fight, but Draco deserves to know.

“It’s okay,” he says, a faint smile curling around the edges of his mouth. “It’s a good thing I ended up getting taken. The Board of Governors was convinced he was involved, and he nearly lost his position. But luckily none of them believed he’d release a monster that would attack his own son, so he’s safe.”

“But he did,” Harry says helplessly, “He was the one who gave Ginny the diary.”

He shrugs, “I know. But he didn’t mean for me to become involved. And – he’s still my dad, Harry.”

He’s aware this isn’t a fight he’s going to win today, or possibly ever, so he drops it. “I can’t get owls during summer vacation.”
Draco brightens. “Well, I can’t be getting any letters from Harry Potter over the summer, either, so that’s fine. I made us something.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out two small compact mirrors, like the kind Aunt Petunia keeps in her purse. “I got these from Millie and Pansy, you’d think I was asking for their newborns the way they were carrying on. I told them I’d get them better ones over vacation anyway.” He rolls his eyes and plops the one with delicately carved pansies into his hand, and keeps the green one Harry assumes used to be Millie’s. “They have linked Siarad charms on them. Just open it and say my name, and my mirror will chime, and vice versa. We’ll be able to speak to each other through them.”

Draco looks absurdly pleased with himself.

Harry had already resigned himself to a lonely summer, barely talking to his friends or his soulmate. But now he’ll have Draco right there, in his pocket, the whole summer.

He hugs him again because he can’t think of what else to do, and Draco’s laughter makes his cheeks flush.

~

Draco meets his parents on the platform, stepping off the Hogwarts Express with his luggage trailing behind him. His mother tucks a stray piece of hair behind his ear and says, “Come along, darling.”

They haven’t said anything of importance in their letters since the Chamber, well aware that their family is under scrutiny because of the incident. His father doesn’t look at him as they walk off the platform to their carriage, and a low pit of dread grows in his stomach. Is he really that mad at him that he won’t even look at him?

Draco steps into the carriage before his parents, and as soon as they’re settled it’s off, heading towards their manor.

Narcissa breaks character instantly, throwing herself forward and pulling him to her chest. “I was so worried,” she says, voice trembling as she holds him tight enough that it’s a little painful, but he’s not going to tell her that. “When Snape called – and they told us you were gone, that you – that your skeleton–” She starts crying for real then, and leans back to press kisses all over his face.

“Mum!” he laughs, making half hearted attempts to stop her kissing frenzy. “I’m fine! Everything’s fine, you don’t have to be upset. I’m okay.”

“I would have torn that castle down to the foundations,” she says fiercely, “I would have flayed Dumbledore alive, inch by inch, and relished in his screams.”

“I know,” he says, beaming, and he knows threats of violence aren’t how most mothers show their affection, but Narcissa isn’t most mothers. She’s his, and she’s the best. “I love you too, Mum.”

She kisses him once more on each cheek, and settles back into her seat, summoning a handkerchief to dab delicately at her eyes.

He looks to his father, who’s seated on the other side, stiff and silent and looking at the window. Draco stares at him, waiting for his lecture, and when it doesn’t come he realizes something.

His father isn’t angry. He’s scared.

Draco inches down the seat so he’s sitting directly across from his father. His hands are clenched into fists and now that Draco’s really looking at him, he looks different. Older. Tired. He doesn’t like it, and he doesn’t want it.
“I’m thinking of trying out for chaser next year,” he blurts out, desperate for anything that will chase the grief from his father’s face. “There’s going to be an open spot, and Adrien says I’ll make a better chaser than seeker anyway, the wanker.”

Lucius slowly looks from the window to him, and there’s still something dark in his face. “I–” he starts, but can’t finish, pressing his lips together in a hard line.

Draco reaches forward and covers his father’s hands with his own. Lucius flinches. “Dad. It’s okay. I’m okay, you don’t have to worry. I’m alive, and I’m fine, and I’m right here. I’m not mad,” he adds earnestly, and he knows that this will be a problem later. He doesn’t want anyone to die, but his father does, and he’ll have to deal with that at some point. But his father would never want him to die, so it’s a problem for a different day. “I know you’d never hurt me.”

Lucius finally turns his hands over so he can clasp Draco’s in his own, rubbing his thumbs over the back of his hands. He meets his gaze, and Draco smiles, trying to show that he means it. Tension leaks from his father, and some of the terrible gravity has lifted from his face when he says, “We’ll get you some private coaching this summer. Flitwick recommended we give you supplemental charms training as well, to ensure your progress continues at its exemplary rate.”

“Great!” Draco beams. “Chars is my favorite subject.”

His father smiles at him, a slow, small thing. Draco counts it a victory.

Harry’s already had to deal with hours of lectures from his aunt and uncle, and he’d tried not to stare at the matching birds on their necks as they’d yelled at him. He’d always known Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon were soulmates, of course, but it had never seemed to matter before. Then he’d had a chores list shoved into his hand that was three pages long, and he’d stopped caring about their soulmarks. They’d locked up his school things, and Petunia had sent him to work in the garden as soon as they’d gotten home.

He falls into bed filthy and exhausted, knowing he should shower but not able to find the energy to make himself do it. There’s a painful sunburn over the back of his neck and arms. The Dursleys insist he doesn’t need sunblock because of his dark skin, in spite of the many times he’s proven them wrong with blistering, angry burns.

He pushes all that aside. His heart is pounding as he reaches into the box of clothes the Dursleys had let him keep. He carefully unrolls a pair of socks and takes out the engraved mirror. He sits up in bed, and holds it to his chest. He hopes this works. He opens it and says clearly, “Draco Malfoy.”

For a moment, there’s nothing at all, and the disappointment threatens to cripple him. Then there’s what looks like a ripple across the glass and Draco’s face fills the mirror. He’s in blue silk pajamas, and there’s a light grey wall behind him. Abigail is draped across his shoulders. “About time,” he grins, then frowns. “Is that mud on your forehead, Harry?”

He sounds so scandalized that Harry has to bury his face in his pillow to muffle his laughter, which means he’s sure to have just gotten his pillowcase covered in mud as well. He can’t bring himself to care.

Draco is lecturing him on cleanliness while Abigail hisses demands for him to translate, and Harry thinks that maybe this summer won’t be so bad.
I hope you liked it so far!

Feel free to follow / harass me at: shanastoryteller.tumblr.com
Harry knows that panicking won’t help anything.

But he’s just blown up his aunt, threatened the Dursleys with magic, and now he’s out in the middle of the street with no idea where to go or what to do, and okay, he’s definitely panicking.

He reaches into his pocket for the mirror, hands shaking. “Draco Malfoy,” he says, and drops down on the side of the curb with his trunk besides him. Nothing happens. “Draco Malfoy!”

There’s another long silence, and then the surface of the mirror ripples like water and his soulmate’s face appears. “What is it?” he hisses, “I’ve stuffed myself in the food cupboard. The Lestranges are over for dinner, I can’t talk.”

From what little Harry can see, the Malfoy’s food cupboard looks to be roughly the size of the Dursley’s whole house. “I blew up Aunt Marge!” he blurts, and Draco goes from irritated to alarmed. “The Dursleys are pissed, and I just grabbed my stuff and left, and I don’t know what to do!”

“Did you use your wand to blow her up?” Draco demands, “How blown up is she? If there are any remains where muggles can see them, make sure to put up a glamour charm. Wait, do you even know any glamour charms? Bloody hell, you need a lawyer. The best lawyer I know is my father, but that’s obviously not an option. I think my dad took the barrister exams with a Longbottom–”

“DRACO!” he shouts. “Not that kind of blowing up! Like – a balloon. She floated away!”

He stares at Harry for a long moment, then slumps against what looks like an entire wall of pickled carrots. “Why didn’t you say that? Who cares! Good riddance. From what you told me, she deserved it.”

Harry rolls his eyes, “Draco. What am I supposed to do now?”

“Exactly what I’ve been telling you to do all summer,” he says. “Go to Diagon Alley where you’re not treated worse than a house elf and don’t have to do your bloody homework under a blanket like a criminal.”

“How am I supposed to get there? Fly?”

“No, you muggle raised simpleton. Take the Knight Bus. Mum won’t let us take it, says it’s for common folk, so it should be right up your alley.”

Sometimes he feels like Draco’s speaking a whole other language. “The what?”

“Just put your wand in the air, get to Diagon, and don’t go wandering around at night anymore,” he says, and Harry can’t help but think the last part is a little odd. “If I don’t get back to dinner my mother is going to murder me. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

The mirror shimmers and Draco is gone. Harry sighs and closes the compact, shoving it back into his pocket. Draco’s an arse, but he feels a lot better than he did a few minutes ago.
“Here goes nothing,” he mutters, and shoves his wand into the air.

Before the knight bus slams down in front of him, Harry barely sees the outline of a great black dog.

~

Harry will never, ever tell Draco this, but it’s possible that he’d had the right idea all along.

Once he figures out he’s not going to be sent to Azkaban for using magic, staying in Diagon Alley is like a dream come true. He does his homework under sunlight, and doesn’t have to do any more ridiculous chores.

It’s nice to be able to talk to Draco during the day too, to sit in his room in the Leaky Cauldron and argue over quidditch or whatever other topic they’re on that day. He sees a lot of the Malfoy grounds this way, Draco going for a walk so they can speak in private and showing Harry the weeping willows around a pond in the back. Harry tries not to think of the size of the Malfoy Estate too much because it gives him a headache, but after a summer catching glimpses of it, he’s almost certain that it’s only about half the size of the grounds at Hogwarts.

Those weeks pass too quickly, and the next thing he knows it’s the end of summer and Ron and Hermione are flinging their arms around him, Ron improbably taller and Hermione’s skin even darker thanks to her weeks vacationing in France.

It’s time to return to Hogwarts.

~

“Potter?” Blaise asks sympathetically as soon he seems him. Pansy tries to cover her snort with a cough, and doesn’t quiet succeed. Draco checks the corridor and makes sure there’s no one around, then casts a sound muffling charm for good measure.

“He’s infuriating,” he snaps, smoothing his robe by running his hands down and over the shiny silver buttons. He hasn’t seen either of them since Harry dragged him from dinner saying he’d blown up his aunt, so he lets the whole story spill out of him now, growing increasingly more frustrated as he talks. He’s been holding it in, unwilling to write about Harry in their letters and risk one of the parents opening their mail. “He’s such an idiot! He has no sense of self preservation, I’m honestly astounded he’s even alive. Black is out there, obviously looking to finish what he started, and he just goes running out without any of thought of where to go or what to do! What if I hadn’t answered? What was his plan? Hang around in plain sight until he got murdered?”

“So things are going well,” Blaise says, deadpan. Pansy is laughing so hard she’s clutching her stomach. He hates both of them. “Did you manage to get anything else out of your parents about Black?”

Draco scowls, “No. Dad claims not to have known him, and all Mum would say was that he was a difficult child. She’s his cousin and only four years older than him, there’s no way she doesn’t know more. They were in Hogwarts together! But she just told me not to get involved and to stay out of the way.”

“There’s no involved!” Blaise exclaims.

“Out of the way of what?” Pansy asks.

Draco opens his mouth to explain about what his dad had warned him about this morning, but when his breath comes out in cloud in front of him he realizes he doesn’t have to.

The dementors are on the train.
“I’ve got to go,” he says, and pulls the door open. “Don’t leave the compartment. It’s not safe.”

They’re calling after him, but Draco ignores them. He closes the door, and takes a sharp right, moving down the train and away from where the horrible cloaked figures have to be, right at the front of the train if he looks, but he’s not going to look because that would be idiotic. He goes stalking down the corridor, glancing in each compartment before slamming their door shut and locking it. Most of them don’t even see him before he does it, which is for the best.

Whenever he happens upon a compartment containing Slytherins he says, “Wands out. Keep this locked.” None of the other houses will listen to him, so he doesn’t bother.

He finally finds the compartment with Harry in his friends at the back of the train.

“Muggle loving freaks,” he sneers, because people can hear him. They all look drawn out already, and Harry is worryingly pale. “Stay here,” he says, quieter, and steps away before they can say anything in return. He’s freezing, and he doesn’t have much time. They must already be on the train if he’s this cold.

He finishes the last couple of compartments, then doubles back, keeping his eyes on the plush carpet the entire time. He slips into a compartment about a third of the way down with only one person in it. He casts the most powerful locking charm he knows, not that it will do them much good against a dementor.

“Draco?” He looks back at Luna. She’s huddled deep in her robe, and her eyes are wide and afraid. “I’m cold.”

No warming charm can help them, because this isn’t a cold that they’re feeling in their skin. “Me too,” he says instead of telling her that. He doesn’t actually know any spells that will work against a dementor so he steps back and sits between Luna and the door. “Here.” He lifts his arm, and Luna huddles into his side.

Dad said that there would be dementors at the castle, not on the train. They aren’t supposed to be here.

~

Harry meets Draco in their classroom that night. He only manages it because Ron helps distract their roommates so he can disappear, and he doesn’t know he managed at all back when he was hiding it from his best friend too.

“You fainted?” Draco says, the same taunting words he’d said in the great hall except now they’re full of concern. He reaches out for him, but pulls his arms back. Harry has no such restraints. He grips Draco in a crushing hug, just like he had Ron and Hermione. Months of talking through the mirrors isn’t the same as really seeing him. Draco returns the hug, and Harry can tell he really is worried by the strength of it. “Did they touch you?”

“I think they might have tried,” Harry admits, “but the new professor stopped them. Lupin. It was amazing.”

Draco’s scowling when he pulls back, “Him and that half-breed Hagrid as professors. What is Hogwarts coming too.”

Harry flicks him in the nose, “Don’t talk about Hagrid like that.”

He means to ask what he has against Lupin, but Draco gives a noncommittal shrug and says, “You
need to be careful. Black is after you, and the Dementor aren’t to be trusted. The Board of Governors voted against them being allowed on the grounds, said they posed too great a risk to the other students, but Fudge overruled them.”

“Does everyone know about Black being after me?” Harry asks, and tries not to sound whiny.

Judging by Draco’s expression, he doesn’t succeed.

Harry lets it go and pulls out of a roll of parchment. “Will you look over this really quickly? Tonight?”

He takes the parchment and unrolls it, eyebrows drawing together. “The charms essay? I helped you write this! Why do you want me to look it over?”

Harry rubs the back of his neck. “Er, it’s not mine. It’s Hermione’s.” Draco is just staring at him, but he doesn’t look upset so he adds, “She wanted you to look at her Potions essay too. If you don’t mind.”

Draco scowls, but it’s not enough to hide the pleased flush high on his cheeks. “I suppose. But only if she double checks my Arithmancy equations. I left it to the last minute, and Mum didn’t have a chance to do it. Our class is on Wednesday, so it needs to be before then.”

“Sure,” he says. He’s sure Hermione will be delighted.

Ron had been a lot more on board with the whole Draco being his soulmate thing when Harry had told him they could probably get away with throwing Hermione and Draco at each other and running away.

~

Harry is certain nothing can be worse than that disaster of a divination lesson.

Harry is wrong.

Draco does everything right, the bowing and the eye contact, and he doesn’t walk forward until Buckbeak bows in return. He’s giving the hippogriff the same affectionate smile he gives Abigail when he says, offhand, “He is kind of ugly, isn’t he?”

Harry’s halfway to rolling his eyes when Hagrid shouts and Buckbeak screeches. His talons cut through Draco’s arm, then Draco is screaming, high pitched and terrified. It’s only Ron’s hand fisted in the back of his robes that stops Harry from rushing forward.

Hagrid pushes Buckbeak away before he can attack again, but there’s already a puddle of red underneath Draco, who’s trying to struggle to his knees. Millicent takes off her robe and presses it against the slashes, and it’s soaked with blood in an alarmingly short amount of time, “He needs the hospital wing!” she cries. “Hagrid!”

Hagrid pushes Buckbeak away before he can attack again, but there’s already a puddle of red underneath Draco, who’s trying to struggle to his knees. Millicent takes off her robe and presses it against the slashes, and it’s soaked with blood in an alarmingly short amount of time, “He needs the hospital wing!” she cries. “Hagrid!”

Draco looks like he wants to argue, but he tries to stand and his legs give out on him halfway up. It’s only Millicent’s quick reflexes that stop him from cracking his head on the ground. “Hagrid!” Hermione says, “You need to take him to the hospital wing! Now!”

Hagrid’s hesitating, and Harry nearly says something but Ron elbows him in side. Daphne Greengrass actually stomps her foot. “Hagrid!”

He finally nods and pulls Draco from Millicent’s arms. The sound Draco makes at the movement
sound like it’s being ripped from him, and standing there and pretending not to react is torture for
Harry.

The rest of the class can only stand there, looking at the spot where Draco stood and the puddle of
dark red he left behind. Millicent is standing there robeless, with red dotting her crisp white shirt.

“That’s a lot of blood,” Hermione says without thinking, and then winces.

“He’ll be fine,” Ron says, speaking loudly so all the anxious looking Slytherins turn towards him.
“Madame Pomfrey will take care of him. She’s taken care of worse.”

Some of them relax about that, but Millicent still looks like she’s about to cry, and Harry can’t bring
himself to do anything about that, because he feels like he’s about to cry.

They all drift away after that, figuring class is over.

~

Draco wakes up flat on his back with a fiery ache in his arm, but he wakes up, which he figures is
the most important thing. Going by the hardness of the bed, he’s in the Hospital Wing. There’s
people talking around him, and it only takes him a few seconds to recognize the furious voice that’s
speaking at just below a shout. “Dad?” he says, but it comes out scratchy and unrecognizable, and
it’s then that he realizes he’s thirsty enough to drink the entire Hogwarts lake.

He pushes himself up with his good arm. His father is standing at the foot of his bed, along with
Dumbledore and a tearful Hagrid. “Draco,” his father says coolly, and Draco ducks his head. His
parents were so worried about sending him to school this year, between Lupin and the dementors,
and it’s not even a week in and he’s landed himself in the hospital wing. He looks up and tilts his
head to the side in a silent question. “Your mother is away at a lunch party. She wasn’t home when
the Headmaster floo’d me.”

That’s probably for the best, all things considered. “How are you feeling?” Dumbledore asks kindly.
He shrugs. “Ah, yes, a healing does rather leave one parched, doesn’t it?” he summons a glass of
water to his bedside table. Draco wants to refuse it on principal, but he’s really, really thirsty. He
drinks it.

“And ye are all right?” Hagrid asks anxiously, “I didn’ mean–”

“Quiet,” his dad growls, “I’ll see to you in a moment. You’re lucky your gross negligence didn’t do
worse harm, otherwise it’d be more than your filthy beast I’d be after.”

Hagrid looks like he’s holding back a fresh wave of tears. On one hand, Draco thinks it’s just what
he deserves – who brings animals like that to a group of kids? He’d followed instructions, and the
savage animal had clawed at him anyway, just because he’d said he was ugly. On the other hand,
Harry likes Hagrid. He may be a half-breed abomination, but his soulmate will mope something
awful if anything happens to the great oaf.

“I’m fine,” he says, “I’ve had worse from quidditch. It’s just an overgrown chicken, Father. Don’t
concern yourself over it.”

He swings his legs over the side of the bed and stands. He manages it for a handful of seconds before
he whites out, and when he comes to it’s to his dad clutching his arms in a death grip to keep him
upright. His eyes are wide to the point of looking crazed, and Draco’s suddenly so tired that he just
wants to fall into his father’s chest like when he was a kid. Lucius slowly lowers him back onto the
bed, and he can tell by the way he briefly cups the side of his face opposite to everyone else how
scared he really is. “Hippogriffs are magical beasts,” he says quietly. “Wounds inflicted by them are not healed so easily. Pomfrey was still working on you when I arrived.”

Brilliant. So his dad showed up to him passed out and covered in blood. It really is lucky his mother isn’t here, because then Hagrid would be nothing more than a scorch mark on the flagstone. “I really am fine,” he tries one more time.

Lucius doesn’t respond to that, only squeezes his shoulder before standing straight and shooting Dumbledore and Hagrid a disdainful look. “You will be hearing from my attorneys. Do try and keep my son in one piece going forward.”

He strides out of there without a backwards glance. Hagrid is devastated, and Dumbledore is giving him a thoughtful look that makes him want to hurl every curse he can think of at him. So instead he gives into the tiredness pulling at him, and rolls on his side and falls back asleep.

~

He’s allowed to leave early the next morning, and he’s given strict instructions not to over use his arm for the next couple of weeks while it heals, a process that can’t be sped up thanks to the magical properties of hippogriff talons. Just – bloody brilliant.

There are hours before breakfast, so he has enough time to shower and look like a proper human being, thank Merlin. He steps inside the common room to see Millie dressed for the day and yet another muggle book in her hands. “Do you ever sleep?” falls out of his mouth before he can think better of it. There has to be some sort of explanation.

She tosses aside her book and runs over to him, “Draco! You’re okay!” She grabs him in a hug, and he wants to yell at her, but she’s careful of his arm and smells like vanilla so he goes with it.

“Thanks for catching me. Again,” he hugs her back with his good arm.

“Anytime,” she’s beaming when she pulls back. “Although, if you could stop putting yourself in situations where you later collapse, that would be nice too.”

He grumbles, “I don’t do it on purpose.” He tugs at the end of her hair without thinking about it, because that’s what he does with Luna, and her smile becomes impossibly wider. “I’m going to go get ready. You should really put an illusion over the book, you wouldn’t have to hide out here at strange hours to read it then.”

“I don’t know any,” she says as he walks to his dormitory.

“I’ll teach you!” he calls over his shoulder before disappearing behind the door to the boys’ rooms.

He enters his and Blaise’s as quietly as he can, and has unbuttoned his pajama shirt when he realizes the sling is going to make all of this more difficult. He walks over to Blaise’s bed and pokes him in the shoulder with his wand, then takes three steps back.

Blaise snorts and then sits up, wide awake, as always no in-between. “Draco!”

“Lend me a hand?” he asks, gesturing to his arm.

Blaise shakes his head, but Draco can see how relieved he is. “Pansy was shrieking something awful about how magical wounds were deadly. Daphne apparently had to smother her with her pillow to get her to shut up.”
“I’m not dead,” he winces as Blaise carefully eases his arm through the sleeve, then sets it back in the sling. “But Pomfrey said it would take a couple weeks to heal completely.”

“Better than being dead,” Blaise says practically, “Want help in the shower?”

“Yes,” he sighs. It’s a good thing Blaise knows about Harry, because the three marigolds on his hip are impossible to miss. “I don’t suppose you know how to make my bandages waterproof?”

He shakes his head, “Pansy’s the only one of us that’s any good at transfiguration. Didn’t Narcissa teach you that umbrella charm? Can you cast it smaller?”

Draco wants to go on a lecture about that’s not how charms work, but is very aware that if he dives into yet another rant about his favorite subject that Blaise will leave him to maneuver washing his hair on his own. “I’ll just rewrap it before we go to class.”

“You mean you’ll make me wrap it before we go to class,” Blaise says, but can’t be that irritated because he’s going through Draco’s trunk for his favorite body wash.

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Harry is only picking at his food at breakfast, anxiously glancing at the Slytherin table like that will make Draco appear any sooner. He hadn’t answered the mirror last night, and Harry knows it’s probably just because he didn’t have it on him in the hospital wing, but it wasn’t much of a comfort. He barely got any sleep last night.

“Do you think Malfoy’s dad will really put Buckbeak on trial?” Hermione asks, seated in between them and speaking softly enough that only Ron and Harry can hear her.

“I think we’re lucky he’s not putting Hagrid on trial too,” Ron says, trying to slip Harry’s favorite sausages onto his plate without him noticing. He appreciates the effort, but he’s just not hungry.

She frowns and absently puts a couple pieces of toast by his elbow, like he won’t notice if she pretends she’s not doing it. He picks up a half piece and takes a bite to prevent himself from being surrounded by a small tower of breakfast food. “That doesn’t seem fair. Malfoy didn’t listen!”

“He did, actually,” Harry looks to the entrance to the great hall, then morosely back at his overloaded plate. “He didn’t really mean the ugly thing. He talks about Abigail like that too.”

Ron finally digs into his own breakfast now that Harry is eating. “He still shouldn’t have said it, Hagrid warned us they were sensitive. But if I’d been the one to get clawed by a hippogriff, my dad would be really angry too, even if it was an accident. Malfoy could have died. So, it’s probably everyone’s fault, a little bit, and it makes sense that everyone’s upset. Besides, Malfoy’s dad is on the Board of Governors, and he definitely voted against Hagrid’s appointment as the Care of Magical Creatures professor, so that just makes all of this worse.” It takes Ron a moment to realize Harry and Hermione are starring at him. He swallows his too large bite of waffle. “What?”

He almost blurts that Ron should have been a Hufflepuff, but he knows he’ll take it entirely the wrong way, so instead he asks, “Is that his dad’s job? That governor thing? Dra – Malfoy mentioned that his dad was a barrister.”

Ron scrunches up his nose, starting in on his toast. “Not really. I mean – it’s a really prestigious position. Malfoy has been on the board since before his son was born. There’s some sort of stipend that members get, but most of them donate it back to the school. The Malfoys are old money, so his dad does a lot of stuff, like half their money is still tied up in businesses back in France. I think if you listed off his all his titles it’d be as long as Dumbledore’s.”
“What does the Board of Governors do, exactly?” Hermione asks, fascinated. “Hogwarts, A History just said it was a governing body.”

He gives her an odd look then shrugs, “That’s about it, really. They approve the yearly budgets, and they need to confirm all new appointments and changes to the schedule and classes. I think things need a two thirds majority to pass? I don’t know, I can ask Percy, he would know.”

“How do you know this stuff?” Harry asks.

Ron blinks, “Er, I don’t know. Doesn’t everyone? Neville has a cousin or something on the Board of Governors, he’d know more than me.”

They keep talking, but Harry doesn’t hear them. Draco has just walked into the Great Hall, Blaise at his side. Besides his arm in the sling, he looks back to normal, doesn’t look like the massive blood loss did any permanent damage. Draco glances up and catches his eye across the hall. He smirks and uses his good arm to run his hand through his hair before continuing on his way to the Slytherin table. He sits next to Pansy, who glues herself to his side. “Prat,” Harry says fondly.

Ron snorts. Harry looks up to see both of his best friends shaking their heads at him. “Eat your sausage,” Hermione says, and Harry frowns but does as she says, his appetite finally returned.

They have potions together, although they sit on opposite sides of the classroom. Harry can see Draco struggling to cut his ingredients with his arm. Snape must notice it too, because he orders Pansy to partner with him. She’s eager to help, although Draco looks frustrated. He settles for ordering her around, and Harry thinks Pansy got the better end of the deal here. She’s average at potions at best, while Draco competes for the top spot against Hermione.

“Focus,” Hermione hisses, elbowing him in the side. “He’s fine. Your potion, on the other hand, is not.”

He looks down and realizes the potion is the completely wrong color, a sickly looking pink, and resigns himself to a failing grade.

“Potter,” Blaise sneers as he passes by, and he looks up just in time to see him drop some beetle eyes into his pot.

After a moment of the potion bubbling dangerously over the edge, it settles back down to a simmer and smoothly changes to the correct shade of bright green. He and Hermione glance back at Blaise, who’s returned to his usual seat behind Draco and next to Daphne Greengrass. None of the Slytherins look over at them.

“Huh,” Ron says, “I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Expecting what?” Neville asks, looking up from his potion with a look of faint terror.

Before any of them can think up some sort of excuse, Snape swoops in. He makes some rude and unnecessarily cutting remarks about Neville’s intelligence and the boy in general, then vanishes his whole potion with a wave of his wand.

Harry has to resist the urge to dump his own boiling potion on top of Snape’s head.

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After Potions lets out, Draco tracks down Flint huddled around a stack of books and with that permanently panicked look all fifth years seem to have thanks to the impending OWLS. He barely gets a chance to open his mouth before the older boy says, “Yes, I know you can’t attend tryouts with that arm. Yes, the chaser position is yours anyway. No, it’s not special treatment, because I’ve seen you flying for a year, I don’t need to watch you some more to know you’ll do better as a chaser than you ever did as a seeker. No, that wasn’t intended as an insult, but feel free to take it as one.” 

He closes his mouth. “Oh. Thanks.”

“Whatever. Get that arm healed up before practice starts. Go away now.”

Draco is tempted to offer to help Flint study for his charms OWL, but that would require being in his captain’s presence more than required, and Flint is a bore. He’s thankful, but he’s not that thankful.

So instead he makes himself scarce. He’ll go find Luna and practice vanishing her shoes.

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Harry’s irritation at not being able to face the boggart is quickly pushed aside at how incredibly cool all of Professor Lupin’s lessons are. Draco only scowls when he brings it up, and – okay, his soulmate is kind of a classist snob, but not this much of a classist snob. He doesn’t even say rude things about the Weasleys anymore, he can’t really be that upset that Lupin wears shabby robes. He tries to get Draco to tell him what’s really going on, but he just changes the subject.

“I’m beginning to feel like a glorified messenger boy,” Harry grumbles one night at the start of October. He takes Hermione’s charms essay from Draco that’s positively dripping in green corrections, and hands him his arithmancy project that has enough red that it looks like someone bled on it.

He doesn’t know how two of the smartest people he knows can apparently be so wrong about so many things.

“Tell Granger she needs to focus less on her wand movements and more on her visualization,” Draco says absently, looking over Hermione’s notes. “She can do it textbook perfect until she’s blue in the face, but if she can’t picture what it is she wants to cast, it’s not going to come out quite right.”

“Like transfiguration?” Harry asks. He doesn’t put that much thought into either his wand movements or visualizing his spells, and they turn out all right.

He purses his lips, then shrugs. “I guess. I’m too textbook in transfiguration to say for sure, but Pansy’s pretty good at it. Her essays are kind of a mess so her score’s lower than mine, but her casting is loads better. I can ask her about it, see if she has any advice for Granger. Pansy is kind of crap at charms though, so I’m not sure how much of an overlap there is, if any.”

Harry resists the urge to fidget, because that will end up with him crumpling Hermione’s essay, and then she’ll murder him. “You know, if we’re going to work together like, studying and stuff, maybe – I mean, maybe once or twice a week, we could all meet up. Together.”

“All of us?” Draco asks, guarded.

He hasn’t said no, so Harry barrels forward. “Yes! Us, obviously, but Ron and Hermione, and Parkinson and Zab – I mean, Pansy and Blaise. We’re good at a lot of different things, so – maybe we should try to be good at different things together?”

There’s an uncomfortably long moment where neither of them say anything, then Draco goes,
“Yeah, sure, it’ll be satisfying to tell Granger off in person. Then I can make her explain how she gets the answer to the bloody equations, she always skips steps because she thinks they’re obvious, except they’re not because otherwise *I would have done them.*”

“Right,” Harry beams, “yes, that.”

Harry brings it up them right before quidditch practice, mostly so that if they get mad at him he can run away. Hermione lights up and immediately starts writing down questions to ask Draco. Ron just sighs, “I suppose we should.” He brightens and asks, “Zabini seems like he plays a good game of chess, yeah?” None of the Gryffindors will play against Ron anymore. He can sometimes bully one of his brothers into playing with him, but that’s it.

“Maybe?” he says. Draco doesn’t talk about his friends much, not like how he talks about Ron and Hermione. “I have to go.”

Ron waves him off, and Harry hurries to the pitch. No one else is there, and it takes him a couple minutes of standing there in confusion to remember that Wood wanted to meet everyone in the locker room first.

“Sorry!” he says, bursting in where the rest of his team are assembled. “I forgot.”

Wood glares, but no one else seems bothered. “Why are we meeting in here to begin with?” Alicia asks. “Shouldn’t we be practicing, not gossiping?”

“This is important gossip,” Wood says grimly. Harry squeezes in next to Katie, who gives him a friendly smile. “Boys?”

Fred and George step forward. They look grim. “We spied on the Slytherin team’s practice,” Fred says, “There’s good news and there’s bad news.”

“The good news is their new seeker, Flora Carrow, is good. But only good. Harry could outfly her blind,” George ruffles his hair, and Harry halfheartedly tries to swat his hand away.

“The bad news,” Fred continues, “is that Malfoy is a *really* good chaser. No need to buy his way to that position. It’s kind of crazy,”

The girls scoff in unison, offended at the idea that Malfoy could be competition for any of them.

“We’re serious,” George insists, “we need a new strategy. I think we should focus on knocking Malfoy off his broom. We’ll keep an eye on everything, of course, but Harry doesn’t need our help against Flora. If anything, we’ll just be keeping the Slytherin beaters off him. Malfoy is going to be an actual problem this season.”

Everyone groans. Harry works on relacing his glove so that no one can see him smiling.

The first time that he brings his friends to meet Draco, Harry is so nervous he feels nauseous. The Slytherins are already in the unused classroom, and Blaise and Pansy’s faces could be carved from stone. There’s no time for it to get awkward, however, because right away Hermione walks up to Draco and smacks him in the chest with her revised charms essay. “Visualize? Visualize what! That’s so unspecific! Do you have any diagrams or photographs as examples?”
“Diagrams?” Draco says, making it sound like a curse word. “Of course not! You have to – to *feel* the charm before you cast it, if you want it to be perfect.”

“Feel it?” Hermione repeats, eyebrow twitching, “What is this, divination?”

The conversation quickly goes past Harry’s ability to follow, the two of them pulling out chairs and flipping through a shared charms book. Ron shrugs and says to Pansy and Blaise, “Better us than them, right?”

Blaise snorts, the first crack in his pureblood mask. “You should see him during the end of the year exams. It’s a nightmare.”

Ron gives him a friendly clap on the shoulder, and Blaise almost looks like he doesn’t want to rip his arm off. “Mate, you haven’t seen a nightmare until you’ve seen Hermione on three hours of sleep reciting every general in the goblin wars for the past three centuries. In the middle of *breakfast*.”

Blaise actually smiles at that. “Chess?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” Ron says. They both retreat to the opposite side of the classroom from Draco and Hermione, who for some reason are almost-shouting over a dictionary of archaic Latin.

Harry looks to Pansy, who raises one perfectly shaped eyebrow. “I heard you’re good at transfiguration?”

“Might as well,” she sighs, taking out her wand. “Your casting on Wednesday was just dreadful. The pattern on your teacup and saucer didn’t even match!”

He wants to ask why it even matters if they match, but he can just tell that that will be the beginning to a whole different type of lecture that he doesn’t have the energy to endure. So instead he says nothing, and listens as Pansy lectures him on the proper way to turn a mouse into teacup.

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It’s not exactly easy after that. There’s too much a of people trying very hard not to offend anyone, but it’s still almost fun. Ron is pleased that Hermione has started saving her detailed ramblings for their study nights, because it means Draco gets to listen to it and he doesn’t have to.

It is easier than Harry thought it would be, though. Under their sneers, Pansy and Blaise are all right. Outside of prying, judging eye, Pansy is honestly more concerned with her hair than being nasty, and Blaise has a deep seated love of herbology. He swears them all to secrecy, but not for the first time Harry wishes they could tell a few more people.

Blaise and Neville would probably get alone rather well, given the opportunity. Draco keeps talking about Millie, who he’s tutoring on the side, and how her essays are rather brilliantly written, and how all that reading must be good for something. Draco makes few mentions of Crabbe and Goyle, who for all that they *appear* to be his constant shadows, don’t spend that much time with him outside of the public eye. “They’re busy,” Draco says dismissively when he asks, “they like spending time together more than they like spending time with me. Also when we were eight they accidentally spilled prune juice on Pansy’s new dress, and have been terrified of her ever since.”

Pansy looks incredibly pleased by this. “They’re nice enough,” she says, which is not how Harry ever expected to hear Crabbe and Goyle described, “but they only hang around Draco because their families told them to get in good with the Malfoy heir.”

“I’m very popular,” Draco informs them, and everyone rolls their eyes at once. “I let them hang
around me in public, I have the appearance of two intimidating bodyguards, and they get to report back to their fathers that they’re following instructions. Everyone wins.”

On that first Hogsmeade weekend, when he’s forced to stay behind, he’s pleased and surprised when Blaise and Pansy bring him back sweets and a case of butterbeer. Ron and Hermione had promised to bring stuff back for him, of course, but he hadn’t expected anything from Draco’s friends. He wonders, hopefully, if this means they’re slowly becoming his friends too.

Draco had scoffed and made fun of him, and brought back two packs of sugar quills and a dozen delicately made marzipan candies in the shape of marigolds, the same flowers Draco has on his hip. It’s in a thick box with silk ribbon, and there’s no way Draco got it at Honeyduke’s, which means he went to some sort of snobby specialty shop just to get it for him.

He’s nice when he’s not being awful.

Of course, Harry’s happiness at his unexpected gifts is quickly snuffed out by Sirius Black making his way into the castle and slashing the frame to the Fat Lady’s portrait in an attempt to break into the Gryffindor common room.

The night after, Harry is waiting in their unused classroom when Draco bursts in and grabs him in a tight hug. It’s unexpected enough that he doesn’t have the time to return it before Draco is pushing him away. “How did this happen?” he demands, “He shouldn’t be able to get into the castle at all, never mind all the way to your common room! This is – this is unacceptable!”

“It’s fine,” he says, “Draco, he didn’t manage to get in. It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay,” Draco snaps, “What if he had found you walking the hall? Or on the grounds? My mother still won’t tell me anything, even after this, and she has to know something!”

“Why would your mother know anything?” he asks.

Draco gives him a cutting look that Harry’s learned not to take personally, “Because Sirius is her cousin? My mother’s maiden name is Black. If she wasn’t married to my father, she’d be next in line for the position of Head of the Family, what with Andromeda gone off the deep end and living in the muggle world. Mum was only four years older than Sirius and your dad and all them.”

“What?” Harry says, wide eyed. First Lupin knowing his parents, and now Draco’s mum. “Sirius Black was in the same year as my dad? Do you think they knew each other?”

“This isn’t the time to joke,” Draco snaps, and then he gets a good look at him and pales. “Merlin, you’re not joking, are you? You really don’t know. How can you not know?”

“I’d know what you were talking about if you would tell me,” Harry says irritably.

Draco gives him a faintly panicked look. He summons Abigail and drapes the snake around Harry’s shoulders, “Here, she’s very calming.”

He doesn’t know how a cranky, pampered snake hissing complaints in his ear is supposed to be calming, but he has more pressing issues. “Draco. What don’t I know?”

“An awful lot, it seems,” he says, but before Harry can get really irritated with him, he says, “Of course they knew each other. They were best friends.”
Halfway through Draco’s explanation, Harry figures out the real reason Draco summoned Abigail is so Harry wouldn’t go storming away to do something stupid with a snake wrapped around him. He still ends up breaking most of furniture in the classroom, because if he doesn’t do something he’s going to explode. Draco doesn’t say anything, only fixes what he can once Harry is done and banishes the rest.

After, he stands with his forehead pressed into Draco’s shoulder and his arms straight at his sides and fists clenched. Draco runs a careful hand down his arm, clearly trying to find the medium between reassurance and not overcrowding him. “Don’t do anything rash, like trying to go after him or anything. I’m serious, Harry. He’s dangerous.”

“Rash?” Harry says weekly, the exertion of destroying half a classroom’s worth of furniture leaving him tired enough that he could almost fall asleep right there, standing up with his head on Draco’s shoulder. “Me? You must be talking about someone else.”

Draco pokes him sharply in the side, “I’m serious, Harry.”

“Are you Sirius? You’re shorter than I was expecting,” he says, and manages to dredge up a smile when Draco groans and pokes him again, hard enough he’s sure to find a bruise later.

Draco is in the stands pretending to cheer for Hufflepuff, but mostly just to watch Harry. Pansy lasts until it starts to rain, then says, “Your soulmate isn’t worth having to re-curl my hair,” and disappears back towards the castle. She’s left more important things for worse reasons, so he’s not surprised. Blaise stays by his side, more for a lack of anything better to do than because he actually cares about quidditch or Draco.

He should have taken Millie. She doesn’t have any interest in playing, but she has a fanatical devotion to quidditch. She might have at least enjoyed it.

He mostly watches Harry the whole game, and pretends not to be impressed when Granger uses a spell to keep his glasses clear of water. He’s making her teach that to him at their next study session.

Because he’s more interested in watching his soulmate than the game, he’s the first to notice something is wrong. The rain is freezing all on its own, and it takes him several minutes to realize that it’s too cold to just be the rain, that the fog that’s rolling in is unnatural.

He’s already screaming for people to run by the time the dementors swarm the pitch. He’s looking for Harry, and sees the moment he passes out just like he did on the train, sees when he slips from his broom.

He’s so high up that the fall can’t be anything less than fatal.

“WINGARDIUM LEVIOSA!” he shouts, hoping everyone is too busy screaming to notice, and the spell barely catches Harry, only manages to slow his decent for a moment before it slides off him. He casts it again, and the same thing happens, and it’s not enough, he can’t catch Harry this way and he’s going to die.

Luckily by this point Dumbledore has noticed The Boy Who Lived falling to his death and uses some spell to Draco has never heard of to guide Harry gently to the ground, and in the next breath casts a spell, so bright that Draco is nearly blinded by it, that drives all the dementors from the pitch.

Blaise is tugging on his arm, and he lets himself be pulled away and melts into the crowd of students fleeing back the castle.
Draco is pacing back and forth in an out of use corridor in the dungeons. Blaise had said that Harry was fine, and then kicked him out of their room because his senseless worrying was distracting. He can’t visit Harry in the hospital wing, even though he wants to, and Harry doesn’t have his mirror, so they can’t even talk. All he can do is wait until he’s released, and then corner him away from prying eyes.

“You know, I think you might have a saving people thing,” says a voice that will haunt him in his nightmares.

“What do you want, Weasley?” he turns to glare, “What are you even doing here? No one comes down here!”

Ginny rolls her eyes, “Luna said I’d find you here. She said I wasn’t allowed to be mean to you, though.”

“You’re always mean to me,” he says petulantly, “Tell my cousin you’re a horrible harpy who’s set on ruining my life. I hope she finds nargles to sleep in your hair.”

“We’ve had like two conversations, ever. Don’t be so dramatic.”

“You were mean for both of them,” he says, “Seriously, Weasley. What do you want?”

Her face smooths in seriousness, “I saw you, at the game today. I saw what you did for Harry.”

“I didn’t do anything for Potter,” he says, and this girl manages to be at the absolute worst places noticing the worst things. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“We’ve played this game before,” she chides. “I won’t tell anyone this time, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

He crosses his arms, “If you’re not here to blackmail me, then what are you here for?”

Her mouth cracks into a grin, “Only you would do a good thing and be worried someone would blackmail you for it. I just wanted you to know that I know, so that when no one finds out, you know I can be trusted.”

“Why would I want to trust you?” he sneers.

She shrugs, “I trust you. I don’t like you, you’re insufferable, and I have no idea what game you think you’re playing. But I trust you. I know evil, Malfoy. I had evil living inside of me for a year.”

He winces. She stalks forward, and for a moment he’s worries she’s going to hit him. But she only pokes the tip of his nose, and he goes cross eyed trying to watch her. “You’re not evil. You’re kind of annoying, and you say cruel things you don’t really mean because people expect you to say them. But you’re not evil. You’re kind of the opposite. And I think one day you’re going to need people you can trust, and I want you to know that I’m one of those people.”

That’s possibly the nicest thing any Gryffindor has said to him, including his soulmate. He’s trying to think of how to respond to that, but she walks away before he gets a chance to say anything at all.

Ginny Weasley is terrifying.
Between Snape taking over the Defense Against the Dark Arts class while Lupin is ill, the disastrous Hufflepuff game, and his destroyed Nimbus 2000, Harry is in a truly foul mood these days. Ron and Hermione have been doing their best not to mention it, but the Slytherins have no such restraint. Last time they’d all hung out, Pansy had called him a bitch and threatened to gag him if he didn’t stop whining. He was so appalled at her word choice that he forgot to be miserable for the rest of the hour they were together, which he’s almost certain was her intention. Or possibly she was just sick of his whining.

That changes when Fred and George corner him after class and give him the best thing he’s ever received – the Marauder’s Map.

He uses the mirror to tell Draco that they have to meet that night, that it’s an emergency, and he’s delighted when he reveals the map to all of them.

The Slytherins are appalled. “Did last year teach you nothing?” Blaise demands. “Did you forget what happened last time something that didn’t have a brain talked back to you?”

Draco already has his wand out, “Give that to me right now.”

“You’re not allowed to set it on fire!” he says, “Fred and George have been using it for years, it’s not cursed!”

They glare at each other a long moment, but Draco huffs. “Fine. At least let us run some diagnostic spells on it.”

Harry hands it over, eyes narrowed. “Why do you even know those spells?”

“Everyone who grows up in ancestral homes are taught them,” Pansy says, “You never know what your ancestors left lying around. You don’t want to put on your great aunt’s purple scarf only to discover it had an anti-theft hex on it after it tries to strangle you.”

Draco finishes muttering a long string of Latin, and the map glows a quick series of colors before returning to normal. They all relax. “It’s safe,” he says, and Harry resists the urge to roll his eyes because that’s what he’d said in the first place. Draco taps the map with his wand, and the colors appear again, the time slower.

“What was that last one?” Blaise asks suspiciously, “The yellow one?”

“Who cares,” Pansy says, “It didn’t turn black so there’s nothing malevolent about it, that’s all that matters.

“Librevenire!” Draco casts, and a tome that has to weigh at least twenty pounds pops out of his wand, and he has to rush to catch it before it falls. Hermione’s eyes are wide as saucers.

Harry had hoped Draco would never perform that charm in front of her. This won’t end well for anyone. Once Hermione figures out how to summon books, they’re never going to get her to leave her room again. “One of these days your parents are going to notice you keep taking books from the manor.”

“They know,” he says, flipping through the pages, “They just don’t care. My dad was notorious in school for getting straight Os on all his exams without having ever stepped foot in the library. It’s because he’d hole himself up in his room and summon whatever he needed from the family library. It’s tradition.”

“Brilliant,” Hermione says. “So can you only summon what you know?”
“Mostly,” he says, “Or if you have a good idea of the layout of the specific place you’re summoning from, and you have the title and author, but that’s pretty hit or miss. It doesn’t work with the Hogwarts library,” he looks up briefly, and grins when Hermione deflates. “All the books have anti-tampering spells on them, and that includes summoning charms.”

She sniffs and crosses her arms. “Rude.”

Draco taps a certain paragraph in the book, and hands it over to her. “Look! Here it is. The map has the same spells on it that portraits do to mimic the creator’s personality.”

“Fascinating,” she says, and gives the map a curious look. “What about the others?”

Draco grabs the map, and is partway through explaining the diagnostic spell when Ron sighs and asks, “Exploding snap? They’re going to be a while.”

“Might as well,” Pansy agrees. “I have to say, I am grateful that now he just nerds out with Granger instead of trying to get us to care about that crap.”

“Same,” Harry and Ron say together, and the four of them grin at each other and begin the game, with the delightful noise of Draco and Hermione arguing about colors in the background.

The trip to Hogsmeade is just what Harry needs, even if he has to spend the whole time under the invisibility cloak. He wishes they could have hung out with the Draco too, but he was never alone enough for that to be a viable option. Crabbe and Goyle were constantly at his back, and they saw him when Millicent dragged him to a bookstore at one point, but there wasn’t a chance for any of them to spend any time together.

It gets even better when Snape and his werewolf-centered curriculum leave the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, and Lupin returns. He even promises to teach Harry how to protect himself from Dementors after Christmas break, and the prospect of not being completely pathetic against his worst fears is enough to almost put him a cheerful mood.

It’s the day before the students that are going home for Christmas break are set to leave on the train, and Harry and Draco are meeting in the same classroom they always do. Draco had told him he couldn’t stay like he did last year – his parents were both worried with everything happening at Hogwarts, and his mother had been furious when she found out about Buckbeak.

By the time Harry gets there, Draco has set a cheerful fire so it’s warm in this disused corner of the classroom. He’s also taken all the faded cushions off the chairs and set them in front of the fire. “Nice,” he says, and Draco turns at the sound of the voice, and his shoulders loosen when he sees Harry’s smiling, which makes Harry feel less nervous too.

They both sit, and Draco shoves a small box into his hands. It’s wrapped in red paper with little brooms zooming across it. “Here, open mine first.”

He does, undoing it with careful fingers so he doesn’t rip the paper, which he can tell is driving Draco crazy. It’s nice paper! He wants to keep it. The box has Quality Quidditch Supplies stamped across it. With the size, it can only be one thing, and he’s already grinning by the time he opens it and a competition grade golden snitch goes flying out. He catches it immediately, the wings beating
wildly in an attempt to free itself, and he slides his finger over the middle groove to deactivate it. “Awesome!” he beams. “Thank you. It’s great.”

Draco gives him a pleased smile, and holds out his hand, “Okay, my turn.”

He hands his present to Draco, a thin square box wrapped in simple green paper and a red ribbon. It’s Christmas colors, but it’s also their colors, which he thinks is kind of nice. He hopes Draco likes it – it’s hard to think of a gift for someone whose parents will give him anything he wants anyway. Hermione had clapped her hands and said was perfect when he’d shown it to her, and helped him with the binding. Ron had said Draco would like it, then called him a self centered ponce.

Draco rips off the paper, and flings the lid of the box off and over his shoulder. It’s a thin book with sewn on binding, and Draco opens it. “I picked that iris on the first day of summer vacation,” Harry says, anxiously watching his face as he flips through the pages. The first page had a full iris pressed flat, like the one on his hip, and on each page after that is a petal he’d taken from Aunt Petunia’s garden, dried out and pressed between the pages of the phone book he’d taken from Mrs. Figg’s yard. He’d take one every day, and carefully written the date beneath the page it was picked. The end of the book is another full iris, one he’d angrily grabbed from her garden on his way out after blowing up Aunt Marge. One of the petals ripped, and it’s a little more crumpled than the others, since he hadn’t been as careful when he’s angrily shoved it in between the pages of his potions book. “Do you like it?”

“You thought of me every day?” he says, and there’s something unguarded and sweet in his expression when he looks up.

Harry wants to deny it, because it’s embarrassing. He wants to say there wasn’t much else to think about, to make a joke of it. But the look on Draco’s face stops him. “Uh, yeah. I did.”

He hugs him hard enough that he has trouble breathing, so Harry figures he likes the present.

The first thing Harry and Draco do on Christmas morning is talk to each other through the mirrors, just quick enough to grin at each other and wish each other a happy holiday. Then they have to go, Harry to open up the pile of presents on the end of his bed, and Draco to pull his parents from their bed so they can eat breakfast and then open presents.

Draco hears about the debacle with the Firebolt the very same night he gets back from Christmas break, Harry pacing and ranting about how Hermione had told the professors and they’d taken it away, and how furious he was about it. “She made the right decision,” Draco says, and only shrugs when Harry glares at him. “What did you expect me to say? It’s a broom, Harry. A very nice one. But someone is trying to kill you, and a cursed broom would be just the way to do it. Which you should know, since a cursed broom nearly killed you in first year. They’re going to run the same kind of diagnostic spells I did on the map, except a lot more carefully since it’s a Firebolt and not some pieces of paper, and if there’s nothing wrong with it you’ll get it back. Honestly, you should thank Hermione, she’s the only one of you with any common sense.”

Harry’s so offended he just walks out of the classroom, slamming the door on his way out.

After that, he won’t answer Draco on the mirror, and they stop meeting up. Draco’s irritated, but not
truly worried. This isn’t like the fight they had last year, when they were trying to hurt each other. Harry’s just being stubborn and stupid. He’d be lying if he said he wasn’t hurt about how Harry is ignoring him, but this is the kind of fight he can handle. Harry will have to see sense at some point, and Draco will make him grovel for a bit before magnanimously forgiving him, and then everything will be fine.

Ron and Harry are clearly giving Hermione the same treatment, Ron partially over the broom and partially because her cat had apparently eaten his pet rat. It’s reassuring that they’re not just doing this to him, even if he feels vaguely guilty for thinking it. To make that feeling go away, he sends a message to Luna. The next day he sees his cousin and Ginny Weasley sitting on either side of Hermione, and she looks a lot less miserable than before, so Draco counts it a win.

Of course, one of the downsides of the whole fight is that he doesn’t haven anyone to help him with his Defense Against the Dark Arts spells anymore. Harry really is the best at that class, in their whole year if not the whole school. Which means if he wants more help than Blaise and Pansy can give him, he’s going to need to talk to the actual professor.

Everything his parents had told him about Lupin is still true, of course. But he’s the best DADA professor Hogwarts has had in years, and incredibly patient, even with people who are bad at the spells just because they’re scared. He’s one of the few professors Draco actually likes, even though he’ll never admit it. He figures he can get some pointers from him, it’s not like his parents have to know.

Of course, all fond thoughts of Lupin are instantly banished when he opens the door to the classroom and sees him standing there, doing absolutely nothing, while a dementor advances on Harry, who’s passed out on the ground.

“Expelliarmus!” he shouts, pointing his wand at Lupin’s back. The professor’s wand goes flying over Draco’s head into the hall, and he shuts the door after it. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Mr. Malfoy!” Lupin says, but he doesn’t have time, there’s a dementor going after Harry, and bloody hell, he still doesn’t know a single spell that works against the damn things.

It turns to him, and he’s getting ready to take a page out of Hermione’s book and just set it on fire and hope for the best. Then the dementor pauses, and shifts. His father stands before him, a sneer on his lips and disappointment in his eyes.

It’s not a dementor. It’s a boggart.

Thank Merlin.

He notices the open wardrobe behind it, and he doesn’t bother with ridikkulous. “Wingardium leviosa!” One of the stools lifts into the air. He jabs and swipes his wand, guiding the stool as it pushes and knocks the frantic boggart back into the wardrobe, then uses the stool to slam the door shut. He ends the levitation spell, and the stool clatters to the ground. “Colloportus,” he casts, locking the wardrobe shut for good measure.

He’s panting when he turns to Lupin, wand still held out in front of him. “Quite impressive,” the man says, looking less concerned than Draco thinks he should considering he’s standing there without a wand. “If rather unnecessary.”

“Unnecessary?” he snarls, “What the bloody hell are you playing at?”

“Language,” Lupin says, and Draco is going to hex him, and he’s going to enjoy it.
There's a warm presence at his back, and a hand trying to push his arm down. "Stop it," Harry says, words coming out a little slurred. "Knock – knock it off. I told him to do it."

"You told him to watch as you faced your worse fear and passed out as a dementor tried to kiss you?" he asks tightly.

"Yes!" he says, and it'd be more convincing if he wasn't leaning most of his weight against Draco's back. "He's teaching me the patronus charm. The boggart is useful, and obviously not as dangerous as a real dementor. Put your wand down, you lunatic!" Oh, that's actually a rather good idea. But a patronus charm? That's not something most people learn without going through auror training. Harry tugs inefficiently at his arm, but his wand is still trained on Lupin. "What are you thinking anyway, attacking a professor?"

"Like our professors haven't attacked you before," Draco says, and he hates the calculating way Lupin is looking at them.

This isn't how enemies talk to each other. Enemies don't attack professors for one another, or charge towards dementors. Merlin, what a mess. Forget Hermione, he should follow in Lockhart's footsteps and learn some memory charms.

Harry huffs, giving up and carefully pushing himself away from Draco and supporting his own weight. "All right, fair enough. But Lupin isn't, so can you stop now?"

"No," he says clearly. Lupin raises an eyebrow. "You're not going to tell anyone what happened here. You're not going to tell anyone Harry and I are friends. Ever."

"Oh?" he says mildly, and Draco hates the condescending smile that's waiting just at the edge of his lips, "Why not?"

"Because if you do, I'll end whatever hope you have at any sort of gainful employment. Everyone will know you're a dangerous, blood thirsty, rabid werewolf."

Harry blinks, "He's a what?"

Draco doesn't take his eyes or wand off Lupin, but he wants to, and stare at him. "Doesn't Hermione tell you anything? She's known for months."

"How long have you known?" Harry demands, and he's not having much of a reaction to it, but Draco's not surprised. Harry wasn't raised in this world, he doesn't know how werewolves are viewed by most civilized people, how they're treated.

He shrugs, "My dad told me before I got on the train. He voted against Lupin's appointment, obviously."

"Obviously," Lupin echoes. "So, what, if I tell anyone about your secret, you'll tell everyone about mine?"

"Don't be ridiculous," he knows there's something cruel and ugly in his smile, but he doesn't bother to hide it or change it. He wants the man to believe he means everything he's about to say. "I'm not even supposed to know, if I start blabbing my father will be blamed. But my mother made it very clear to let her know if you so much as looked at me funny, to let her know if I'd decided you posed too much of a threat to the people around you. If I do, she'll mention her concerns at her next lunch with the Notts, who will tell the Ollivanders, who will tell the Browns, who will tell the Diggorys. All of whom, of course, will tell the families they're close too, which covers almost only every
Pureblood family, and the entirety of the magical business owners and government officials in Britain. By the time the school year ends, not only will you be out of a job in addition to everyone knowing you’re a werewolf, but your name will be so thoroughly blacklisted you won’t be able to get a job as a shoe shiner.”

Lupin’s face has gone blank. Harry shoves him, and he stumbles but his wand doesn’t waver. “Draco! What’s wrong with you? Don’t – don’t do any of that!”

“Additionally,” he says, ignoring his soulmate. “If you harm Harry, if you endanger him in any way, I won’t be using my mother’s solution. I’ll be using my father’s.”

Lupin’s gaze drops to Draco’s chest, seemingly counting each of his silver buttons. “Ah. I had been wondering if those were there on purpose.”

“As if my father would send me to school with a werewolf prowling the halls without protection,” Draco scoffs.

“Not particularly deadly on their own,” Lupin says woodenly, “Unless, of course, one is talented in charms. Paired with particularly strong levitation charm, they could do a fair bit of damage.”

He kind of wants to be sick. This isn’t like making fun of Longbottom, or threatening the first years. This is real, and terrifying. “My father suggested heating the buttons and spreading the molten silver over your heart. Personally, I’m rather curious as to what would happen if I made you swallow them.” He feels like he’s about to vomit. He hopes it doesn’t show on his face. Threats aren’t particularly effective if he throws up at the thought of following through.

“ENOUGH!” Harry roars and this time Draco doesn’t fight him when he shoves his arm down. “That is – that is enough, Draco. Why would you – that’s – don’t – you’re better than this!”

“I’m really not,” he says. “Do you think Professor Lupin will harm you?”

“OF COURSE NOT!” he shouts.

He doesn’t miss how Lupin’s shoulder loosen just a little at that. “Then it doesn’t matter, does it? If he doesn’t harm you, I won’t harm him. If he doesn’t ruin our lives, I won’t ruin his. All nice and fair, just like you like it.”

Harry glares. “That’s a Slytherin’s version of fair. The rest of us just don’t threaten anyone to begin with.”

Draco shrugs, pretending to be unconcerned, and turns to Lupin, “Do we have an understanding?”

“I suppose,” he says dryly, “I don’t see how I have much does choice in the matter, when disagreeing with you ends in either destitution or death.”

“Excellent,” Draco says brightly, and hopes he doesn’t look as green as he feels. “I’ll be staying for the patronus lesson, and attending all the future ones. If that’s all right with everyone?”

“No!” Harry says at the same time Lupin goes, “Might as well.”

Harry looks at Lupin, betrayed, and the man has seemingly moved on from Draco threatening to murder him. He shrugs, “Flitwick says he’s the best charms student he’s seen in years. Maybe he can help.”

Draco scratches his nose to hide his flush, and Lupin actually smirks at him.
Harry looks between them, and throws up his hands, “I have no idea what’s going on.”

“You never do,” Draco says, “This is all your fault anyway. If you hadn’t been ignoring me like a sullen child, I would have known about the patronus lessons and none of this would have happened.”

Harry sputters. Draco opens the door with a swish of his wand, then summons Lupin’s wand from where it’s on laying in the corridor. He holds it out to him, and the man spends a long time studying his face before he accepts it back. Draco doesn’t know what he’s looking for, but whatever he finds seems to relax him. “Thank you, Mr. Malfoy.”

“Draco’s fine,” he says, “We’re all friends here.”

He thinks he’s pushing it too far, but Lupin must have a dark sense of humor buried in there because he smiles and says, “Of course we are, Draco.”

Harry looks very much like he wants to strangle both of them.

~

Harry drags Hermione away from Luna and Ginny at breakfast, and snags Ron’s elbow on his way out. He marches them out of the great hall and into the first empty room he finds. Unfortunately for all of them, it’s a broom closet. “Did you know Professor Lupin was a werewolf?” he asks.

Ron recoils, “He’s a what? No way!”

“Did Draco tell you?” Hermione asks, “I figured he might know, what with his father being on the Board and all.”

Harry gives them a quick rundown of the events of last night. They both look more thoughtful than he expected. “It’s not that I think he did the right thing,” Hermione says, “because it’s a quite narrow minded view, and he’s a good enough analytical thinker to know better. But he did offer to fight a werewolf for you.”

“Who knew the bastard had it in him?” Ron says in wonder, “Also, not to be a prat, but I kind of agree with Draco. Just a little. Werewolves are scary! And we’re being taught by one!”

“Yes,” Harry says crankily, “He’s so scary, with his shabby robes and greying hair.”

Ron shrugs, “Werewolves are stronger than the rest of us, even when they haven’t transformed. They’re faster too, and they have a temper.” He scratches his chin, “Then again, Lupin doesn’t really have a temper. At all. I don’t think I’ve ever heard him raise his voice, honestly.”

“Maybe because most of the horrible things you’ve heard are unsubstantiated rumors,” Hermione says testily. “Not that this little break from the silent treatment hasn’t been wonderful, but we all have a class to get to.”

Harry and Ron glance at each other, and they’ve been friends long enough that they don’t have to say anything before moving in unison to block Hermione’s exit. “I guess we’ve been a bit, uh,” he begins.

“Awful, rude, arseholes,” Ron supplies helpfully.

Hermione’s lips twitch up in the corners. “I’m listening.”
They’re ten minutes late to class, but they enter it as one, smiling and walking alongside each other. McGonagall must approve, because she doesn’t even take points away for their tardiness.

After the third lesson where neither he nor Draco manage to summon a patronus, Harry asks, “Aren’t you supposed to be really good at charms?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be really good at defense?” Draco shoots back, summoning a glass of water and chugging it. Harry looks pathetic, so he refills the glass and hands it over. “I’m best at charms that involve something physical – summoning something, lifting it up, changing its properties. But charms that are just magic – that’s hard! The most advanced one I know is protego, and that’s only because my mother drilled it into me before I even got my Hogwarts letter.”

Lupin finishes stuffing the boggart back into the wardrobe. He’s sweating too, so Draco summons him a glass of water as well. He hesitates, but must decide that Draco isn’t interested in poisoning him because he accepts it. He only takes two swallows before blinking and asking, “Where did you get this from?”

“My house,” he says, “I tried summoning stuff from here, but the house elves throw a fit when stuff suddenly goes missing. The Malfoy elves are used to it. Besides, our water comes from an underwater stream, not some dirty lake.”

“Of course,” Lupin says solemnly, and takes another sip to hide his smile. It doesn’t work at all.

Draco’s found that spending time more time with Lupin makes him like the man more, not less. It’s quite unfortunate, what with him threatening to kill him and all.

Lupin seems – relaxed, around them. It’s not just that they’re outside of a formal classroom setting, because Harry agrees with him, and he’s been hanging out with Lupin outside of the classroom for a while now. He thinks – well, he thinks it’s because they know he’s a werewolf, even if they haven’t brought it up since that first time. But that Lupin could care so much just that they know, even with all the awful things Draco said, is just too pathetic to be true, so he refuses to believe it.

“What memory do you use to cast your patronus?” Draco asks. Harry looks up, interested.

“I have a few,” he says, rubbing at his wrist. “Never mind that. Knowing what I think of won’t help you cast any better. Come on – no more patronus work, but there’s no reason you can’t some extra practice in on this week’s spellwork.”

Draco groans, because Defense will never be his favorite subject, but Harry beams and impatiently pulls him to his feet.

There are wrinkles in the corner of Lupin’s eyes like he’s trying not to laugh.

Harry finally gets his Firebolt back, unharmed. Draco is on edge for the entirety of the Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw game, but no dementors appear, and his soulmate stays thankfully on his broom. Millie is an excellent quidditch companion, cheering and booing with equal enthusiasm.

Of course, nothing good can last, because that very night Sirius Black breaks into the Gryffindor common room.
Harry knew he and Draco were friends. Not just because they’re soulmates, but because over the last year they’ve truly grown to like each other. Draco and Hermione obviously get along outside of all the sniping about each other’s school work, and Draco still agrees to play chess with Ron, even though he gets destroyed every time.

He doesn’t really realize that Blaise and Pansy are friends with them until the night after the break-in when Pansy goes over to Ron and starts patting him down, scowling and cursing and calling him an idiot while Blaise looms over Ron – the only one in their year who can still do so – and looks disapproving.

“This means they like us, right?” Harry whispers, nudging Draco in the ribs.

“Oh, obviously,” he answers, squirming away from Harry’s sharp elbows.

He nudges him again just to get Draco to give him an affronted look, and after the Slytherins have been reassured that Sirius Black didn’t manage to damage any of them, it devolves into them arguing about their latest transfiguration paper. Draco and Ron think the process to becoming an animagus is archaic and outdated, while Blaise and Hermione insist it’s more complicated than it seems and all the rituals are very necessary.

Harry and Pansy honestly don’t care, and it would just prefer not to have to write five feet on it either way.

“Can I do your nails?” she asks, “I have nightmares about your cuticles.”

He looks down at his hands. He still has some mud stuck under there from quidditch practice. “Yeah, okay. No Slytherin colors.”

She scoffs and ends up painting them red. She also manages to paint an improbably detailed snitch on each of his thumbs, and he doesn’t bother to hide how delighted he is by it. She responds to that by huffing and tossing her hair over her shoulder, but it’s Pansy, so that’s about what he expected.

The next Hogsmeade visit, Harry splits his time between being invisible next to Ron and Hermione, and being invisible next to Draco, and it’s the most fun he’s had possibly all year.

That’s soured somewhat when Harry gets caught be Snape coming back from Hogsmeade, and Lupin of all people confiscates the map.

He tells everyone the next time they all together. Ron, Pansy, and Blaise are pissed, but Draco and Hermione are oddly silent.

“Yes?” Harry says. “Is there something you two would like to tell us?”

Hermione bites her lip, “Well – you know Draco and I were just so interested in figuring out how the map worked, and we took so many notes. The spells are strong, and advanced, of course. But we are quite strong and advanced for our age. It would be risky, and we might fail–”

“Will you get to the point?” Pansy snaps.

“We can probably recreate the map,” Draco says. “We’d need to make the parchment ourselves from some sort of magical plant that’s resilient enough to handle all the spells we’d need to perform on it, and of course we’ll need to brew two potions–”

“We need the locking potion, we can’t just use the spell.”
“We can just use the spell,” Draco says, “The locking potion takes three months to brew, and is irritatingly difficult to complete without it going wrong. It’s too big of a risk.”

“I made Polyjuice in a girls’ bathroom last year,” she says, “I can make the locking potion.”

He rolls his eyes, “Fine, three potions, whatever. The point is it will be a disgustingly large amount of work, and it will take us to the end of the year, but we can recreate the map. If you guys are interested.”

“Yes,” they all say at once, and as scary as they are together, Harry is so grateful Draco and Hermione get along, because it leads to brilliant things like this.

~

Draco gets a letter from his parent’s informing him of Buckbeak’s verdict. It’s not like it was ever in doubt, not really, not with his father on the case. But he’d asked his dad to let it go, tried to say he was fine and it didn’t matter, but his dad wouldn’t listen to him. If only he hadn’t tried to stand in the hospital wing, or his dad had arrived a little later and hadn’t seen him screaming and bleeding, that might have worked. But those things did happen, and even if Draco was able to persuade his father to drop the case, he would never convince his mother. He supposes, in the grand scheme of things, it’s better for Buckbeak to die by executioner than for Hagrid to mysteriously go missing and never return, which is likely what would have happened if it had been up to his mother.

Now he just has to convince the Gryffindors of that.

They’re all dejected when they meet up that night, but Draco barely gets a minute into a fumbling almost-apology before Ron shakes his head and claps him on the shoulder, “Don’t worry about it, Draco. You tried. I can’t say my parents would be thrilled if I’d gotten clawed by a hippogriff either.”

Hermione nods emphatically, and Harry nudges him in the ribs, smiling.

On one hand, it’s a relief that they don’t blame him, that they’re not mad at him. On the other, it somehow makes him feel even worse for not being able to save Hagrid’s beast.

~

They end up gathering broken branches from the Whomping Willow to make into paper. Pansy does that part, and two weeks later she presents several long sheets of parchment that are a pure snowy white and thicker than normal parchment. In the meanwhile, the rest of them work on reproducing the actual map with all its hidden corridors, Blaise carefully drawing out the map since he has the steadiest hand and his mother forced him to learn calligraphy. They figure out that if they want to keep track of the moving staircases, they’re going to have to individually charm each staircase and connect it the map. Draco does that part, while Hermione is neck deep in research in how to enchant the map to pick up people’s magical signature. They have the list of spells that were used to create the original map, the tricky part is figuring out how exactly they were used and what they were cast on. Ron ends up being best at that, somehow managing to look at the list and work out which spells conflict with each other, and which ones cancel each other out. “It’s a bit like chess,” he says defensively, when Hermione gives him a surprised and impressed look.

“We should add the Chamber,” Draco says, at one point. “It wasn’t on the old one, but we should add it.”

“And that weird place where the sorcerer’s stone was kept,” Ron adds, “That wasn’t on the map
either, we should put it in.”

Pansy frowns, “We need to make it so we can edit the map after we complete it, otherwise there’s no point. Who knows what else we’ll find?”

They all groan, but no one disagrees, and a whole new round of research begins.

Eventually they figure it all out and decide that Harry should do the majority of the casting, with Ron doing the fiddly bits and Draco focusing on the charms that will give the map parts of their personality. It has to be individually tailored to each of them, and they will all have to cast it themselves, but he’s the one designing it for each of them. Pansy assists Hermione with the potions whenever Draco is too busy, and Blaise gets the forbidden ingredients from his mother, which is so much easier than trying to steal things from Snape’s private stores.

At one point, they have an intense argument over what it should be called that lasts four days and involves several broken chairs, but Blaise is finally the one to suggest a name that they can agree on, one that everyone agrees is cool without sounding too pretentious. Then there’s a whole other argument about nicknames, since whoever made the map the first time obviously had them, and everyone’s name has to go through a vigorous voting process to ensure no one ends up looking like a twat.

They each perform the charm to imbibe the map with their personalities, the same one that’s used on magical portraits. Draco guides their casting in addition to performing it by himself, and it’s a good thing they do it on a Friday night, because Draco sleeps through all of Saturday after that.

Soon, all that’s left is for the complete map to soak in the locking potion for a month, and then dry under the light of a full moon. They’ve timed it perfectly, and it should be completed just as the school year ends.

This is how the Chimera Map is born.

~

It’s the final quidditch match of the year, and the most important – Gryffindor versus Slytherin, and Slytherin is enough in the lead that Gryffindor doesn’t just have to win the game to get the Quidditch Cup, but they have to win by over one hundred and fifty points.

Fred and George were right. That’s going to be a lot harder than it’s been in the past.

Harry circles the pitch, keeping one eye on Slytherin’s seeker, Flora, and the other on the game. Draco is so much better as a chaser. He weaves and dives around players, and has no problem passing the quaffle to whoever has the best chance of scoring the goal. Which is another thing – he’s managed to score two goals himself already, because he has such an accurate throw that other chasers will feint out Wood, then pass the ball to Draco at the last second and he’ll manage to throw it through whichever hoop Oliver isn’t defending at the moment.

Draco throws the quaffle almost halfway across the pitch at one point, and Fred sends a bludger his way, cursing. Draco has to drop down and head towards one of his own beaters to get it off his tail.

“BLOODY HELL!” Lee Jordan shouts from his typical place at the commenter box, and Harry doesn’t look over but he’s sure McGonagall is yelling at him. “DID YOU SEE THAT? DID WE ALL SEE THAT? DRACO MALFOY JUST MADE, AND I CAN’T BELIEVE I’M SAYING THIS, A SPECTACULAR THROW! MALFOY CHANGING POSITIONS IS THE WORST THING THAT’S HAPPENED TO THE GRYFFINDOR TEAM SINCE CHARLIE WEASLEY
Harry smothers a laugh, keeping an eye on the scoreboard. He sees the snitch a couple of times, but doesn’t do anything, knowing that now isn’t the time to catch it.

Unfortunately, not long after that Flora sees the snitch and dives after it. He tries to knock her off course and distract her, but now that she’s finally seen it she doesn’t lose track of it, no matter how many times Harry cuts her off or the Weasley twins send the bludgers after her. It gets to the point where Harry has to either catch it himself or watch her do it.

From when he decides to catch it to when the snitch is in his hand is about fifteen seconds.

He twists to see the scoreboard.

Gryffindor won.

By a hundred and thirty points.

Everyone’s landing and the Slytherins are cheering. They may have lost the game, but they’ve won the cup. Harry is disappointed, of course, and he wants to be angry, he sees the anger on his teammates’ faces. But the Slytherins are hoisting Draco onto their shoulders and he’s laughing, and Harry can’t even remember the last time he saw Draco really smile in public, never mind laugh, and he can’t be that upset about it.

They don’t meet in person that night, but Draco does contact him on the mirror. He looks worried, and like he’s trying not to look like he’s worried, so Harry tells him congratulations first, makes sure he sounds like he means it because he does, and Draco’s face melts into relief.

There will be other games. Besides, for once, the Slytherins won fair and square.

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Once quidditch season is over, final exams smack them all in the face. Draco and Hermione become snappish and exhausted, although Draco refuses to show he’s trying as hard as he is, which limits him. Hermione doesn’t have an aloof and effortless reputation to maintain, so she constantly has her head buried in a book or is surrounded by notes.

They start meeting nightly, and Draco and Hermione go to each other immediately, both of them tripping over each other to demand help with one subject or spell. Hermione drills Draco in arithmancy formulas while he adjusts her wand movements, and the rest of them stay back and study amongst themselves to stay out of the crossfire.

Exams are mostly over when Harry gets the note from Hagrid that Buckbeak is to be executed at sunset. He and Ron and Hermione all agree they should go down and try to comfort him, and so they make the trek down to his cabin right after dinner.

Then someone knocks on his door, and Harry is shocked to see Draco behind it.

~

Draco doesn’t want to go. It’s not his fault that any of this is happening, it’s Hagrid’s for bringing a creature so dangerous in first place. But there’s still this awful sense of guilt churning in his stomach that he can’t help, and unfortunately through his exposure to Gryffindors there’s only one way he knows to make it go away.
“Cover for me,” he tells Blaise, stuffing his feet into his shoes.

“Don’t get caught!” Blaise hollers after him, but can’t be that concerned because he doesn’t look up from his magazine.

He almost convinces himself to turn around twice on the way to the half-breed’s cabin, especially because his dad is going to be on the grounds soon and the last thing he needs is for his dad to catch him talking to Hagrid. But he’s pretty sure if he does it after the fact it doesn’t count, so this is really his last chance to get rid of the roiling feeling in his gut, which is his only motivation in doing this.

He knocks on the door. Hagrid opens it, and he sees his soulmate and his friends inside, and instantly regrets everything. This is going to be so much worse if he has an audience.

“Malfoy,” Hagrid says cautiously, “is there somethin’ ya need?” He seems to remember then that none of them should be out of the castle this late, and tries to block his view of the Gryffindors and force his face into something vaguely disapproving at the same time. Draco shakes his head and waves his hand. Hagrid relaxes a little, but not much.

“May I come in?” he asks stiffly, “I’m not here to cause trouble.”

Hagrid looks dubious about that, which is only fair, but steps back to let him inside. The heavy door swings shut behind him, and Draco appreciates that none of the Gryffindors say anything. “What’s this ‘bout?” Hagrid asks.

He rubs his hands against the front of his robes, unsurprised that they’re sweating but irritated about it anyway. “I just – I don’t want Buckbeak to die,” he says, and Hagrid blinks at him. “I think he’s an awful brute, and you must be an absolute moron to think hippogriffs to be a suitable creature for the first class of the year, but I – I think the only thing stupider than bringing a hippogriff to class would be doing do so if you actually intended for anyone to get hurt, and I suppose you’re not quite that stupid. So, I – I figure you didn’t intend for that to happen, and I tried to tell my dad that, I tried to get him to let it go, but he wouldn’t listen to me, and I’m still mad about everything, just so we’re clear, but I don’t want him to die.” He takes a deep breath, realizing he hadn’t been breathing through any of that, and says, softer, “I don’t want anyone to die.”

He’s looking at the ground, waiting for Hagrid to roar at him and throw him from his cabin. But – he does feel oddly better.

That’s not what happens. Instead Hagrid pats Draco on the back with his enormous hand and says, “That’s alright, don’t worry ‘bout it. Yer dad was righ’ - I shouldn’ brought such a creature ter class.”

He risks a glance up, and Hagrid is smiling at him, something warm in the half-giant’s face that Draco’s never seen before. He huffs and sticks his nose in the air to cover his surprise, crossing his arms. “Well, you’re clearly Scamander stock, so I suppose we can’t expect anything else from you.”

He says it like it’s insult, but it’s obviously a compliment. Hagrid is positively beaming at him, and his eyes have even gotten a little shiny.


Draco pales, looking past Ron struggling to stuff his newly found and apparently not dead rat into his pocket. His dad can’t find him here. Hagrid ushers them out, and it’s uncomfortably close under the invisibility cloak, but they all manage to get out of there without being seen. They hear the thud of an
axe, and Harry’s hand finds his under the cloak, but none of them make a sound.

Draco is in the Shrieking Shack after watching Ron disappear beneath the Whomping Willow’s branches and watching Hermione’s cat, of all things, freeze the tree. Black is down there, looking as deranged and emaciated as one would expect an escaped convict from Azkaban to look. If they survive this, Draco is going to make it clear to Harry that these types of things don’t happen to other people.

They’ve all got their wands pointed at Black, but his soulmate is shaking he’s so furious. It’s not that he doesn’t understand, of course he does, he threatened to kill Lupin if he harmed Harry, and anyone that murdered his parents would find a long, painful death at the end his wand. But that’s him. Harry is supposed to be better than him. That’s the whole point.

“Don’t do it,” he says, in a rush, and Harry doesn’t look away from Black but his whole body twitches. “I know you want to, and he deserves it, he’s a traitor who betrayed and therefore killed your parents—”

“I would never betray James or Lily!” Black rasps.

“Shut up!” Draco snaps, “I’m trying to save your life, so shut up.” He doesn’t really care if Black lives or dies, but he cares about what it will do to Harry to kill him. Harry raises his wand an inch higher, and Draco clamps his hand over his wrist, desperate. “STOP! I’ll do it!”

Harry freezes.

“Draco?” Hermione whispers, uncertain.

“I’ll do it,” he repeats, “My family library doesn’t exactly have a forbidden section, I know the type of spells that will make it hurt, that will make him suffer. If you want Sirius Black dead for betraying you parents, I’ll do it.” Harry is still trembling, and he’s not saying anything, so he continues, “How do you want it done, Harry? Want me to explode his eyeballs? Want him to suffocate slowly? Want me to wingardium leviosa one of these broken wooden boards through his stomach? Want me to try and summon his heart from his chest? I’ll give it to you, and you can squeeze it until it bursts, and maybe in those seconds before he dies he can feel like you have your whole life. Is that what you want?”

There’s another long moment where Draco’s unsure if he’s about to become a murderer, but then Harry slowly shakes his head. He’s still furious, but he’s not shaking anymore, he doesn’t look like he’s ready to kill anymore.

The relief is short lived, because the next moment all their wands go flying from their hands. They all look to see Lupin stepping through the entrance. There’s a moment of confusion, then Lupin throws himself at Black, hugging the man until it looks like he’ll break, and Draco cannot believe this is happening.

“Are you kidding me?” Ron bursts out, “You – you monster! You’re working with him?”

“I TRUSTED YOU!” Hermione screeches, “I knew you were a werewolf, and I didn’t say anything, because I thought it didn’t matter! I thought you were a good person! Now this? I should have gone to the Prophet and gotten you sacked!”

Draco is numb, staring wide eyed. He’d – he’d liked Lupin, thought he was all right, for a werewolf, thought maybe he was wrong about werewolves if most of them were more like Lupin
than the dark stories his parents told him growing up. But if he was working with Black this entire time – but no, he couldn’t be, people didn’t hug like that if they were just co-conspirators, if they were just allies.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione are still yelling, but Draco thinks back to one of their last patronus lessons with Lupin, and takes a closer look at Black. His robes are tattered, and hang off his skeletal frame. It’s covered in dirt and mud but it’s there - wrapped around his wrist is a mark, a delicate sprig of wolfsbane.

“Hey,” Draco says, grabbing onto Harry’s robes and tugging. “Look.” He points, and Harry follows his finger until he notices the same thing he had.

Harry looks to Lupin and snarls, “Roll up your sleeves.” He looks back to Black, who’s trying to cover it up, but it’s too late. “Your left arm, to be precise.”

“Clever,” Lupin says softly. “I will – if you promise to stop yelling and listen.”

He throws them their wands before they can respond, and Draco grips his and can’t help but think how stupid that is. He’s wearing his cloak with the silver buttons.

Lupin shoves up the sleeve of his left arm – draped across his wrist are tiny snapdragon flowers.

“You’re soulmates,” Ron says, shocked. “The two of you are soulmates?”

“Yes,” Lupin says, and looks to Sirius, “which makes my belief that he was the spy so much worse.”

Black shakes his head and croaks, “I thought the same. They wanted to make it you after I refused, and I told them not to.”

They explain everything, about the map and how and why they made it, about Lupin knowing to come and knowing Sirius was innocent after seeing Pettigrew on it, about becoming animagi, about the secret keepers and what went wrong, and finally about the wolfsbane potion that Lupin now takes each month to stay sane during the full moon.

Draco’s just starting to believe it all when this already horrible situation gets even worse – Snape throws off Harry’s invisibility cloak, and reveals that he’s been hiding in the corner almost the whole time. He ties up Lupin in the next breath, the only other adult with a wand, and then turns to Draco.

“Mr. Malfoy,” he says, “How surprising to see you here.”

They’re all shouting, begging him to listen, but Draco can’t really hear any of it, only the blood rushing past his ears and his own rapid heartbeat. Snape isn’t like Lupin – Draco doesn’t have anything to threaten him with, not really, and he’s not someone that Draco could convince his parents to dismiss if he did say something. Snape will tell his parents everything, and that will be the beginning of the end.

He steps forward and raises his wand, shouting, “OBLIVIATE!”

The spell hits Snape square in the chest, and he stumbles from the force of it, hitting his head against the shack wall and crumpling unconscious to the ground.

Everyone is silent.

Hermione cuts Lupin free. He says, “I thought you struggled with charms that lack corporeal elements.”
“I do,” he says, swallowing. “I’ve never cast that before.”

Ron looks a little green, and Draco doesn’t think it’s just from the pain of his broken leg anymore. “So, do you think, like – like with Lockhart last year?”

He shrugs. “I guess we’ll find out when he wakes up. I read the theory. I meant to only take a couple hours, but – well, we’ll find out when he wakes up.” He swallows and gestures to Sirius and Lupin, “You were saying?”

They continue, halting at first, then picking up pace, and Harry is still skeptical but Draco believes them. Harry’s skepticism finally dissolves when they transform Scabbers into a sniveling, balding man that is undeniably Peter Pettigrew. He admits to betraying James and Lily Potter.

Finally satisfied by the explanations, Sirius takes Snape’s wand and he and Lupin prepare to end Peter’s life. Draco looks away, and he sees Hermione hide her face in Ron’s shoulder. He kind of wants to do the same, even if Ron does have exceptionally bony shoulders.

“Stop.”

They all look up. “Harry?” Lupin asks.

“Stop,” he repeats firmly, standing straight and with something flinty in his eyes. “I wasn’t going to let Draco become a murderer to kill Sirius. I won’t allow you guys to become murderers to kill Peter. I don’t think it’s what my dad would have wanted, and it’s not what I want.”

“He won’t be the first person we’ve killed,” Lupin says gently, “There was a war, Harry.”

“And now there’s not,” Harry says. “This isn’t a war, and we don’t kill people even when they deserve it. That’s not our job.”

Peter starts wailing his thanks, and Sirius kicks him hard in the side of the ribs to shut him up.

Draco clears his throat, “It’ll be a lot easier to clear your name if we give the aurors Pettigrew. Certainly a lot easier than if we give them his corpse.”

“Oh, there wouldn’t be any remains,” Sirius says darkly, then sighs, “I suppose you have a point. Both of you.”

They tie up Pettigrew and Snape, Lupin floating them up ahead of him. Hermione and Draco go on either side of Ron, helping him limp up the stairs. Harry and Sirius trail behind, talking quietly, and Draco makes an effort not to eavesdrop.

They’ve just made it past the weeping willow when a cloud shifts and a shaft of moonlight lands on the group. They all look up. “Oh dear,” Hermione says quietly.

The next few minutes are terrifying, and it’s difficult for Draco to keep track of what’s happening. Lupin changes, having not taken his potion, and Pettigrew gets away. Sirius chases after him, then comes back to chase Lupin away from them, for which Draco is absurdly grateful. He really, really doesn’t want to have to use the silver buttons on his cloak.

Then, because clearly their situation hasn’t hit rock bottom yet, the dementors arrive.

Not one or two, but all of them, dozens and dozens swarming around them in their search for Black. He, Hermione, and Harry fall to ground, nowhere to run and suddenly too tired to move even if they could.
He reaches for Harry, and a dementor comes and grabs his soulmate’s face, and he wants to cry out, wants to save him, wants to do anything, but he can’t bring himself to move.

Then a brilliant silver stag comes charging into them, piercing the dementor holding Harry through with his antlers and knocking him aside. Harry falls to the ground.

The last thing Draco sees before falling unconscious is the shimmering patronus chasing all the dementors away from them.

~

Harry wakes up, which is always a pleasant surprise. Snape is speaking, which is less pleasant. “For the last time, Minister, I have no idea what any of us were doing out there, because I can’t remember. I woke up to the unconscious students, and returned them and myself to the castle. There’s nothing more to say.”

“Head injuries can have these type of affects, Minister,” Dumbledore says soothingly. “Surely there’s no reason to continue harassing my Potions Master over it? Can he not be released to get some much needed rest?”

Fudge grows but says, “Fine. You may leave.” There’s the sound of Snape walking quickly away, and a door opening and closing. “Sirius Black is in your office, spouting nonsense, and Harry Potter was found unconscious on the edge of the Forbidden Forest. I’m tired of waiting for answers, Dumbledore!”

“Now, Cornelius, perhaps now is not the time to act recklessly–”

“This is not reckless!” The minister snaps, “Black is caught, the executioner is here, I think it’s fairly obvious what the next step is.”

No! No. Harry’s just gotten his godfather, he can’t lose him already, that’s not fair, and nothing in his life is fair, but this is too much.

Dumbledore sighs, “If only we had more time, perhaps two lives could be saved.”

“What nonsense are you going on about now?” Fudge says, “Never mind that, let’s go, we need to catch the executioner before he returns to the ministry.”

They leave.

Harry pushes himself up, and the hospital wing is empty but for four beds. “Are you awake?”

“Obviously,” Draco says, pulling himself up as well. “What was Dumbledore talking about?”

Hermione gets up, face pinched, “He was talking to me, I know what we have to do.” She looks to Ron and bites her lip, “Pompfrey put him in a healing sleep for his leg, and he really can’t walk on it anyway. We’ll have to leave him behind.”

“We’re going to save Sirius?” Harry asks, “How?”

“With this.” Hermione pulls out a necklace from underneath her robes.

Draco curses, “A time turner? You rotten cheat – how many more hours of studying did you manage with that? How did you even get it?”

“McGonagall got it for me so I could take extra classes,” she says, “Now hurry up and get over here
before someone else walks in.” Harry’s not sure what’s going on, but he gets up and stands next to her. Hermione loops the necklace around all three of their necks, the golden chain magically expanding to accommodate them. “Three turns ought to do it, I think.”

Harry figures it out once they’re three hours in the past. “Brilliant,” he breaths. “The second life Dumbledore was talking about – Buckbeak?”

“It has to be,” Hermione agrees, “Come on, we need to get out of sight, no one can see us.”

They sneak down to Hagrid’s cabin, waiting until past Draco has entered to quietly lead Buckbeak away. Draco makes Harry and Hermione walk between him and the beast, unwilling to be any closer to the hippogriff than necessary. The executioner swings the axe into a tree stump in frustration, the same sound they’d heard before, and the three of them laugh quietly from where they’re hidden in the edge of the forest.

After that it’s just a waiting game. They watch Ron get dragged under the Whomping Willow and into the Shrieking Shack, and then watch them all come out. Lupin transforming is somehow even worse the second time around, and Hermione leads Buckbeak into Hagrid’s empty cabin just in case Lupin heads this way.

“Are you coming?” Draco asks, impatiently, “As much as I don’t want to get clawed by that overgrown bird, I especially don’t want to get bitten by a werewolf.”

“You go,” he says, desperate to see who conjured the patronus that saved them, desperate to get a glimpse of his father.

Draco stares at him for a long moment before huffing and settling down beside him. “If we get killed, I’m blaming you.”

“That’s fair,” he says, leaning his side into Draco so they’re pressed together from shoulder to hip. It gets cold in the forest at night.

It gets even colder when the dementors flood the grounds, and he can hear Draco’s teeth chattering next to him. He’s straining his eyes, looking for his father to appear and save them, but the dementor’s mouth is descending on his past self, and nothing is happening.

“Oh,” he says, a mix of disappointment and pride sweeping through him, “It wasn’t my dad. It was me.”

“What?” Draco asks, but Harry ignores him.

He leaps up, running forward to snap his arm out, wand held high. He thinks of Draco’s hand in his, of those long nights where his friends and Draco’s friends eventually became their friends, of Sirius offering for Harry to leave the Dursleys and live with him. “EXPECTO PATRONUM!”

The beautiful silver stag erupts from his wand, charging forward and forcing the dementors to scatter. Draco scrambles forward to stand beside him, “Bloody hell, Harry.”

“Come on,” he grabs Draco’s hand and pulls him back to Hagrid’s cabin, “Let’s go.”

Harry rides Buckbeak up to Dumbledore’s office window, and undoes the latch. Sirius is looking at him with wonder and surprise as he climbs onto Buckbeak’s back. They land, and Draco and Hermione are standing back, giving them the chance to say goodbye.

“I came here to save you, and you’re saving me instead,” Sirius says, voice still raspy from disuse.
Harry shrugs, “You can save me next time.”

Sirius barks out a laugh, and for a moment his whole face changes, he looks younger. He ruffles Harry’s hair, “I like your friends. I’m not too sure about that Malfoy boy though.”

“He’s a Black too,” Harry feels the need to point out. “Your cousin is his mom.”

Sirius snorts, “That’s not much better.”

“I don’t know,” he says, “I’ve met more Blacks I’ve liked than not.”

He smiles at that, “Take care, okay? I’ll write when I can, if – if you want.”

“Yes!” Harry says instantly. “Me too. You’re my godfather, after all.”

“Yeah,” he says roughly, “I am.” Sirius pulls him in for a crushing hug, and he tries not to worry about how he can count Sirius’s ribs through both their clothes. “Now get along, you’re running out of time.”

He’s right, but Harry can’t bring himself to look away until Sirius is only a speck in the sky.

They make it back to the hospital wing just in time to watch themselves disappear.

~

Pansy and Blaise are furious that everything happened without them, and make Draco recount every detail, sometimes more than once because of how ridiculous it all sounds.

Draco doesn’t know exactly how much time his memory charm has taken from Snape, but he apparently wasn’t surprised that Lupin was a professor, so there’s that. It can’t have been more than a year, although by the way Snape has spent most of his time locked away in his office since, Draco thinks it was way more than a few hours.

That of course means there’s no one to contradict him when he says that he saw the Gryffindors sneaking away, so he told Snape and went with his Head of House down to the Shrieking Shack. It means Snape gets a howler from his mother about the proper care of children, and her furious voice echoes throughout the whole Slytherin common room. Draco gets away looking like he just stumbled into this whole mess, with no personal attachment to it at all.

The dementors are sent back to Azkaban the same night. His dad had called an emergency meeting of the Board of Governors, and they’d all gotten together and threatened Fudge with legal action if he didn’t get those things off school grounds immediately.

Luckily in all the chaos of the dementors and Sirius, Lupin doesn’t get mentioned at all. Which means he’s not expecting it when he reads his parents’ letter and at the end of it his dad tells him that Lupin is resigning.

He drops the letter and is running to the defense classroom before he can think better of it, bursting inside and shouting, “What are you doing?”

“Packing,” Lupin says calmly, and half the classroom is indeed already packed away. His lips quirk up at the corners, “I’m glad you’re all right, after what happened. Did you come here to deliver your mother’s punishment? I’m afraid if will be slightly less effective, since I’m quitting anyway.” His eyes drop to Draco’s cloak, “Or have you come to enact your father’s method? You did say that’s what would happen if I endangered Harry, and I’m not sure we can call me transforming in front of
him anything else.”

Draco stares, aghast. “Wingardium leviosa,” he casts, and his silver buttons pull themselves from his cloak. Lupin takes a step back, face closing off as he reaches for his wand. “Reditus!”

The buttons vanish, returning back to the manor. Lupin blinks, mouth opening and then closing. “Mr. Malfoy?”

“I don’t care that you’re a werewolf!” he says, furious, “We were down there with Pettigrew and dementors, and you were the least monstrous of them all, even when you transformed. It’s – terrifying, and awful. But I don’t suppose you can help being a werewolf any more than Millie can help having a muggle mother, or Hermione being a mudblood, or Hagrid a half-breed. So – so I’ve decided it doesn’t matter.”

“Is that so?” Lupin asks, and he’s smiling, the skin of his eyes crinkling in the corners.

Draco scowls, “We would all be worse than dead if you hadn’t taught Harry the patronus charm. We need a professor who knows what he’s doing, and no one knows you’re a werewolf, and they’re not going to hear it from me. Don’t quit.”

Harry runs from Hagrid’s cabin to Lupin’s classroom, and throws the door open to see Draco glaring at Lupin who’s only smiling. “You’re quitting?” he demands.

“News travels fast,” Lupin says dryly, “Yes, I am.”

Draco rolls his eyes, “Excellent, maybe you can talk some sense into him, he won’t listen to me.” He walks out, knocking his shoulder into Harry’s as he does.

Lupin watches him go, and waits until he slams the door behind him to say, “You know, I think I actually like that kid.”

“‘He grows on you,” Harry agrees. “Don’t go. Please. You’re the best professor we’ve ever had.”

“We were extremely lucky last night,” he says. “I could have hurt any of you, or worse. I shouldn’t be around students when I transform. It’s all right – I have a year as a Hogwarts professor on my resume. It’ll be a lot easier for me to get a different job.”

“But what about us?” Harry asks, clenching his hands into fists, and tries not to say – what about me?

Lupin softens, “I’ll keep in touch. You don’t need me – you and your friends have proven you’re more than able to take care of yourselves. Besides,” he touches his left wrist, “Sirius does need me. We have a lot of catching up to do.” His smile gets a touch of nostalgia, “Sirius and I got our soulmarks the very first day of classes. When he got his animagus form, James said that my soulmark was a clear sign that we were all meant to be friends, because in India snapdragons are known as dog-flowers, and without him we wouldn’t have known it.”

Harry almost tells him about Draco, about his own soulmark, but holds it back. It’s not just his secret to tell. “Take care of each other, okay? I just got you guys back.”

Lupin ruffles his hair and reaches for something in his desk, “I suppose I should give this back to you. It won’t do me any good.”
He holds out the Marauder’s Map, and Harry takes it, cheeks flushing. He almost wants to keep it for himself, wants to keep this part of his dad for himself, but that’s not very fair. “Er, do you think, I mean – can I give this back to Fred and George? They’ve been making good use of it, is all, and it was a map made by pranksters for pranksters, so I feel like it’s something they should have.”

“If you like,” Lupin says, surprised, “But it’s quite useful. I’m surprised you don’t want to keep it for yourself.”

“Well,” Harry rubs the back of his head, “the thing is, that after you took it away, we kind of – made our own? Draco and Hermione had figured out all the spells and stuff you guys used to make it before you took it, so after that it was pretty easy to figure out how to do it ourselves. Your map is missing a couple things, anyway,” he adds, just to make Lupin laugh.

He says, “I’m impressed. It took us two years to make that map.”

“Well you had to do it all from scratch,” Harry says reasonably, “We didn’t have to.” He hesitates, but adds, “We’re calling it the Chimera Map, because we’re all so different, and Chimeras are a mix of a bunch of things, including a lion and a snake, so it seemed to fit.”

“Yes,” Lupin agrees warmly, “I think it fits perfectly.”

Harry rolls his eyes when Draco slams open the door to their compartment, sneers, “Losers,” and steps inside, Pansy and Blaise following him. Hermione performs a locking spell on the door, and Draco casts a sound muffling charm to dissuade any eavesdroppers.

“Make room,” Pansy sniffs, sitting next to Hermione, and Blaise sits next to her, while Draco shoves Ron over and collapses next to him on the opposite bench. They’ll have to move before they get back to the station to avoid suspicion, but they have a couple of hours before that. “What is that?”

“An owl,” Ron says dubiously, “Sirius gave it to me.” He pokes the ball of fluff, “Doesn’t look like it can carry much.”

Harry laughs when all the Slytherins give the owl a dubious look. “Who wants to play exploding snap?” he asks, “Might as well have some fun before summer starts.”

“Just blow up your aunt again,” Blaise suggests.

Ron snorts, “I’ve already talked to Mum about you spending part of the summer – hopefully you won’t be with the Dursleys long.”

“We have the mirrors,” Draco says, “You won’t just have the muggles to talk to, thank Merlin.”

Hermione leans forward, “How did you enchant those mirrors, by the way?”

Ron groans, and starts dealing cards, loudly talking about his summer plans so that the whole trip home doesn’t turn into a charms lesson. Draco pushes Ron onto the floor, and Hermione hits him with a tickling charm.

Ron turns out to be annoyingly resistant to it. “Five older brothers, two of which are Fred and George,” he reminds smugly, which leaves the rest of them with no choice but to spend the rest of the ride trying to tickle him at random moments to startle a laugh at him. Pansy ends up being the only successful one.
By the time the train pulls into the station, Harry has almost forgotten to dread the upcoming summer.

Chapter End Notes

I need to work on my other WIP, so the next update will come a little slower.

I hope you liked it!

Feel free to follow / harass me at: shanastoryteller.tumblr.com

I post writing updates in my 'progress report' tag, so if you're interested in what I'm working on, you can find it there :)}
Hi! sorry everyone, unfortunately, this ended up being way, way longer than i anticipated, so i don't think i'll be able to keep to the one chapter per year goal i'd been hoping for, because otherwise we'll end up with 40k+ chapters, and i will go insane.

Harry wakes up in cold sweat, heart pounding from his latest nightmare. He blindly reaches for his side table, opens the top drawer, and his fingers curl around the compact mirror. He flips it open, and whispers, “Draco? Are you awake?”

Normally, he wouldn’t disturb him, it’s just a nightmare, just strange visions about the dark lord, just things that haunt him in his waking hours as well as his sleeping ones. But after he’d told his soulmate about them, he’d made Harry promise to contact him, not matter how late it was.

The surface of the glass shimmers like water, and Draco’s face comes into focus, pillow creases on his cheek and blue eyes half lidded. “You okay?” he asks, cutting himself off midway to yawn.

“Yeah,” he says, and the relief of just having Draco there when he needs him makes him feel like it’s almost not a lie.

Harry has actually been able to get mail this summer (which he’s incredibly grateful for, because if it wasn’t for his friends sending him food he would have starved on Dudley’s ridiculous diet), he’s traded over dozen letters with Remus and Sirius, and of course he’s spoken to Draco almost every night. None of that, however, is the same as being back with his friends and away from the Dursleys.

He stumbles out of the fireplace laughing, even as Mrs. Weasley screams something awful at Fred and George for pranking Dudley. For Harry, it’s the best thing he’s seen all summer.

“Come on,” Ron says, throwing his arm around Harry’s shoulders. He really hopes his best friend stops growing at some point – he’s gone straight past tall and settled on looming. Ron isn’t very good at looming, so it would probably be best for everyone if he stopped getting any larger.

The largeness of Ron is reserved for his height alone. He’s comically skinny considering the amount of food Harry has seen him eat at any given time – Ron looks like he’s the one who’s been living on half-grapefruits the whole summer. He’s like taffy, Harry settles on as Ron steers him into the backyard, all thin and stretched out.

“Harry!” He barely gets a look at her before Hermione’s hair is in his face and her arms are around his neck. “You look all right, I was so worried! Dra – uh, you said you were fine, but – I still worried.”

He snorts. Draco has complained multiple times that Ron and Hermione were badgering Blaise and Pansy to make sure Harry wasn’t wasting away or getting beaten, since Draco was the only one of them who was able to physically see him, and it’s not like they could risk sending letters straight to
Draco any more than Harry could. They’d decided letters to Pansy and Blaise, whose parents were slightly less fanatical about blood purity, was an acceptable risk.

“Thanks for the protein bars,” he says, “they really helped.” They’d tasted like cardboard, but they were filling, easy to hide, and had actual nutrients, so he supposes their taste is beside the point.

“Heya Harry!” Ginny calls out from the other side of the garden, and she’s covered in mud. He spends most of his summers in Aunt Petunia’s garden, and he doesn’t get that dirty, so he doubts whatever she’s doing has to do with actual gardening. Harry waves at her until she ducks back down.

Ron introduces him to his older brothers, Bill and Charlie, and Harry wonders if Ron has noticed that he’s about a half an inch taller than both of his brothers. “Nice to finally meet you,” Charlie says, shaking his hand, “I heard you took my old position.”

“He’s brilliant,” Ron says proudly, and his grin turns sly in a way that Harry’s almost certain he learned from Pansy. “Even better than you, I’d say.”

Bill laughs and Charlie’s eyes narrow. He points his wand at Ron and says, “Those are fighting words, Ronald.”

Ron nudges Harry in ribs, “Up for a bit of a game, mate?”

He looks back at Charlie, and the man isn’t actually mad, he’s smiling with his eyes even though he’s scowling, and Bill looks as if he’s delighted by the course this conversation had taken. “I’m always up for a game,” he says, and cracks a grin when Ron whoops in delight.

It’s not perfect, because he doesn’t have Sirius or Remus or his soulmate or Pansy or Blaise. But it’s pretty close.

~

They should be asleep already, because they have to get up at the crack of dawn to take a portkey to the camp grounds for the World Cup. But instead they wait until the rest of the house is quiet, and Harry opens his mirror. “Draco?”

There’s a shimmer across the glass, and then his favorite Slytherin’s face appears. “Harry,” he grins, “You’re looking less like an abused house elf.” He blinks then says, “Ronald, have you gotten taller? Is that even possible?”

“You know, I was going to say I missed you, but I’ve changed my mind,” Ron sniffs.

Draco laughs, and it’s clear he’s supposed to be asleep as well. There’s only the soft glow of a suspended lumos charm beside him, and he’s in grey silk pajamas. Abigail slowly enters the frame, slithering her way up Draco’s arm to rest across his shoulder. “Where’s Hermione?” he squints and a faint look of disgust come over his face, “Is your entire room orange?”

“The Cannons are amazing, get stuffed,” Ron insists at the same time that Harry says, “She’s sharing a room with Ginny, and we didn’t want to risk waking her.”

“Probably for the best,” Draco says, and Harry knows he’s convinced that Ginny is something like an all-seeing prophet, but he’s refused to elaborate on why he feels that way. “Are you guys camping? I wanted to, but my parents said camping was for commoners.”

Harry tries not to wince at that. He must succeed, because Draco doesn’t glare at him. “Yeah, we’re
camping. How are you getting there if you’re not?”

“My dad’s just going to side-long apparae with me on the day of the game. I’ve been doing it since I was a kid, even though it used to drive Mum crazy. We’ve never splinched though, so you’d think she’d have calmed down a little. She hasn’t.”

Ron pokes his hand into the mirror, distorting the image. “That’s bloody unfair, mate. We have to get up before sunrise tomorrow!”

“That’s unfortunate,” Draco says in a voice that just means he’s laughing at them. “You should get some sleep then – I’ll see you at the match. Remember, we hate each other!” He winks at them before the mirror shimmers and he’s gone.

Ron scowls, “Your soulmate is a prat.”

“Yeah,” Harry agrees, but he’s assuming it comes out fonder than he intended by the way Ron retches and tries to smother him with his pillow.

As excited as he is for the game tomorrow, he’s dreading falling asleep, dreading the nightmares that he hopes won’t come. He should really tell someone besides Draco about them, like Sirius and Remus, or at least his other friends. But he’s worried they’ll overreact, that they’ll panic and make it a bigger deal than it needs to be.

They’re just nightmares. They don’t mean anything.

~

The portkey is disorienting, but the worst part of the trip is having to listen to Cedric’s dad talk about him while he’s standing right there. Cedric looks mortified, so Harry catches his eye and shrugs, because it’s certainly not Cedric’s fault that his dad is a bit of a prat. If he’s not going to hold Draco accountable for his father’s actions, it seems wrong to do it to anyone else.

He knows he’s made the right call when Cedric’s shoulders slump in relief and he flashes him a smile.

The day of the game comes, and they see Draco in the stands, sitting only a few rows above them, and they glare at each other as is expected. Arthur greets Draco, and looks like he’s gearing up to attempt to have a real conversation, but thankfully Ginny grabs her dad’s hand and drags him away before he can make it any more awkward by attempting to exchange pleasantries with the boy who saves his daughter’s life. There’s a house elf sitting by herself in the stands, which is odd. She’d said she was saving a seat for her master, but the minutes tick down and no one shows up.

The Veelas pour onto the field, and they are very beautiful, of course. But as most of the stadium loses their mind, shouting and waving at them, Harry only blinks in confusion. Ron and most of Weasleys are nearly falling out of the box they’re leaning so far out, and Harry grabs the back of Ron and Hermione’s robes as they yell at the beautiful dancing women, just in case. Bill has a hand fist ed in the back of his father’s jacket as well as Charlie’s, and Fred and George are holding back Ginny and Percy.

“What’s going on?” Harry asks, panicked.

Bill grins, wide and easy. “Don’t worry about it, Harry. Veelas only affect people who don’t have a soulmate. They probably won’t jump off the stands, the Veelas wouldn’t want to disrupt the game, but it doesn’t hurt to be cautious.”
Harry slide his gaze to Fred and George, surprised. He hadn’t known they had soulmarks. Bill winks and twists around, jerking his head to the side so his long ponytail shifts enough that Harry can just make out a black ring on the back of his neck – what a soulmark look likes before someone touches their soulmate. No wonder Bill hadn’t wanted to cut his hair.

He risks a glance up. Sure enough, Draco and his father are completely unaffected, looking onto the field with identical expressions of cool disinterest. He thinks Draco could be part Veela himself, with his pale blonde hair and his – his –

Harry abruptly looks back on the field, heat radiating from his face. He didn’t mean – well, Draco has always been pretty, no use helping that, of course. He had changed over summer, though, and it’s so much more obvious now that Harry’s seeing him in person than it was over the too-small frame of the mirror. He’s taller, and his hair is longer. He’s lost some of the baby fat from his face, his jaw sharp enough that he’s lucky he has those full lips to balance it out, otherwise he would look quite silly, Harry thinks.

He also thinks he should stop thinking about what his soulmate looks like before his face literally bursts into flames. If anyone asks he’s going to blame the Veelas.

Luckily, the opening ceremonies end and the Veelas are ushered off the field. Ron and Hermione and everyone else are back to normal. They’re both embarrassed by their behavior but Harry resolves not to make fun of them for it considering all the things they don’t make fun of him for.

The match finally begins, and he pushes all thoughts of his soulmate situation aside and focuses on the game instead. Thank Merlin.

~

When Mr. Weasley wakes them all up in the middle of the night and tells them to run, Harry doesn’t know what he was expecting. But as he, Ron, and Hermione burst out of the tent and see Mr. Roberts, his wife, and his children being levitated and tortured in the air – he just knows he wasn’t expecting that.

“Let’s go!” Ron says, grabbing each of their hands and pulling them away.

“Shouldn’t we help?” Hermione asks, voice trembling. Harry can’t bring himself to look away even as Ron drags them past and around the flailing muggles. It takes Harry a second to realize Ron is leading them in the direction of the crowd, and the crowd is headed to the woods.

Ron shakes his head, picking up the pace. “What are we going to do? We can’t even use our wands.”

“Shouldn’t someone else be helping?” Harry asks, and he’s looking but all the adults are running. Grown up, fully trained wizards, and they’re just – running.

It doesn’t seem right.

“Dr – Malfoy?” Hermione says suddenly, and Ron must be as surprised as Hermione sounds because he stops running and the three of them stumble to a stop.

Harry finally tears his eyes from the tortured muggles. Draco is leaning against a tree at the very edge of the woods, arms crossed and a careful casualness in his pose. He’s paler than Harry’s ever seen him, even when they were nearly attacked by a transformed Remus, even when they were both moments away from receiving the dementor’s kiss. He’s certain Draco has crossed his arms to keep them from shaking.
“Get out of here,” he says urgently, voice low, but his face is at odds with his words. He’s smirking at them, something cruel in the curl of his lips that isn’t quiet reaching his eyes. “You guys can’t stay here. Go!”

If anyone was looking at them, but couldn’t hear them, they would think Draco was taunting them.

“You have to come with us!” Hermione says, taking a step towards him.

Draco pulls out his wand and presses it to Hermione’s sternum. She freezes, eyes wide. “They won’t hurt me. I’m safe here. You are not – you especially are not. Do you want to join the muggles up there?”

Harry that knows they have to keep up appearances, always, even now, but he wants so badly to grab his soulmate’s hand and drag him to safety with them. “Come with us. You’re not helping anyone by staying here.”

“I can try and make sure no one dies,” he says, and his hand really is shaking now. “Go. Now. I’ll be fine.”

“You better,” Ron says fiercely. Then he grabs Harry and Hermione’s arms and drags them into the woods.

Harry resists at first – he’s no weakling, he’s on the quidditch team. But Ron is taller than him and stronger than him and there’s a stubborn set to his mouth that Harry has never been able to win against. “We can’t leave him!”

“You’re the Boy Who Lived!” Ron snaps. “You’re the least safe out of all of us. You’re the one who killed You-Know-Who, Hermione’s a muggleborn, and I’m a blood traitor. We don’t want to hang around a bunch of wannabe Death Eaters, understand?”

“But we left him behind!” Hermione says, and she sounds like she’s about to cry, which Harry really can’t deal with right now because he feels as if he’s about to cry.

Ron is still pulling them forward with single-minded determination, doing his best to get them as far from the chaos as possible. “Draco is a pureblood and the son of a Death Eater. They won’t hurt him, but they will hurt us. How do you think Draco will feel if we get hurt because we didn’t listen to him? Do you think he’ll be happy? Do you think he’ll thank us?”

“No,” Hermione says quietly.

Ron finally pauses to whirl around and face them, his freckles standing out against his ashen face, his eyes as round as galleons. “Then move faster!”

Harry stops resisting him, and picks up the pace. This works up until a green smoky spell appears from seemingly nowhere, and Ron just barely glances up before throwing himself to the ground, yanking Harry and Hermione along with him.

He doesn’t get a chance to yell at him before he feels the heat of several spells passing over them, and, okay, maybe Ron had the right idea.

“WHICH ONE OF YOU SUMMONED THE DARK MARK?” Barty Crouch roars, stomping forward as they carefully get to their feet. A dozen wands are still trained on them.

“Excuse me?” Hermione demands, “Which one of you threw combat spells at three underage wizards? I’m certain that can’t be legal.”
Crouch goes purple, and Ron is edging forward, clearly preparing to throw himself in between Hermione and Crouch, and Harry takes a moment to marvel at how an already horrible situation has gone from bad to worse.

Then the house elf from earlier is found with his wand, the wand that apparently summoned the skull and snake, and it’s always impressive just how much worse his life always manages to get.

~

Draco sees the Dark Mark and bolts into the forest. The Death Eaters are still torturing the muggles, and he’d meant to stay, had been standing there with his wand clenched in his fist, ready to interfere if the torture threatened to go too far.

But he sent his soulmate into those woods, he sent his friends into those woods, and if he sent them into a trap then it’s his obligation to go rushing in a after them in a traditionally Gryffindor foolhardy fashion.

Luckily, when he arrives it’s not to anything quite so dire. There’s a bunch of adult witches and wizards with their wands pointed at his friends, as well as a sniveling house elf clutching and twisting her ragged pillowcase. He would love to fade back, to turn his back on this and let it sort itself out. However, Crouch is doing an excellent job of making himself look like the caliber of idiot his father is always complaining about, and he’s not about to stand here and let a bunch of moronic adults foist the blame on some teenagers just because they were too afraid to stand up to the actual Death Eaters, and pointing their wands at some kids gives them a power rush.

Besides, Crouch has dismissed his house elf in front of everyone, which gives Draco a rather brilliant opportunity to do something stupid. Harry really is rubbing off on him.

“You can’t go anywhere without causing trouble, can you Potter?” he drawls, pitching his voice just like mother taught him to, so it carries over the petty squabbling and the house elf’s tears.

He doesn’t have to push his way through, because they part for him. Sneers are on their lips, but when he steps forward they get out of his way. “Mr. Malfoy,” Crouch says, blustering, “this doesn’t concern you—”

“Oh, I think it does,” he doesn’t bother to keep the contempt from his voice. “Really, Mr. Crouch, I expected better of you. There are atrocious crimes being committed just a half mile back, and here you are – interrogating the Boy Who Lived? Dismissing a house elf who, in a time of chaos and fear, was kind and thoughtful enough to pick up an abandoned wand? I rather think you and your,” he pauses, curling his lip as his eyes sweep across the assembled wizards, “compatriots would be better served directing such heroic tendencies towards those who actually require your aid, and not in detaining Hogwarts students.”

Most of the adults have lowered their wands, and their eyes dart around, trying to avoid meeting anyone’s gaze. Good.

“Mr. Malfoy,” Crouch says through gritted teeth. “You should know better than to speak of matters you do not fully understand. I will be speaking to your father about your behavior.”

“Please do,” he says, “I’m sure he’s quite worried. We became separated, you understand, what with all the chaos. But I imagine I would have found him by now if I hadn’t been sidetracked by your gross negligence.”

This is all false. His father had slipped away moments before the Death Eaters had appeared, and he
doesn’t want his father to be one of those men, but what he wants has no bearing on reality, unfortunately.

Hermione is stubbornly not looking at him, which is much better than Harry, who hasn’t stopped starring ever since he stepped into the clearing. “Can we go now?” she asks acidly.

Crouch opens his mouth, but Draco can’t have them leave yet. He needs an audience for this next bit.

“Of course you can,” he speaks over Crouch. The man looks like he’s about to pop a blood vessel. “However, before we all get on our merry way, Mr. Crouch, what do you say to the matter of your house elf?”

“House elf?” he repeats blankly, then he looks down to creature sobbing at his feet like he’s just noticed she’s there. “I have no house elf.”

The thing wails at that, prostrating herself. Draco assumes he doesn’t kick her only because they have an audience.

“You have dismissed her, claiming her to be a thief. A house elf with no loyalty is an unemployed house elf, and an unemployed house elf is a dead house elf. Perhaps her judgement was poor,” he allows, “but we hardly hand out death sentences for poor judgement. Do we, Mr. Crouch?”

Everything he isn’t saying hangs in the air between them. Crouch has just accused the Boy Who Lived and a house elf of summoning a Dark Mark. Poor judgment is the kindest description of his actions.

“If you’re so concerned with her future, why don’t you ask your father to take her on? Your family did recently lose a house elf, didn’t they?” his eyes flicker over to Harry for the briefest moments, and okay, he’s not a complete moron. He has been playing this game longer than Draco’s been alive.

He can’t agree with him, that just reminds everyone here that he’s a kid, that he has no place calling them out in the first place, and it undoes all the work he’d just done in shaming them for being pathetic cowards.

“That won’t be necessary,” he says, because he’s a moron, and his parents are absolutely going to kill him for this. Then again, if his father didn’t want him doing stupid shit like this, then he should be around to stop him, and not running around torturing muggles. “You, elf, what is your name?”

The pitiful creature looks up at him with her wide liquid eyes. “W – Winky, sir.”

“Winky,” he says, “Do you know who I am?”

She nods, “You is the young master Malfoy, sir.”

“Very good,” he says, and she stands a little straighter. “It appears your former master has been derelict in his responsibilities, and I have no choice but to pick up his slack.” There’s disbelieving murmurings coming up around him, but he ignores them. “Will you accept a bond from me, Winky?”

“Yes!” she says, and it’s a gamble on the both their parts. But a dismissed house elf will gain no work from any sort of reputable family, and those that would take her won’t be strong enough to sustain her.

Her choices are a fast death, a slow death, or him.
“You can’t do this!” Crouch says, true nervousness making him pale. “You are not old enough, it’s a
strain your magic can’t afford!”

Ron is shaking his head, eyes wide and pleading, “Malfoy, you – that’s – don’t,” he settles on.
Hermione and Harry don’t know exactly what’s going on, but they know enough to be worried.

“It’s not really up to you. Either the spell will take, or it won’t,” he says, speaking to all of them. He
pulls out his wand, and Crouch is moving to stop him, some of other adults doing the same, but that
will actually be a disaster, will undermine him more than anything else.

He holds out a hand, and Winky takes it, her fingers wrapping around his with surprising strength.
“Alliges duplicia!” he casts, and a pale yellow light comes from his wand and winds its way down
his arm and curls around his hand. He holds his breath, waiting to see if it will take, and for a
moment he’s certain it won’t, that he’s managed to mess this all up in the worst way possible.

But then the yellow band pushes forward, encircling Winky’s hand and wrist and continuing its way
until it reaches the center of her chest. “Accipio!” she shouts, completely the spell, and sealing the
binding between them.

He’s immediately drained as the spell interweaves their magic, and he nearly bites through his lip
doing his best not to stagger. He glances around, and no one is sneering at him anymore, eyes wide
and mouths agape.

Good.

“You’ll excuse the underage magic, under the circumstances,” he says, internally wincing when his
voice comes out rough. He swallows before he speaks again, “I hardly think these events need an
official documentation. Do you?”

Crouch shakes his head, something almost like respect on his face.

“Excellent,” he says crisply, and he needs to get away from all these eyes before his legs give out on
him. “Come along, Winky.”

He turns and walks through the crowd, his new house elf at his heels. They part for him this time just
like they had before, and he walks like his father, head tall and straight, contempt hovering at the
corners of his mouth.

He makes it about a quarter mile before his vision goes blurry and he slides to the ground, leaning his
back against a tree and closing his eyes. He won’t fall asleep, that would be irredeemably stupid. But
as his eyes feel heavier and heavier in his head, he realizes he might not have much choice in the
matter.

“Wake me if anyone gets close,” he orders, pulling his cloak more tightly over his shoulders and
wishing he were doing this somewhere more comfortable, like his bed. “I can’t let anyone see me
like this.”

There’s the slight crinkle of fallen leaves as Winky sits beside him and whispers, “Yes, Master
Draco.”

He’s asleep before she’s even finished saying his name.

~

Harry doesn’t know what, exactly, just happened, but he knows Draco looked like he was about to
pass out when he’d walked away. They’re rushing back to their tent, the Death Eaters apparently
gone, and the muggles being taken care of. “Ron, what the hell—”

“Later,” he says sharply, and Harry quiets.

He feels a hand on his shoulder, and he’s spinning around, his wand raised. He sees Ron and
Hermione do the same.

“Woah, easy!” Fred and George have raised their arms in surrender, and they all drop their wands.
“Bit trigger happy there, eh?”

“Shut up,” Ron says, “Where’s everyone else?”

George shrugs, “Bill was with Ginny and Percy, and Charlie went with Dad. We need to get back.”

“Should we go look for Malfoy?” Fred asks, “He didn’t look so good.”

“Of course he didn’t,” George snaps. “He’s way too young to be pulling that type of crap, someone
should have stopped him.”

“If he keeps this up, soon he’ll be bleeding gold along with red,” Fred says.

Hermione glares, hands on her hips, “Why should we care about Malfoy? And what are you talking
about anyway?”

“Later!” Ron repeats, “We can discuss this later, when we’re not in a strange forest, potentially
surrounded by Death Eaters.”

The twins are trading covert looks, and it’s Fred who goes, “You know, we did have the Marauder’s
map for years. We’re really grateful you gave it back to us, but – we have had it at our disposal. For
years.”

Harry has no idea what they’re talking about.

“What he’s saying is that we know all about your strange secret alliance with the Slytherins.” Fred
elbows him in the side, and George amends his statement. “Okay, we don’t know all about it, we
basically just know it exists. But you all hang out with him, and he saved Ginny, so we’ve just been
running under the assumption Malfoy’s an all right bloke underneath all the prissy snobbery.”

Hermione chokes on air, and Harry really needs to stop tempting the universe by thinking that things
can’t get any worse, because the universe seems dead set on proving him wrong. “Have you told
anyone?”

The twins put a hand over each other’s hearts, offended. “Of course not!” they say together, then
George continues, “We haven’t said anything to anyone, but we’re pretty sure Ginny knows too. She
somehow seems to know everything. It’s a little scary.”

“Guys!” Ron hisses through gritted teeth. “Later. This can all wait until later. I’m sure Draco is fine,
because no Death Eaters are going to be attacking him, because he’s a bloody Malfoy. Can we
please worry about ourselves for two seconds, and get back to the tent?”

There’s really no good reason not to listen to him, when he puts it like that. Fred and George walk on
either side of them and slightly ahead, wands in their fists.

Ron’s right about Draco. He’s probably fine. There’s no reason for him to worry at all.
If this is how Draco feels every time Harry goes off and does something stupid, it’s possible he owes his soulmate an apology. This is awful.

Draco wakes up freezing and sore, but he’s at least not tired anymore. For a moment he thinks he’s forgotten how to open his eyes, then he looks up and sees the blanket of stars around him.

It’s dark. He’s been asleep for hours.

“I’m so dead,” he says aloud. Then he frowns. His parents must have tried to find him, right? It’s a simple tracking spell. They wouldn’t have just left him. There must be some reason they haven’t come for him, but he can’t think of – actually, he can think of one. “Winky,” he says, and the elf steps up next to him. “Did you put a, a cloaking spell of some sort around us?”

Her ears droop, and she nods. “Yes, Master Draco. You was saying that you didn’t want anyone to see you. So I mades it so no one could.” She reaches up for her ear, twisting it painfully back, “Did I do the wrong thing, Master Draco?”

“No, stop that,” he orders. She lets go of her ear. “That was clever of you, Winky. Very good.”

She beams and gives him a deep curtsey.

He can have her drop the cloaking spell, and his parents will find him in no time. But that’s a little pathetic, and there has to be some sort of better way to do this. He could try and cast the portkey charm, but he’s never gotten it quite right, and he’s already performed a powerful spell today, there’s no reason to make his situation worse.

The campground may be run by muggles, but the town surrounding it is mostly magical. That means the only thing separating him from the floo network is a couple miles of walking, and the one awkward conversation it will take to convince someone to let him use their fireplace.

“At least it’s a clear night,” he sighs, “Come along, Winky.”

She follows at his heels, shivering. He can’t give her clothes, that would be rather counterproductive, so he casts a warming charm on himself that extends outward enough that it encompasses her as well.

He doesn’t look at her as he does it, pretending it’s entirely on accident.

Mr. Weasley brings them back to the burrow immediately, face nearly grey. No one’s talking, and being surrounded by silent Weasleys is possibly the strangest thing Harry has ever experienced, and he lives a very strange life.

There’s a whole lot of tears from Mrs. Weasley, and furtive glances to her husband that she probably doesn’t think the rest of them notice. She makes them all sit down to eat, even though no one’s hungry, and it feels like hours until they manage to get alone.

The twins and Hermione squeeze into Ron’s bedroom, since Bill and Charlie are sharing the twin’s room. Harry like them, they seem nice, but he has no interest in spilling his secrets to them. “All right, we’re alone, and it’s later,” Hermione says, crossing her arms. “What was all that about? What did Draco do?”
Ron opens his mouth, but Fred raises his hands. He and George share a look, but he only sighs and says, “Fairs fair, I suppose, if we know their secrets it’s only right that they know ours.”

George bites his bottom lip, “Well – yeah, I guess.”

Harry doesn’t know what they’re talking about until Fred takes out his wand and casts a muffling charm around the room.

“Are you mad?” Ron hisses, “Mum’s going to kill you!” He looks toward the door, clearly waiting for their mother to come running up. Nothing happens.

“We figured out a way to get past her sensing charm,” George says, “It’s a potion, we’ll brew it for you when we get back to school. But be smart about it! If she catches you casting, she’ll know we messed with it and set up a whole new one.”

“Or take our wands like she had to do to Bill and Charlie,” Fred says. “Which sounds properly miserable.”

Harry’s been looking to the window, waiting for the owl from the ministry, and is confused when nothing comes. “Hold on,” he says, “Why are you talking about your mom? What about the Ministry?”

“Using magic outside of school is illegal!” Hermione says, aghast, just in case they’ve somehow forgotten. “What are you doing?”

“What?” Ron says blankly, then, “That’s only for muggleborns.”

Hermione looks like she’s getting ready to punch him.

Fred rolls his eyes, “What my dear, dull brother means is that it’s only enforced for muggleborns. How are they supposed to track it for the rest of us?”

“Remember a couple summers ago?” George asks, “Harry got a warning for a house elf doing magic. They only know where magic happens, they don’t have any way to track who cast it. Every couple of years someone will try to introduce a wand tracking law into the Wizengamot, but it never gets very far.”

“It’s a parent’s responsibility to keep track of underage magic,” Ron says. “Mom has an alert set up, and that is attached to our wands. If we use them, she gets an alert, and then we get grounded. But the ministry just knows someone cast a spell – and since our parents live here, and they’re way past seventeen, there’s no way to know if it was a kid or an adult.”

“Then why aren’t kids just doing underage magic all the time?” Harry demands.

The Weasleys stare. “They are?” Ron offers. “Mum’s pretty strict about it, but that’s mostly because she doesn’t want to have to keep carting us off to St. Mungo’s when we do something stupid. And the law isn’t pointless, I guess, we do need to rest our magic if we want it to keep growing properly. Neville’s gran encourages him to use magic during the summer, it’s why he’s so burned out all the time. Seamus’s dad’s a muggle, and he always wants to see what his son has learned, so his mom lets him doing a demonstration before taking away his wand for the summer. And, I mean, we all used our parents’ wands growing up. Not often! But, well, no one casts their first spell in Hogwarts.”

“Some of us do,” Hermione says quietly, and Harry winces. “Some of us don’t have a choice.”

Sometimes, it’s really frustrating to continually find out new ways that you’re lacking, or different, in
the world you inhabit.

Ron opens his mouth, and then looks toward his brothers, panicking. George places his hand on Ron’s shoulder and says kindly, “Hermione, you’re the best witch in your year. A couple extra spells that we knew going in doesn’t change that.”


“What an idiot!” Ron says. “I don’t know how he expects to maintain his grades with a house elf sucking him dry.”

“The bond did take,” Fred says, but he doesn’t sound very sure of himself. “It wouldn’t have worked if he couldn’t handle it. Probably.”

“Guys,” Harry sighs, “Explanation? Please?”

The three brothers stumble over themselves explaining, talking over one another, until Ron gets irritated and slaps his hand over the twins’ mouths. “House elves are made of magic,” he says, and then Fred peals his hand away and says, “No, you’re already getting it wrong–”

The door bounces open, and they all fall silent. Ginny is standing there, arms crossed. “Your muffling charm sucks,” she informs Fred.

“Ginny, get out of here!” Ron scowls, “This doesn’t concern you!”

She kicks the door shut. George’s shoulders slump. She shoves Ron over until he makes space for her on the bed, and crosses her legs one over another. Harry thinks maybe he was underestimating Draco when he said that Ginny was terrifying. He kind of sees it now.

“First of all,” she says, “House elves are not made of magic, they are made from magic. They are naturally occurring from magical forests, or they were, house elves don’t really just show up anymore. They need a source of magic to survive, which was fine when most of the world was magical forests, but that’s not how it is anymore. So, to survive, house elves will bind themselves to powerful magical families, and survive off their magic. Which is a huge risk for a family to take, not just because it’s draining their magic, but because it makes it impossible to use magic against an elf that’s connected to you, since their magic is now yours. So if an elf turns on its master, which is possible if difficult, there’s virtually no way for that wizard to protect themselves. That’s why corporeal punishment is so favored. In return, the house elf acts as a servant for the family.”

“That’s barbaric!” Hermione says, aghast. “That’s – that’s slavery! They’re forced to work for no pay, just to survive?”

Ginny frowns, “They are paid, weren’t you listening? They get paid in magic, something far more valuable than gold. It’s not ideal, of course, but for what they get in return, some cleaning seems a small price to pay. What should families do, give house elves unrestricted access to their magic, and get nothing in return? Have no safety net against them taking advantage?”

Hermione goes silent. She’s not agreeing, but she’s thinking about it.

“Hold on,” Harry says, a sinking feeling in his chest, “Malfoy said that an unemployed elf was a dead elf. So if they don’t have a bond—”

“They starve to death,” George finishes grimly. “What Crouch did was barbaric. Because the families who employ house elves are so vulnerable to them, an elf who’s fired for being disloyal will never find work, especially one who’s fired from such a prominent figure. Without a bond, they have
no way to get magic, and without magic to feed on they die. It’s not pretty.”

“So it was rather noble for Malfoy to take on Winky’s bond,” Fred says, “although I’m sure he did it for political reasons more than anything else. But it was also incredibly stupid. Heads of families usually take on the bond, because then house elves are feeding on family magic, and not personal magic. But Malfoy took it, and not his father, so – well, I’ll guess we’ll see what happens.”

Ginny sighs, “He really should work on his saving people thing. It’s going to get him in trouble one day.”

Harry wants to open his mirror and talk to Draco right then, but the twins are there, and so is Ginny, and he’s still unsure about how much they all know.

He’ll just have to wait.

~

He’d held Winky as he went through the floo, not wanting her going through on her own and getting lost, and then having to track down his lost elf on top of anything else. He’s just stepped out when he can hear rapid footsteps heading toward him.

“Wait for me in my room,” he orders her and she disappears with a crack. She should be able to figure out which one is his based on the concentration of his magic, but if not the family elves will be able to show her.

His mother rounds the corner, eyes wild and hair a mess and he feels instantly guilty. He’d been trying to punish his father by making his own way home, but he’d worried his mother as well. “Draco!” she cries, breathless, and he moves to meet her. He’s crushed in her embrace, her arms solid as iron around him. “We were so worried! What happened, where were you?” He doesn’t get a chance to answer before she’s pulling back to pepper kisses all over his face, and then smoothing back his hair from his face. Her hands are shaking.

“I’m sorry, Mum,” he says, and he means it, grabbing her hands in his own. “I, uh,” if he says he passed out she’ll throw an absolute fit, but if he says he fell asleep of all things she won’t believe him. Or if she does believe him, she’ll kill him, which isn’t an ideal solution either.

He’s saved from having to say either by his father apparating into the living room. If he thought Narcissa looked disheveled, she has nothing on Lucius, who looks a mess. Robes askew and hair in a rumpled ponytail. “Narcissa,” he says, voice reedy with panic, a voice Draco has never heard before, “I can’t find him!”

The moment his father’s eyes land on him, he slumps in relief, hand going to cover his face as he turns away. Draco’s still angry, he still has a very good reason to be angry, but it’s hard for him to hold onto that in the face of his parents’ fear.

“Where were you?” Lucius asks, still turned away from him.

“In the forest,” he answers, swallowing. “Where were you?”

“What?” he turns around.

Draco refuses to focus on his red rimmed eyes. “Where were you? You were next to me, and then you were gone.”

“Never mind that,” Lucius says, “What do you mean you were in the forest? I searched all over!
Why didn’t you go home?”

He steps away from his mother, and oh, there’s that anger. “Why didn’t I go home? I don’t know, Dad, maybe because we came together, and I can’t apparate on my own! But instead of being with me, you were off TORTURING MUGGLES!”

“Don’t raise your voice at me!” he snaps. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. I heard what you did in that field with that blasted house elf. Surely you don’t think that thing picked up Potter’s wand on accident—”

“No, I don’t think that, I’m not an actual idiot,” he says, interrupting his father for possibly the first time in his life. “Which is why I know that you were there, in a mask, messing with muggles. While you were doing that, Crouch was causing a scene, and making remarks about our family and I would have loved to let you handle it, Father, I really would have. But you couldn’t do that because you weren’t there!”

“Well, I’m here now,” he says, trying to be calm and reasonable, even when Draco’s not, and for some reason that makes him even angrier. “Summon that blasted elf, I’ll take on its bond. You’re too young.”

The thing is, he’s right. Even as Draco had done it, he’d kind of assumed his father would take on Winky’s bond if he succeeded. But he’s furious and upset and instead he says, “No.”

Lucius goes still. “Excuse me?”

“No,” he repeats. “Winky is my elf, and I’m keeping her. You – you have more important things to worry about, what with doing the Dark Lord’s dirty work. Never mind that he’s been dead for thirteen years. Clearly that’s more important that our family.” Than me, he doesn’t say, but by the way his mother has pressed her hand to her mouth he’s sure it came through loud and clear.

“Nothing is more important to me than you and your mother,” Lucius says intently, and Draco wants to believe him, he wants that to be true so desperately it hurts. “But there are things going on that you don’t understand, and I need you to be a good son, a good Malfoy.”

“I AM A GOOD MALFOY!” he bursts out, and his chest feels tight and his eyes are stinging, but he’s not going to let anyone talk to him like that, not even his dad. “Our family predates the Dark Lord, we were merchants and politicians and nobles, not servants! I am a good Malfoy, and a good son! But,” he licks his lips, “but I won’t be a good Death Eater, and you can’t make me!”

His parents look stricken, and he runs. He runs for his room, desperate to end this, but after a moment he can feel his father at his heels. “Draco! DRACO!” He makes it to his room, and tries to slam the door, something he’s never done, but Lucius is there, holding it open and panting. “We are not finished!”

Draco shakes his head, and there are tears in his eyes threatening to spill over, and he doesn’t want to do this now, he can’t do this now, he doesn’t know if he’ll ever be ready to do this.

Lucius takes a step inside. Winky appears in front of him, ugly little face set in a scowl. “Master Draco would like to be alone now!” she declares, and with a snap of her fingers Lucius is shoved back and his door slams shut. Draco can hear him pounding on his door, but he can’t get through.

He throws himself on his bed, and finally lets the tears spill out. He buries his face in his pillow and clutches it as sobs wrack his body, until his stomach hurts and his throat hurts and his head hurts. He’s never fought with dad before, not like this, not over something that mattered. He hates it.
He’s just started to quiet when there’s a presence at his elbow, and he looks up to see Winky hovering next to his bed with a cup of hot cocoa and Abigail comically wrapped around her, and he has to smile at this sight of his big black mamba struggling to be held up by a tiny house elf. “Here you is going, Master Draco!” she carefully sets the cup of cocoa on his bedside table and heaves Abigail onto the bed. She hisses in displeasure, but is quick to curl on top his back. Winky wrings her hands. “I will draw Master Draco a bath now? That is what the other elves said you is liking when you are sad.”

He blinks and takes a sip of the cocoa, careful not to dislodge Abigail. It’s spiced with cinnamon and chili powder, just how he likes it. She must have talked to the family elves about him already. That was fast.

“Very good,” he winces when his voice comes out as a croak.

Winky gives him a pleased little smile and then disappears with a crack. A moment later he can hear water rushing from the bathroom attached to his room. He reaches into the pocket of his robe, feeling for his mirror, and pulls it out, desperate to talk to Harry.

When he opens it, the glass piece falls out, having come unstuck from the rest of the compact. He reaches for it, but misses, and it falls and shatters on his bedroom floor.

He stares at it for a long moment. Even if he repairs the glass, the spell connecting it Harry’s won’t be the same, not unless he repairs it when he has the other one next to it.

“Brilliant,” he says hollowly, too exhausted to even get upset about it. He’ll have Winky clean up the glass while he’s in the bath.

~

Hermione gets a letter from Pansy the next day. She spends most of it filleting Rita Skeeter and her horrible reporting, but sandwiched in the middle of that and complaining about their book lists, she says that the mirror broke but he’s fine. She doesn’t specify who he is, out of fear of their mail being read, but she’s talking about Draco, and they’re all relieved. Ron had been trying to keep Hermione and Harry calm about the whole thing, but the longer Draco went without responding to the mirror, the more worried he’d begun to look.

He’s not thrilled about not being able to talk to his soulmate, but he’s safe, and they’ll be at Hogwarts soon.

Harry is there when Ron gets his dress robes, and he sees his disgust at them. He turns to his mum, but Mrs. Weasley is wringing her hands in her apron, and Harry winces, preparing himself.

But Ron just looks back down at his robes and says, “Thanks for getting these for me, Mum.”

Her relief is nearly palpable. “Of course dear! Meat pies for dinner?”

“My favorite,” he says, smiling. “Thanks.” He waits until she’s gone to turn to Harry and say, “These are absolutely hideous.”

“They’re not that bad,” he says, but he must not do a very good job at lying because Ron rolls his eyes.

“They’re abhorrent,” he says, and that’s definitely a word he picked up from Hermione, “I’m going to make Pansy fix them, she has to know how. Mum’s crap at clothing spells, it’s why she hand knits all our sweaters. But Pansy is good at transfiguration, and the vainest girl I know. She has to know
“Maybe don’t phrase it quite like that when you ask her?” Harry suggests. “You know, I could get you new robes. I really don’t mind. It can be an early Christmas present!”

Ron throws a pillow at his face, and his glasses go askew. “Don’t make me have to hit you. You won’t even let me pay you back for the binoculars, I don’t need any handouts.”

“It’s not a handout!” Harry says, but he knows better than to push this too far. “You’re my friend, and I like giving you things because I care about you. Is that so bad?”

“It’s absolutely horrible, how could you say such hurtful things?” Ron asks, but he’s grinning. “Thanks, but no thanks. Pansy will handle it.”

“The offers open, if you want it,” he says, but Ron waves him off, and takes out the chess board instead.

The last few days of summer are quiet, and then finally, finally they’re heading back to Hogwarts. Charlie and Ron’s parents see them off, and Charlie says something cryptic about seeing them soon, which he would probably be more interested in if he wasn’t so anxious to get on the train and get a compartment. He can’t help but keep looking around the platform, trying to catch a glimpse of their Slytherin friends.

He realizes he’s not being subtle when Ron says, “Ah, he’s just excited for … learning.”

He turns back at the Weasleys, who are looking at him with raised eyebrows. “I know that look,” Charlie says, leering. “Got yourself a girlfriend there, Harry?”

Ron chokes.

“NO!” Harry says, face flushing. “No, I don’t have a girlfriend.”

“Boyfriend?” Charlie tries, and he’s too mortified to say anything at all. Luckily, Hermione hooks her arm through his and drags him away before the silence can get too awkward. Thank Merlin.

“You really are a disaster,” she says, sighing, “I’m shocked you ever manage to keep any secrets at all.”

He really doesn’t know what to say to that, so he just shrugs and goes, “Yeah.”

Harry wants to go searching for them, but he never has before, and it would be odd to be seen doing so now. So he doesn’t, and they wait.

They don’t have to wait too long. About twenty minutes after the train leaves the station, their compartment door slams open, and three Slytherins tumble inside.

Harry barely waits for the door to close before he’s on his feet, snagging the front of Draco’s robes and pulling him closer. He cups his face in his hands, and there are bags underneath his eyes. Harry’s never seen that happen outside of finals before. “Nice to see you too, dear,” Draco says, quirking his lips up at the corners. “I’m fine.”

“I’m doing great!” Pansy says loudly, “I’m so great, standing here, watching my best friend and his soulmate be disgusting together. This is just, wow, such a good time.”

Harry rolls his eyes and sits back down, tugging Draco down to sit next to him. “You bear such
heavy burdens Pansy, it’s truly inspiring.”

“Thank you,” she sniffs, pushing Ron over into Hermione so she can take the window seat. “It’s about some time I started receiving my due credit around here.”

Blaise snorts and takes the seat next to Draco. “How have you guys been doing? Everyone’s been gossiping about what happened at the World Cup.”

“Draco did manage to steal most of the high society gossip for himself,” Pansy interjects, “but thanks to Harry, you guys did manage to make the front page. A few of them, actually.”

“Great,” Ron says dryly. “I love being accused of being a Death Eater in front of a bunch of adult wizards, and then being held a wandpoint.”

“Great!” Pansy says, beaming. “Then you had a wonderful time, is what you’re telling me.”

Ron snorts and jerks his chin at Draco, “Hey, my brother was dropping hints about something big happening this year. Do you have any idea what it is?”

Draco slumps, so he’s pressed to Harry from shoulder to hip. He can’t get Charlie saying the word boyfriend out of his head.

“Isn’t something big happening every year?” he asks tiredly. “No, I don’t know. There is something big happening, my father has had to go to about three times more Board meetings than he normally does. But – we’re not, uh, talking. Right now. So I don’t know what it is.”

Pany and Blaise glance at each other, then quickly look away, something pinched around both their faces. Harry wishes he could hug him, or at least hold his hand, but he doesn’t think Draco would appreciate that with an audience, even though it’s their friends.

“No worries!” Ron says with forced cheer. “I’m sure we’ll find out soon enough. So, that Skeeter woman, she’s awful, isn’t she?”

Pansy latches onto the topic of conversation with full force, and Harry does his best not to think of all the things that everyone isn’t saying.

~

Draco had managed to avoid an incredibly awkward carriage ride with his parents be leaving for the train station at absurdly early hour. He’d taken the floo, and sent Winky ahead to the castle with his luggage. Which had been quite boring until his friends had shown up, but still preferable to the part wounded, part angry looks his father kept on sending him.

He refused to talk, because he didn’t know what he wanted. It was all too confusing. He can’t ask for what he doesn’t know he wants, so better not to say anything at all.

But he’s thankful to be back at Hogwarts, especially with Winky. There’s enough latent magic around the castle and the forest that she won’t need to depend solely on him for magic. With any luck, he’ll barely notice any strain at all. At least while he’s in school. He’s not exactly looking forward to this upcoming summer – that week at home had been draining, and he hadn’t even done much.

There are no rules against bringing personal elves, because it’s not something most students would be stupid enough to do, so he orders Winky to help in the kitchens unless he needs her, and to pick up after the Slytherin common room. He just doesn’t have enough chores to keep a house elf busy,
so loaning her out to Hogwarts is the best thing for both of them.

Plus, Snape has been useful for once and set it all up for him, so he hadn’t even needed to speak directly to Dumbledore. Which was good, because whenever he saw that man he was filled with the overwhelming urge to punch him, as if he were some common muggle.

So it’s really for the best that he never gets the opportunity.

~

It’s too conspicuous for them to sneak away on the first night back, so they have to deal with a whole day of classes before they manage to get together again, which Harry considers pure torture. He gets a letter from Remus and Sirius, saying they’re worried about his scar and his dreams that Harry finally gave in and told them about, and that they want to talk in person. Harry doesn’t like the sound of that. That’s easy enough for Remus, who isn’t an international criminal, but he’d rather Sirius not risk imprisonment just so they can have a conversation.

Draco is a prat in Care of Magical Creatures, but he doesn’t say anything truly awful, and since Hagrid has decided that Draco’s all right, he just regard his sullen remarks with a sort of cheerful benevolence. This just seems to frustrate Draco, which makes the whole thing even funner.

That night, the Slytherins are already waiting for them when they make it down to their favorite abandoned classroom. “They’ve cancelled Quidditch!” Draco shouts as soon as they shut the door, and Harry takes a split second to think about how they’re definitely soulmates.

“I know!” he says, right as Ron goes “Despicable!” in the most offended tone of voice he’s ever heard him use.

“Really?” Blaise asks flatly. “That’s what you’re most upset about?”

“What are we supposed to do? Just not practice for a year?” Harry asks, “I’m going to talk to Angelina about it. No way she’s happy about this.”

“Flint is,” Draco grumbles. “He failed his Owls, so he has to retake them if he expects to graduate. I tried bringing it up to him, but he cursed me out and said he didn’t give a shit about quidditch.”

“Try Cassius,” Ron says, “He’s always keeping an eye on the whole game when you’re playing. It makes him a good beater, but it will also make him a good captain. Maybe you can get Flint to step down?”

“He wants the status,” Draco says, “but I might be able to get Cassius to do it anyway. That’s a good idea, Ron.”

“Excuse me,” Hermione says, “not to derail this very important and thrilling discussion, but aren’t we ignoring something a little more important than quidditch? Such as the Triwizard Tournament?”

“Who cares,” Ron, Harry, and Draco say in unison.

“We’re not seventh years,” Ron continues, “What difference does it make to us? Having the other schools here will be fun, I guess. Krum will definitely show up, which will be fantastic. It doesn’t really effect us, besides that, does it? If anything, I’m more worried about being taught by Mad Eye Moody. That guy looks crazy!”

“I guess,” Hermione says dubiously. “Draco, did you really need to be so rude to Hagrid today?”
“Absolutely,” he says. “It’s bad enough that the Weasley twins know about us, and your demonic little sister. Who knows who else is getting suspicious? I have a reputation to maintain.”

Ron chews on his lower lip. “Actually, I had an idea about that. It involves you being an utter prat, so I assume you’re on board.”

Draco looks delighted.

~

It’s a simple enough plan, and Ron offers himself up as the victim, since it was his idea. “We haven’t gotten into a real fight in ages,” Ron had said, “this will be fun.”

“You have a very strange idea of fun,” Hermione had said, but she’d also said it was brilliant in its simplicity so Ron had ignored her.

They’re walking the halls, surrounded by people, and Draco and Ron are trading insults back and forth. Harry drags Ron away, trying not to tense in preparation for the curse he knows his heading his way, for the curse Draco told him he’d aim at him the night before.

It never comes.

They turn around just in time to see a bright green spell hit Draco, and Harry’s heart is in his throat. But it’s not a killing curse, it’s something else, and where his soulmate once stood is a pure white ferret suspended in the air.

Moody stands there, wand outstretched. “What a cowardly thing to do,” he growls, “trying to attack an opponent when their back is turned. Did your father teach you that trick, boy?”

Then, to Harry’s ever increasing horror, he jerks his wand and starts hitting his transformed soulmate against the stone floor. Repeatedly. “Holy shit,” Ron says, too softly for anyone else to hear. He’s so pale that his freckles stand out in stark contrast to the rest of him.

Everyone has gone deathly silent, and he when he’s risks a glance around he’s gratified to realize no one is laughing. They’re all staring, looking as horrified as he feels, and he wills one of them to do something.

But no one does.

This is probably the exact opposite of what Draco wants him to do, the opposite of what they were trying to achieve, but he doesn’t bloody care. He whips out his wand, pointing it at Moody. “Put him down,” he says, and he doesn’t recognize his voice. It sounds cold. It sounds like Draco’s does when he’s pissed off.

Moody stills his wand, and Draco isn’t being hit against the flagstone anymore, so there’s that, at least. “Easy,” he says, “I’m only trying to help, Potter.”

“If this is what you consider help, then it’s no wonder everyone considers you a washed up auror past his prime,” Harry glares, and he guesses Rita Skeeter is good for something, because he got that phrasing from her. “Put him down, and turn him back. I won’t ask a third time.”

“Or what?” he asks.

Harry’s already got the disarming spell on his tongue when McGonagall comes charging through and shouts, “MR. POTTER! What is the meaning of this?”
“Professor Moody turned Malfoy into a ferret,” Ron says, and he shoves Harry’s wand arm down now that reinforcements are here, so that he looks slightly less like a lunatic.

McGonagall turns her furious gaze on Moody. All the students take a step back. “Alastor! Is this the truth? Is that Mr. Malfoy?”

“He deserved it,” Moody says gruffly.

Her eyes narrow and she whips out her wand. “We do not transfigure the students! Hormorphus!

There’s a bright blue light, and Draco is standing there once more. He’s too pale, and his eyes are wide. He smooths back his hair, and his hands are shaking. Harry hopes he’s the only one who notices. “Much obliged, Professor,” he says, voice coming out even.

She gives him a sharp nod and advances on Moody, wand still out. “With me, Alastor,” she hisses, and then leads him away from the students.

Draco sniffs, and walks away, Crabbe and Goyle falling in to walk a half step behind him. Now everyone’s starring at him and Ron, so Harry grabs the back of his best friend’s robes and leads them in the opposite direction of – everyone.

“That went poorly,” Ron mutters.

“That,” Harry says, “is such an understatement.”

~

They meet that night, just the two of them, and this time Harry is there first, pacing across the classroom. Draco slips inside and Harry blurts out, “I’m sorry! I just – couldn’t stand there and watch him hurt you!”

Draco has bags under his eyes. He hadn’t had them earlier, which means he must be using a glamor charm to hide them from everyone. “It’s okay,” he says, “you’re a courageous Gryffindor, so it was in character. We’re fine.”

“I didn’t do it because I’m a courageous Gryffindor,” he says softly, “I did it because he was hurting you, and I wanted to hurt him back.”

Draco smiles, “Well, I’ll take my chivalry how I can get it. It’s just a few bruises, Harry. Don’t worry about it.”

“Bruises?” he asks, and his voice is back to sounding cold. “Show me.”

He looks like he’s going to argue, then he takes a closer look at Harry’s face and thinks better of it. He throws off his robe first, then his tie, then unbuttons his shirt. He hesitates before taking it off. “You’re not allowed to overreact.”

“I won’t,” he says. It’s an easy promise. There’s no such thing as overreacting when people hurt his friends.

Draco is frowning, but he shrugs off his shirt and tosses it aside. “It looks worse than it feels.”

Harry sees red, is instantly furious. His entire torso is blue and purple, and it goes further. He steps forward and tugs Draco’s pants down, and he makes a yelp of protest, but doesn’t do anything else to stop him. He’s gentler, and there are more welts down Draco’s legs. He tugs his boxers down on
one side, just enough to see his soulmark.

The marigolds look even brighter against the deep purple of the bruise covering his hip. “Why didn’t you go to Pompfrey?”

“So it can be reported to my parents? Absolutely not.” His teeth are chattering. “Can I put my clothes back on now? I should have had Winky start a fire, or at least put a warming charm over the place.”

“Er, right,” he says, and it is cold in here, but suddenly he’s too warm all over as Draco hurries to get dressed. “Why do you care if you parents find out?”

“Because we’re having a row, Harry. If my mother hears about this, she’ll come down here herself to set Moody on fire, and my father will use his considerable clout to get him removed from school.”

“Good!” he says, “Brilliant! Do that!”

Draco rolls his eyes. “I can’t. We’re fighting! I can’t let them get involved in this while we’re fighting.”

Harry didn’t grow up with parents, so he’s fully aware he’s far from the expert here, but that doesn’t sound quite right. “I think they’d want to know anyway.”

“Oh, absolutely,” he agrees, “Unfortunately, if they want me to tell them things, then they should have thought about that before – well, before we started fighting. Now we’ll all just have to deal with the consequences.”

Harry is convinced Lucius Malfoy is a bad person. But he’s also pretty sure he’d eviscerate anyone who harmed his son, and Harry’s kind of in favor of that general attitude. But maybe it’s a good thing Draco’s fighting with his parents? They are, well, Death Eaters.

This is all confusing and worrisome, so instead he focuses on the one thing he is certain of. “I hate him.”

“Who?” Draco is fiddling with his tie, trying to get it sit just right even though they’re the only ones there.

“Moody,” Harry says, “I – I hate him. That was cruel. Aurors aren’t supposed to be cruel. They’re supposed to help.”

Draco laughs, but when he meets Harry’s eyes his expression is soft. “I see you haven’t met many aurors.” He frowns, but Draco shakes his head, stepping forward to slip in hand in Harry’s, “When we graduate, you can become in auror, and change the whole lot of them. You can be kind, and make them be kind too.”

“What will you be doing, while I’m off fighting for truth and justice?” he asks, heart in his throat. They’ve never spoken about the future before.

“I’ll be just down the hall, of course,” he says, and they’re not looking at each other, they can’t, Harry’s certain the second they do the dream of this impossible future will shatter. “I’ll be a barrister first, but then after that, well. My family has held a Wizengamot seat for centuries. I’m sure Great Aunt Tiana will be ready to retire in a decade or so.”

“That sounds nice.” he says, leaning his head so it’s resting against Draco’s.

“Yeah,” his soulmate says, “it does.”
Draco didn’t think teaching a bunch of fourth years about the unforgivable curses was the best of ideas, but as far as he was concerned that was among the least of Moody’s sins, so he wasn’t going to make a fuss about it.

Then he says he going to perform them on them, and Draco must be hearing this incorrectly.

He’s not. Sure enough, Hannah Abbott is brought to the front of the class, and made to cluck like a chicken in a truly embarrassing display. He locks eyes with Pansy first, and she nods, but when he looks to Blaise, he shakes his head, eyes wide. Damnit.

Crabbe and Goyle can’t, he knows, unless something drastic has changed in the past few years. Daphne and Theodore should be fine, too, he thinks. He has to twist around to catch Millie’s eye, but Moody is still focused on the Hufflepuffs so he doesn’t notice. She sees him and winces, but gives a shrug. All right, a little resistant is better than he was expecting. They’re not in too bad of shape.

He hopes Moody doesn’t plan on trying the Cruciatatus Curse on them next. Crabbe and Goyle have been exposed to it, but surprisingly it had been his father who had drawn the line there, saying that was something for when he was older. The only other one in their year who had dealt with it was possibly Theodore, but he’s not sure because he’d never asked. He hadn’t thought it would ever come up.

He doesn’t know how to help Blaise, because the only way to practice resisting the curse is to be put under it, repeatedly. And he doesn’t know anyone who’s actually able to cast the damn thing. Well, he supposes he could ask Snape, but that would require spending a significant amount of time in the man’s presence, something he does his best not to do unless absolutely necessary.

The man is a brilliant potions master, but a teacher he is not. He’s an even worse head of house. His mother routinely called his appointment sabotage. Draco wouldn’t go quite that far, but it hardly helped that that man was the face of the Slytherin House.

Moody finishes with the Hufflepuffs, and the only one of them that manages even a token protest is Susan Bones, which Draco should have expected. The girl’s aunt is a liberal, but she’s also ruthlessly pragmatic, according to his father. And he’s hardly the type to sugarcoat these type of things. “Who next?” he asks, his fake eye roving over them uncomfortably. “Mr. Zabini, how about you?”

Yeah, no. Blaise sucks at this, and he hates it, he isn’t going first. Draco’s already half risen from his seat when Pansy’s perfectly manicured hand grabs his shoulder and pushes him back down.

“I’ll go first,” Pansy says, getting to her feet with a sneer and snapping her sheath of hair over her shoulder. “To show everyone else how it’s done.”

Moody quirks an eyebrow. “If you insist, Miss Parkinson.”

“I do,” she says, rolling her hips as she walks to the center of the room. “I’ll take whatever you can give me, Professor. Don’t be gentle – it’s not my first time.”

Moody’s face goes blank. It takes all of Draco’s willpower not to burst out laughing, and he can see Millie has her hand over her mouth to prevent the same reaction. There are few things capable of throwing Mad Eye Moody off balance, and being hit on by a fourteen year old is one of them. It’s good thinking – if they stall for time, it’s possible that they’ll manage to get through this class without Blaise, Crabbe, or Goyle having to face the curse.

“Darling,” Draco drawls, “please, have some decorum.”
She looks over her shoulder to wink at him, and then blow him a kiss. “Oh, you should know better than to think I have any of that.”

There’s a vein popping out of Moody’s forehead. It’s glorious.

“Enough chit chat!” he barks, “Imperio!” Pansy goes completely still and her eyes go glassy. They’re not laughing anymore. “Jump up and down.”

Draco’s hands clench into fists. He’d given the other students the same command, but – Pansy doesn’t wear tights, and she’s been modifying her skirts to be about six inches shorter since second year. If she jumps up and down, she’ll end up flashing the whole classroom.

She raises on her tip toes, and he can see Millie reaching for her wand out of the corner of his eye, and Daphne’s shrugged off her cloak, holding it in her lap, ready to spring forward.

Pansy stills, standing one her tiptoes, looking like a ballerina frozen in time. “Jump up and down!” Moody repeats.

Her leg jerks out, then comes down in a stomp. She shakes her head from side to side, and when she looks back up her eyes are clear. “No, thank you,” she says daintily, triumph in the curl of her lips.

Applause erupts from the other side of the classroom. Pansy freezes.

Draco turns, and they all have their wands in their hands, and half of them are clutching scarves or cloaks, ready to leap to their feet if Pansy hadn’t been able to fight it off and her skirt had gone flying.

Moody bangs his hand against his desk, “All right, all right, that’s enough!”

The Hufflepuffs cheer louder. Pansy flushes, then curtsies before walking back to her seat.

“Huh,” Draco says softly, “who would have thought.”

Susan catches his eye and winks. He’s so startled he winks back without thinking about it.

Draco, Blaise, and Pansy hear about the Gryffindors’ experience that night, and Draco adds putting Longbottom through that on his list of reasons that Moody is awful. There’s no need to rub his parent’s circumstances in the boy’s face. Even he wouldn’t stoop that low.

They’re all suitably impressed when they hear about Harry.

“I couldn’t beat it,” Harry says miserably, “I tried, but – I couldn’t shake it completely, not like you Pansy.”

“I’ve had it cast on me a couple hundred times, Harry! I couldn’t even begin to resist it until, Merlin, a hundred in? That you were able to almost throw it off the very first time it was cast on you is—”

“Incredible,” Draco finishes. “That’s scarcely impressive, Harry. I don’t think I’ve ever heard of anyone being able to resist on their first try, without any training. I would have said it’s impossible, but, well, you’ve certainly taught me a lesson about throwing that word around lightly.”

“I can’t do it at all,” Blaise says, doing a poor job of hiding his bitterness.

Pansy elbows him in the side, “You don’t know that, not for sure. Your mum won’t let anyone else
cast it on you, and obviously you won’t be able to resist it when she casts it. I can’t resist my parents either.”

Draco nods, “Sometimes I almost resist my dad, but my mum? Forget about it. I’ve never even hesitated.”

“Wait!” Hermione holds up a hand, “What are you guys talking about?”

They all turn to stare at her. “Hermione,” Blaise says, now sounding more amused than bitter, “did you miss part of Moody’s lesson?”

“No!” she scowls, “Of course not. What are you talking about?”

Draco thinks back, and actually, he can’t remember Moody mentioning it. Which is strange, since it’s a rather basic component of the curse. “The Imperio Curse is harder to resist if it’s cast by someone you trust, and easier to resist if it’s cast by someone you distrust. It’s still possible to break no matter who casts it, but it’s a lot more difficult. I can sometimes resist my dad, not because I don’t trust him, but because he’s not as good at curses as Mum is. So I’ll probably be able to resist him completely long before my mum.”

“So, comparatively, it’s a lot easier for me to resist Moody, because I very much do not trust him, than if someone in my family cast it,” Pansy adds.

Ron frowns, “But, wait, if Blaise’s mum won’t let anyone else cast on him – are you telling me your parents did let other people cast on you?”

Pansy and Draco shrug. “Gotta learn somehow,” she says, “and they were there, of course. But it’s good to learn. And it’s at least less boring than occlumency lessons.”

“Occu-what now?” Ron asks.

It occurs to Draco, for the first time, that Hermione’s a muggleborn, Harry was raised by muggles, and Ron’s a Weasley, so there’s no conceivable reason for them to have been taught occlumency.

“Shit,” Blaise breathes, clearly coming to same conclusion.

Draco rubs at his temples. “Open the map, we need to find the twins. They should know this too.”

“Ginny?” Pansy suggests.

Draco makes a face. “She should learn, but I’m not subjecting myself to that. I’ll have Luna teach her.” Pansy gives him a dubious look. “She’s good at it! All those flighty, crazy thoughts have to be good for something, right?”

Hermione pulls the Chimera map out of her bag, scanning it. “They’re in bed.”

“Really?” Draco asks, leaning over to look for himself. “I’m shocked.”

“They have to sleep sometime,” Ron points out.

Harry snorts. “Why? We don’t.”

“And it’s very bad for us, and is probably stunting our growth,” Hermione says decisively. “Don’t you think your marks would be higher if we got regular, adequate rest?”

“No,” Ron, Harry, and Pansy say in unison.
“Probably,” Blaise says, and laughs when Pansy whirs around and smacks his arm. “Anyway, you guys need to learn occlumency. It’s a wandless magic to protect your mind. It’s – well, bloody boring, honestly, but not too hard.”

Draco wonders if they’ll help with the strange visions Harry’s been having when he sleeps. He hopes so. They’re kind of terrifying.

Ron claps his hands together, “Okay, sounds good. Should we head back, to get adequate rest for once?”

“That ship sailed about an hour ago,” Hermione says dryly.

She starts to roll up the map, but Draco shakes his head, and she smooths it back out. “I saw Moody heading out to the forest when we were coming here. I want to make sure he’s not anywhere close before we head back.”

She taps the map, “You’re good, he’s in his office.”

“Really?” he leans down.

“Really,” she says, exasperated. “I can read, Draco. It’s one of my many talents.”

“No, I know. Sorry. It’s just,” he frowns, “I really expected him to be gone longer. I thought I was being overly cautious. That was a short trip.”

“Maybe he just wanted some fresh air,” Blaise says, “Who cares? Let’s go to bed. We can grab the twins and start the lessons tomorrow.”

“Right,” he says, rolling the map up and handing it to Hermione. She slides it back into her bag, which seems to contain more things than can reasonably fit inside it. If she’s been working on the bottomless charm without him, he’s going to be cross.

His mind wanders back to Moody, and how quick that walk must have been, then he shakes his head. He’s clearly spending too much time around Luna, and it’s making him paranoid, is all.

~

Angelina had been thrilled with Harry’s suggestion to keep practicing for next year’s quidditch season. There was the small matter of the pitch being under construction for the Triwizard Tournament, and therefore unusable. “Do you think there’s space somewhere in the forbidden forest?” Angelina asks, a look in her eyes that reminds him far too much of Oliver Wood.

Harry thinks that every time he’s gone in that forest, something has tried to eat him. “I’ll ask Hagrid,” he says, instead of voicing that. Something tells him that Angelina wouldn’t care.

“Brilliant!” she says. “I’ll talk to Cedric and Roger about it, no reason for us all to practice separately this year. It’ll be fun! We can play some games mixing the teams.”

Harry should just keep his mouth shut. But that’s never been his strong point, so he asks, “What about the Slytherins?”

“What about them?” she glares, then looks mildly ashamed of herself. “Yeah, I’ll talk to Flint too.”

“Uh,” he thinks back to his conversation with Draco, “Maybe not Flint. I know he’s the captain, but he’s – busy, this year. Maybe ask Cassius instead?”
She looks a bit more cheered at that. Harry can’t blame her. Having to talk to Flint would put a
damper on anyone’s mood.

Harry’s own good mood at the prospect of still being able to play quidditch lasts until he gets to the
Gryffindor common room. It’s mostly empty, but Hermione’s there, curled up on the seat next to the
window with her legs pulled to her chest. Harry wishes Ron was here. For how oblivious he is with
most things, he’s always been excellent at getting Hermione to stop feeling upset. Granted, he
usually does it by making her angry, but it is effective. Personally, he finds Hermione too scary to
make her mad on purpose.

“Hey,” he says, scooting onto the little bit of space left by her feet. “What’s up?”

She looks up at him, and tries to smile, but doesn’t do a very good job of it. “It’s silly.”

“It’s not,” he says immediately. Nothing that upsets his friends is silly.

“I can’t stop thinking about the house elves,” she confesses, “Everyone acts like it’s normal and fine,
and Ron doesn’t get it. I know Ginny said that they do get paid, that it’s not so – unequal, but it looks
that way. And – I mean, once upon a time, people thought slavery was normal and fine too, so.”

“Pretty much no sane person ever thought slavery was fine,” he says, and honestly he hasn’t given
much thought to the house elves. There’s Dobby, who was so desperate to be free, and Winky, who
burst into sobbing hysterics when it happened to her. Those are the only two house elves he knows.

Realistically speaking, his father’s ancestors were probably enslaved by the British, just like
Hermione’s were. Or, well, probably not actually, since his ancestors were magical, and he figures
they took to slavery just as well as American witches took to being burned in the town square. But
he just doesn’t think about that kind of stuff that often, at least when he’s away from the Dursleys,
which kind of makes him feel shallow, now that he is thinking about it.

Are there books on this type of stuff? Probably, but he’d have to admit to not knowing it in the first
place in order to ask for them.

“I don’t know what to do,” she says quietly. “I love Hogwarts, I love magic, but – I don’t want to
stay here if, if it’s all just – operating on slave labor.”

Pretty much no sane person has ever thought slavery was fine, and it seems like all their friends, who
are very much sane people, think it’s fine. But that’s the type of reasoning that will get him punched
in the face. Or worse, pulled into a discussion on changing social mores and the dangers of viewing
the past through a modern world view. He really prefers to leave those types of discussions to Draco
and Hermione. “Why don’t we go talk to some?”

She blinks. “What?”

“Why don’t we ask? We can sit here talking about them, or we can talk to them. Draco doesn’t have
class until after lunch, let’s go ask him to talk to Winky now?” He reaches into his back pocket for
his compact. Draco had added a permanent sticking charm and unbreakable charm to them both after
he’d repaired his and reconnected it back to Harry’s.

The thrilled look on Hermione’s face is absolutely worth the loss of the free period he’d thought he
was going to have.

Ron walks down the stairs, yawning. He’d been smarter than Harry, and had used the break in their
schedules to go take a nap. “What’s going on? What are we doing? If it involves spiders, I’m out,
let’s be clear about that right away.”
“No spiders,” Harry promises as his soulmate’s face appears in the mirror.

~

Draco has no idea why Hermione wants to talk to his house elf, or why it’s so important that they have to do it in the middle of the day. Then again, he supposes it’s better than doing it tonight when they’re supposed to be having occlumency lessons. Hermione’s curiosity can derail him at the best of times, like when they’d started arguing about how many rotations to stir the color changing potions and ended up debating the most effective wand movements for transfiguration. That had ended with Pansy jabbing her wand in between them, turning the desk they’d been using into a rabbit, and declaring that wand movements were the for the weak.

“Winky,” he says, and his house elf appears next to him with a crack. She’s wearing one his old silk pillowcases, cinched at the waist with what looks like an impressive bit of needlework, and she’s even stitched his personal sigil into it so it sits on the upper left corner of her chest – the Malfoy family crest encircled by a dragon. He’s charmed. “Did you make this yourself?”

“Yes, Master Draco!” she says. “I am not wanting to be confused with castle elves.”

“Hmm,” he must look pleased, because Winky looks positively ecstatic. “These are my friends, Winky. Meet Harry, Ron, and Hermione.” They wave as he says their names. “Hermione has some questions for you. Answer them as honestly and completely as you can, understand?”

“Yes, Master Draco,” she turns to face them, tucking her hands behind her and rocking back on her heels. “How can I be helping Master’s friends?”

“Are you happy, Winky?” Hermione asks carefully.

Dear Merlin. He should have brought a book. Luckily, he’s a wizard, so he summons his herbology text from his room.

~

Winky seems to think Hermione has a couple screws loose, but they’re her master’s friends, so she answers all her questions, and even grabs a couple of her own friends from the kitchen so Hermione can talk to them too.

Harry is deeply relieved when they all say the same thing, and when Hermione asks if they want to be earning an actual wage, they laugh. Winky looks like she wants to, but she restrains herself, probably because she doesn’t want to risk being rude to them.

“You don’t want to own games? Or books?” Hermione asks, “Really?”

“We is liking to be kept busy,” one of the castle elves, Dal, says, “Hogwarts is good, there are lots of messy children!”

“Poppy likes to knit,” Mip says, “She makes the extra blankets we give out in the winter. And Kurk etches the designs into the dinner plates himself. The more elaborate the plate, the cleaner the students are. One year the Slytherins were so neat we needed to reassign him to the Hufflepuff common room, or else he was going to start recreating tapestries on the dessert dishes.”

Mip looks old, although Harry isn’t really sure how house elves age. He’s also the first elf who’s speech patterns match the humans. He’s wonder if it’s something they pick up in time, or if it’s something Mip taught himself on purpose.
“Those aren’t really hobbies,” Hermione says, crestfallen. “Don’t you want to do things just for
yourself?”

“If we is wanting a thing, we can make it ourselves,” Dal says. “We is magic, Miss Hermione.”

Ron makes a choking sound that is definitely him trying to muffle his laughter. Hermione kicks him
in the shin without looking.

“We like to create, and to clean, and to maintain,” Mip says, something wistful about his face. “There
aren’t enough forests to sustain us anymore. We’re not needed like we used to be, so now we do this.
Wizards don’t need us either, but we help, and we like it. You don’t need to worry over us, Miss.”

Hermione still looks uncertain, but she nods. “Thank you for your time, Mip, Dal. I appreciate it.”

“Anytime, Miss Hermione!” Dal says cheerfully, and then they’re gone in a crack and a wisp of
smoke. Winky is still standing there.

“You’re dismissed,” Draco says, not looking up from his book. “Good job.”

She bows and disappears.

“Are you satisfied?” Ron asks.

“Almost,” she turns to Draco. “What about Dobby?”

He stops reading and looks up. “What about him?”

“He was abused, and hurt, and he hated working for your family,” she says tightly, “So if this whole
house elf thing is so perfect and wonderful, why did that happen?”

“Well, it’s neither perfect, nor wonderful, for starters,” Draco says. “It’s just the least horrible option.
House elves need magic to live, and there’s just not as much natural magic as there used to be. So in
exchange for working for us, we give them ours. But that puts us in a vulnerable position. If Winky
chose to attack me, my magic wouldn’t work on her, even though hers works on me. My magic
doesn’t work on any of the family elves either, even though technically my dad holds their bond. So
it’s not a great solution for anyone. Especially since any family old and powerful enough to support
house elves is certainly rich enough to afford a maid and a cook, who’s employment wouldn’t leave
us defenseless against them. Plus, there’s literally over a thousand cleaning and cooking spells. But
we don’t actually want house elves to go extinct, so we do this instead.”

“Dobby?” Hermione repeats, frowning.

He shrugs. “He was a horrible house elf. He did his duties just fine, that wasn’t the issue, but he
wasn’t loyal. I mean, I’m glad he helped Harry, obviously, but he went behind my father’s back and
betrayed him to do it, and that wasn’t the first time he’d done something like that. So Dad had him
put his hands in the oven and twisted his ears back. He wasn’t going to free him, because a house elf
freed for disloyalty will never find work again, and he didn’t want the wretched thing to die. Mum
was actually pretty relieved when Harry tricked them into freeing him.”

Harry’s gone cold. “Are – is – did I kill Dobby?”

“No!” Ron says. “Of course not!”

Draco just stares at him. “Do you not listen to me at all? Thanks to you, Dobby wasn’t freed for
being disloyal, my dad was tricked by you. Which he wasn’t thrilled with, publicity wise, but I’m
sure Dobby is working for some other family, hopefully one suitably liberal so he doesn’t feel the need to betray them at every opportunity.”

“And Crouch?” she asks.

His face darkens. “Horrible. Freeing Winky like that was cruel, and unnecessary. It was wrong, and freeing your elf without sufficient cause is illegal if they don’t have another family ready to take on their bond. But I’m, oh, let’s say a few years off from getting my barrister’s license, so I took on her bond instead.”

Hermione crosses her arms, scraping her teeth of her bottom lip. “Okay. Okay. Neither perfect, nor wonderful, just the least horrible option. Fine. But I’m going to look for a better way to do this. There has to be another way for house elves to survive, and I’m going to find it.”

“Great!” Draco says, throwing up his arms, sending the book flying. He banishes it back to his room before it hits the ground. “Please do. I, personally, would love to not have my magic tied up in a house elf. Since your insanity has taken us nearly to lunch, can we go to the Great Hall now? Or would you like to go down and interrogate Hagrid about the thestrals?”

“I do have to talk to Hagrid about something, actually,” Harry says.

Draco pinches the bridge of his nose, “Merlin’s sagging ballsack.”

Ron gives a bark of laughter, and Hermione lets out a scandalized, “Excuse me?” but it comes out kind of warbly, since she’s also doing her best not laugh, which has Draco and Harry dissolving into giggles.

~

Fred and George are the last to make it to the classroom that night, and there’s some wariness about the Slytherins, but once they figure out that no one’s about to start flinging insults – or curses – they relax.

The occlumency lessons are, as promised, incredibly boring. Blaise is the only half decent Legilimens they have, and he doesn’t both trying to get into anyone’s mind that first night. Instead he slips inside, testing their shields, searching for weak spots and letting them know when they’re doing it wrong. At the end of the night, he looks more exhausted than the rest of them.

“How do you guys do this all the time?” Fred asks, yawning. “I can already tell I’m going to be falling asleep in class.”

Hermione rolls her eyes, “Draco and I brew a batch of Pepper Up potion once a month, we’ll give you each a vial. And we don’t meet at night every night!”

“We will be meeting twice a week to practice until you all get the hang of it,” Draco announces. “I spoke to Luna, and she’s handling teaching your demonic sister.”

“She’s our only sister,” George says, amused. “You don’t need to specify demonic, it’s implied.” Draco narrows his eyes, and Harry ushers them all out before things can deteriorate any further.

The last thing in the world he wants to do is to listen to is Draco and the Weasley twins argue about semantics.

~
The next morning Harry gets a letter, unsigned, containing a sketch of the logo for the Three Broomsticks, and a date and a time a week from today. He recognizes it as Sirius’s hand, and he tells himself it will be fine. Remus is with him, and he won’t let Sirius do anything too rash or dangerous, hopefully. Then again, he thinks Remus may do plenty of rash and dangerous things all on his own, and it’s really kind of awful that they’re each other’s impulse control.

Luckily, today’s the day that the students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang are set to arrive, so it’s all anyone can talk about, and he can focus on that instead of worrying about his godfather being thrown back in Azkaban. Draco had toured both schools with his father when he was ten, even though his mother had said it was Hogwarts or she was filing for a divorce, and all he said about it was that they were equally as pretentious and exhausting as Hogwarts, but Beauxbatons at least had good weather.

The giant flying carriage and ghost ship are impressive to Harry, but most of the upper level Ravenclaws and Slytherins look underwhelmed, which makes Harry thinks that spells that did it are too simple to constitute as a grand display, which he doesn’t agree with at all. Just because the spellwork is simple doesn’t change that the effect is brilliant. Draco must have been serious about the weather comment, because all the students from Beauxbatons are wearing light, powder blue robes that do absolutely nothing to help protect them against the chill, while the ones from Durmstrang are dressed like it’s the middle of the winter and they’re expected to walk a mile through a snowstorm.

“Krum looks shorter in person,” Ron says, looking at the boy who’s standing at the head of the group. “Is that a seeker thing, then? The shortness?”

“I’m of average height, and also I’ll murder you,” Harry says, “You’re the giant here. Look at you, it’s like talking to an oak tree, this friendship is making me develop a crick in my neck.”

“Your burdens are great and impressive,” Ron says, before ruffling his hair.

“Murder,” he repeats, but he’s grinning, so it’s probably not very effective.

Hermione pushes herself between them, but only so she can elbow them both in the side at the same time. “Could you shut up for five minutes?”

“No,” they say together, but out of fear of bruised ribs they do in fact shut up until Dumbledore has finished the introductions.

Draco’s out of his seat immediately, and he makes a bee line for the Beauxbaton students. Within moments, he has a small crowd clustered around him, and is he … it’s too far away to hear properly, but Harry’s almost certain …

“Is he speaking French?” Hermione asks. “I didn’t know he could do that.”

Ron gives her a weird look, “I told you that his family still has business there. I’m pretty sure he speaks a couple other languages too.”

“Do you speak any languages I’m not aware of?” she demands.

“English?” he offers, “and Latin, but everyone speaks that. The twins picked up Welsh because they thought it would be funny, and I kind of understand them when they speak it, but I can’t say much myself. Percy knows Ancient Greek and Latin, because he’s a nerd. Bill speaks Arabic, and Charlie’s almost fluent in Romanian, last I checked. Who knows what Ginny’s learning, I dare not even ask. Japanese, maybe, since she spends so much time with Luna.”

“Latin, but everyone speaks that,” Hermione repeats. “I feel like I don’t even know you.”
Ron rolls his eyes and calls across the table, “Oi, Neville! How many languages do you speak?”

He turns to face them, and frowns, “Uh, fluently? Or just like, enough to not cause an international incident at a dinner party?”

“Both,” Ron says. “Also, how many international dinner parties does your grandmother force you to go to?”

“Too many,” he says darkly, and Lavender Brown pats him on the back sympathetically. “Uh, five fluently. Fluently-ish. About as many more in dinner party territory. Why? Please don’t make me translate anything.”

“No reason, don’t worry about it,” Ron says, before turning back to Hermione with a smug smile.

“Well,” she says to Harry, “at least the lack of science classes is good for something.”

He holds up his hands, grinning, “Hey, I speak another language, you’re the only slacker here.” His Parseltongue abilities aren’t exactly a secret, but they aren’t common knowledge either, and he’d like to keep it that way.

Did his mum speak another language? Or his dad? He must have, if it’s a wizarding thing. Did he speak Hindi? Or – some other Indian language. He doesn’t even know enough of them to wonder at which one his dad might have spoken. Maybe Sirius and Remus know. That’s something he can ask them when he sees them next week.

Hermione’s eyes narrow, but before she can say anything a hush falls over the table, and Harry realizes everyone is staring at the space just behind them. They turn around.

Krum is standing there, eyes locked on Hermione. “Ah, excuse me,” he says in accented English, “is there, perhaps, a seat available for me at this table?”

A bunch of people scramble to make room, but he doesn’t react. He keeps his gaze on Hermione, unmoving. Her face goes red, and she slowly reaches out for her bookbag, grabs it by the handle, then does nothing. Harry will kick her if she doesn’t do something soon.

She pushes her bookbag to the ground, something he’s never seen her do before, and meets Krum’s eyes. “Yes,” she says, and then can’t seem to think of anything else.

A disarmingly handsome smile overtakes Krum’s face, and Harry moves over so he’s not crowded in between him and Hermione. Or maybe he shouldn’t have moved? Maybe Hermione wanted Krum to be too close?

“I’m Viktor,” he says, offering her his hand.

“Hermione,” she returns, placing her hand in his. Then Viktor twists their clasped hands and pulls them up so he can kiss her knuckles.

Harry is certain he hears some of the girls down the table screaming. He turns to Ron, pleased by this turn of events, but Ron isn’t laughing anymore. He’s got the darkest scowl Harry’s ever seen on his best friend’s face, and he freezes, not sure what to do.

He looks to the Slytherin table, knowing Draco can’t do anything to help him out while they’re in the middle of the Great hall, but searching him out anyway.

He finds him, seated now, but still surrounded by Beauxbatons students. Pressed up against his side,
with an arm over his shoulder, is one of the prettiest girls Harry has ever seen. She’s got blonde hair and clear skin, and everything about her is so perfectly formed that she looks like one of the Veelas that had poured onto the quidditch pitch during the World Cup.

Harry’s good mood drops instantly. There’s no reason for it, she’s not doing anything wrong, and neither is Draco. Ron has sat like that with Harry before, there’s nothing inappropriate about it. But – if there was – would he be allowed to get mad at that? He thinks of Charlie asking if he had a boyfriend at the train station, and – does he? Draco is his soulmate, but does that mean they’re boyfriends? Are they just dating my default? Or – are they – not?

He groans and drops his head down on the table with a painful smack. “Same,” Ron sighs, patting him on the back.

His entire life is a nightmare.

~

Fleur is a delight, and it was instantly obvious that she’s the most interesting student at the school. Pansy keeps up with the rest of the students in French perfectly, while Blaise, who’s fluent in Italian and only passable in French, spends a lot of time looking bored. Luckily, bored is a good look on him, because several cute boys and girls from Beauxbatons ask if he’s single.

Fleur also has an interest in charms, and is looking to get an apprenticeship after she graduates, and figures being a Triwizard Champion will look good on her resume, even if she doesn’t win. They’re already making plans to visit each other during the summer by the time dinner ends, and he almost hopes she doesn’t get picked as champion, if only so she’ll have more free time to hang out. But also if she’s not picked as champion, then clearly everything is rigged, because she’s fabulous.

“Careful,” Pansy whispers in his ear as they’re getting up to go back to the dorms, “your boy is looking green eyed.”

He blinks and looks to the Gryffindor table. Harry catches his eye immediately, and Draco blows him a kiss. Anyone who sees it will just assume he’s mocking him. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he says, “his eyes are always green.”

~

He keeps himself up all night, tossing and turning and thinking about Draco, pressing his hand against the iris on his hip. He almost reaches for his mirror a dozen times, but doesn’t do it. He doesn’t even know what he’d say. I saw you talking to a girl, and I didn’t like it? I thought this whole thing had to be a mistake when it first happened, but it’s been a couple years and now I’m pretty sure it could never have been anyone else? Are we boyfriends?

Every single option makes him want to punch himself in the face, so he does none of them.

He meets up with Ron and Hermione in time to watch Fred and George taking the aging potion. “You know that’s not going to work, right?” Ron asks, amused.

“Oh, little of brother of little faith!” George says, “It will work.”

“I have a more important question,” Hermione says, raising an eyebrow. “The aging potion isn’t an overnight brew. So, you just had this? What on earth could you be using an aging potion for?”

The twins turn to her, scandalized. “Hermione,” Fred says, “I don’t know what on earth you could be implying, but I’m certain I’m offended by it.”
“Uh huh,” she says dryly. “Hurry up now, I’m interested to see how this will blow up in your faces.”

Thirty seconds later she’s proven right, literally, and the sight of the twins as old men is funny enough that Harry can’t help but laughing, even though he’s exhausted.

Lee is there, shaking his head, and offers to escort them to the hospital wing.

“My back!” Fred groans, “Being old is awful! Why does anyone do this?”

“We don’t really get a choice in the matter, as I understand it,” Lee says. “Up and on your feet, Grandpa.”

“Don’t disrespect your elders,” George says, midway through French braiding his beard. “Why, back in my day, when I was a young whippersnapper–”

Harry tugs on Ron and Hermione’s arms, still snickering, “Come on, let’s get out of here before they turn it into a production.”

“I think they already have,” Ron says, “but sure. Where are we going?”

“Hagrid’s,” Harry says, “I still need to ask him about a place to practice Quidditch, and I keep getting distracted. Angelina’s had us all running laps around the castle and stuff, which is important and whatever, but I want to get back on a broom.”

“Could be worse?” Ron offers. “At least you’re not on the Slytherin team.”

Harry shivers. Cassius had taken his new unofficial appointment as captain very seriously, and had made the team do pull ups until someone threw up. Although, anyone who survived his training was going to be hell to face on the pitch. “Good point.”

The visit to Hagrid’s is largely unhelpful, because he spends most of it getting sidetracked by talking about Madame Maxine. Harry does manage to secure a promise that Hagrid will try to find a place for them to play quidditch.

But it takes so long that they end up having to run back to the castle in order to avoid missing the announcement of the champions. Hagrid runs back with them, but quickly outpaces them, thanks to his much longer legs.

“Unbelievable,” Hermione pants.

“Love makes people do crazy things,” Ron says.

She pauses in running to stare at him. “What?”

“Never mind,” Harry pushes them both forward, “come on, let’s go, we don’t want to be late.”

They make it into their seats just as the fire in the goblet changes color.

It has begun.

~

Krum as the Durmstrang champion is an obvious choice, honestly he would have been more surprised if it wasn’t him.

Then Fleur gets picked for Beauxbatons, which is brilliant, he cheers louder for her than for Krum.
He may be a fan, but Fleur is friend. Or if she’s not yet, she will be.

The hall goes silent, waiting, and the slip of paper comes from the goblet.

The Hogwarts champion is Cedric Diggory.

A few weeks ago he may be been irritated by that choice, but he has a new respect for Hufflepuffs. Besides, he’s a seeker, a quidditch captain, and a prefect. They’d be hard pressed to find someone more suitable on credentials alone.

Then, just as Dumbledore is getting up to speak, the goblet changes color again, and it spits out a fourth slip of paper.

There’s a pit of dread in the bottom of his stomach, and he just knows who’s name is written there. Can’t they just have one normal year?

“HARRY POTTER!” the Headmaster calls out. “Harry Potter! Get up here, my boy. Harry Potter, come along now.”

There’s a split second, where Draco wonders if Harry did this on purpose. Then he sees his soulmate’s face as he woodenly walks down the great the hall, and he knows he didn’t. He wouldn’t have put his name in the goblet to begin with, even if he could have, and if he’d figured out a way to bypass the age restrictions, he would have told Draco.

This means someone else did this. Someone put his soulmate’s name in the goblet, someone is to blame for Harry being forced to participate in these ridiculous, suicidal games.

Draco’s going to find out who that someone is. And when he does, he’s going to kill them.

Chapter End Notes

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Finally, finally Harry gets to leave, and he almost wishes the other champions had been mean about it, had glared or cursed him out, or – something. They’d been frustrated, and Cedric had to have been furious, he had to be, but none of them had down more than give him disappointed glances.

He doesn’t want to go back to the common room, doesn’t want to face all his housemates. They’d been cheering when his name got called, but no one else had, and – this doesn’t feel good, it doesn’t feel right. He’s getting tired of people congratulating him for things he didn’t do, for things he didn’t want to do. That’s why he likes quidditch. At least when people admire him for that, it’s because he’s earned it.

He’s just made up his mind to go to Hagrid, who will pat him on the back and give him rock cakes and let Fang slobber all over him, when someone grabs his elbow and yanks him down the corridor. He struggles for a second before he catches sight of bushy brown hair. “Hermione! What are you doing?”

“He’s just made up his mind to go to Hagrid, who will pat him on the back and give him rock cakes and let Fang slobber all over him, when someone grabs his elbow and yanks him down the corridor. He struggles for a second before he catches sight of bushy brown hair. “Hermione! What are you doing?”

“Quiet,” she hisses, and continues dragging him. It takes him about two turns to figure out they’re heading to their favorite empty classroom, and she really doesn’t have to continue pulling him. He’s going to end up with bruises the shape of her fingers at this rate. But it’s easier to do what she wants than to argue, so he says nothing as she takes them to the classroom and shoves them both inside, casting a locking and sound muffling charm behind her.

He barely manages to catch a glimpse of the Slytherins before Ron grabs the front of his robes and pushes him against the door, and this close it really does hurt Harry’s neck to have to look up at him. “How did you get your name in the goblet?” he demands, freckles standing out against his pale skin and his mouth set in a scowl. “You said no more secrets!”

“I didn’t!” he yells, glaring. “Of course I didn’t, how could you – I said no more secrets, and I meant it! You know everything about me, you know about my Parseltongue and my soulmate and my nightmares and – you know everything! I didn’t put my name in the goblet, because if I had you would already know about it!”

He and Ron glare at each other for several long moments, and Harry can feel his heart beating against his sternum, and he can’t tell if he wants to scream or cry, because if his best friend doesn’t believe him –

Ron sighs and lets go of Harry’s robes, slumping down at an awkward angle and rubbing the back of his neck. “I was afraid you’d say that.”

“Did you want me to be lying to you?” he asks, but his anger leaves him as quickly as it came.

“It’s better than the alternative,” Ron says, “Well, I mean, less dangerous at least. Because this means someone tampered with the Goblet, probably by adding a fourth school and just submitting your name. That’s serious magic, nothing a student would know, which means someone snuck into Hogwarts, something that’s historically unlikely to impossible, and did it. Someone’s trying to kill you, Harry.”

Ron cares about studying about as much as Harry cares about polishing his shoes, so not at all, and
sometimes Harry forgets how smart he is. “That’s exactly what Moody said.”

“You don’t have to do it,” Draco says, and he sounds normal but when Harry looks over he sees the tightness around his eyes and mouth. Blaise is stone faced, but Pansy is twisting the bottom of her skirt in her hands, wrinkling it horribly. It’s probably a little messed up that Pansy wrinkling her skirt is the most concerning reaction he’s seen all night. “You don’t have to compete.”

“They said it was a legally binding contract?” he says, because surely if it was so easy they would have just let him out of it. No one was happy about him being the fourth champion, himself included.

Hermione crosses her arms, “That’s ridiculous! You’re fourteen, how could anything involving you be legally binding? You’re a kid!”

Blaise snorts, “Oh, that’s not a problem. It’s not – legally binding, per se. But it is binding.”

Why must they always go through this? “Guys,” Harry points to Hermione, “muggleborn,” then points to himself, “muggle raised. What are you talking about?”

“The goblet is a protected artifact, isn’t it?” Ron asks, resigned. “Dad hates those, they’re not allowed to destroy them or even tamper with them to make them less dangerous, and they always somehow manage to fall into muggle hands.”

“It’s a protected artifact,” Pansy confirms.

Ron groans, and some of Blaise’s stoicism bleeds into amusement. Draco explains, “The goblet’s fire won’t go out until the tournament is complete, and it’s – the thing is, the goblet is alive, in a way, and it’s – it’s a Legilimens, kind of. I mean, not really, because it’s an object, and not a person, but it has to pick the most suitable candidate, right? It’s not random. So, just based on someone’s name, it somehow gains access to their personality and history and abilities, and decides who’s most likely to survive the tournament.”

“Wait,” Harry says, “it decides? I thought we didn’t trust things that could think if we couldn’t see where it keeps its brains?”

“We don’t,” Blaise says grimly. “But the goblet is ancient, and it’s – no one knows what it is, really, we use it for the Triwizard Tournament now, but that wasn’t the original purpose. It was used to pick champions to fight in dueling tournaments.”

Pansy adds, “And back then? You won a duel by killing your opponent. In order to prevent it from being a slaughter, the goblet was used so that people below a certain skill level wouldn’t be allowed to compete.”

“It didn’t stop the killing,” Draco says, “but it meant that instead of a champion having to kill fifty people to win, they’d only have to kill about five. You can thank Godric Gryffindor for that – there are reports of him being challenged by over a hundred people at one tournament. He’s the one that walked away. After that, someone showed up with the goblet, but whether it was made during that time or before is anyone guess.”

Harry recoils at the bit about his house’s founder. But, well, the history books did say he was a dueling champion. He’d just never considered what that meant before. Hermione’s frowning, but Ron doesn’t look at all surprised at Draco’s statement, which Harry can only assume means he already knew.

“The magic is so delicate and old that no one wants to risk using diagnostic spells on it,” Ron guesses, and sighs when Pansy nods.
“I still don’t see why any of this means Harry’s forced to participate in these stupid games,”
Hermione says.

Blaise says, “The Goblet can’t stay lit forever, it’s not meant to and the magic won’t be able to sustain it, and it will break, probably with an explosion. It can only be put back to – sleep, I guess, by the slip of paper with the participants name being put back in with their final scores written on it. It knows if they’re lying.”

“So we put my name back in with a zero, and I’m done!” Harry says, “That’s great, let’s do that.”

Judging by the Slytherins’s faces, it’s not nearly that easy. “It was made to choose a champion to duel to the death,” Pansy say quietly, “Non participation isn’t an option. It’s connected to you now, Harry. It’ll know if you don’t participate, if you lie.”

It feels like there’s ice water down his spine, “It’s connected to me? How?”

“The same as the other champions, the same as everyone who put their name in. It senses you, and looks at you, and knows everything about you, because it has to in order to pick the best champion,” Pansy explains. “You can’t run, and you can’t hide. It’s – Harry, it’s connected to your magic, and if you don’t participate, it’ll kill you. The price for cowardice is death.”

Well, that’s horrifying, and definitely sounds like something his house’s founder would have done, if he killed over a hundred people at a single dueling tournament.

“So the only way to sever the connection is to destroy the goblet,” Ron says, scowling. “But since it’s a protected object, they can’t do it. Not without petitioning the Wizengamot, and getting a trial, and winning the trial.”

“Which would take a year, at least, with all the red tape,” Pansy says. “So they’re not going to even bother.”

Harry slumps and rubs his hand over his face. “This is a mess. How do I always get in these situations?”

“You don’t have to compete,” Draco says.

“You just said the only way to sever the connection was for Harry to complete the tournament, or to destroy the goblet!” Hermione glares.

Draco says nothing, just continues looking at them with an even stare.

“No way!” Ron says, “No, no – even if we could, if we get caught we’ll go to jail. Not the normal one either, not some magically reinforced cell in Wales – we’ll get sent to Azkaban! Destroying a protected object is a big deal, and not even your dad or your money could save you from it.”

“I didn’t say you had to help,” Draco snaps. “But the alternative is Harry participating in these stupid games, and maybe dying. If it’s us in a cell, or Harry in a grave, which one would you rather have?”

The thing is, Harry knows they would do it. All of them. They would try and destroy the goblet to protect him, because they’re his friends, and risk getting sent to Azkaban. Risk getting sent to the place that nearly managed to destroy his godfather. “No.”

“It’s worth the risk,” Hermione says, crossing her arms. Sometimes Harry thinks of the eleven year old who was so terrified of getting caught in the forbidden corridor, and he compares her to this determined young woman willing to break actual laws, and three years doesn’t seem like that much
time, but clearly it is.

“No,” he repeats. “Look, other kids are participating, they don’t want it to be too deadly. They’re not planning for anyone to die, and I’m not trying to win this. I don’t care about the prize money, about the fame, about any of it. If I have to participate, fine, I’ll do that. But I’m not going to win. I shouldn’t be a champion in the first place, I didn’t earn it like the others did, and it wouldn’t be fair if I won.”

“It would, actually, since you’re up against people who are older and know way more magic than you,” Pansy says dryly.

Draco stalks forward and grabs Harry’s chin, tilting his face so he can look him in the eye. Harry’s heart beats faster. His soulmates eyes are looking into his, and he’s close, only inches separating him. “No stupid, foolhardy Gryffindor heroics. If you do this, you don’t compete to win. You compete to survive.”

“Yes, dear,” he says. Draco rolls his eyes and slaps him upside the head, but his shoulders are looser, his face doesn’t look as tight.

“You know what this means, don’t you?” Hermione asks.

Harry blinks, confused, but Ron’s face twists in disgust. “Research,” he says, and Harry coughs to hide his laughter.

Draco and Hermione look cheered at the prospect, at least. No one else does.

Harry gets up early the next day to send a letter to Remus, updating him about his status as the fourth champion. He’s probably already seen it in the papers, but he figures the least he can do is tell him himself. He says not to worry, and that everything is fine, but that part is directed more at Sirius. He only addresses his letters to his former professor just in case they get intercepted, but he knows for a fact that Sirius reads all of them, and that Remus’s replies are from them both.

Suddenly, it seems like next week can’t come fast enough. Hopefully they’ll have some tips on how not to die in this ridiculous tournament.

He doesn’t have too much time to worry about it, because he has to hurry if he doesn’t want to be late to potions. He’s not especially looking forward to it, and not just because of Snape’s charming personality. Draco had called him on the mirror last night to tell him he’d had a great idea, and not to take it personally, which probably means he’s going to get mocked and teased in some way for most of the class.

Draco is exhausted. He was up the whole night charming enough buttons for the entire Slytherin house. The actual charming hadn’t taken that long, but figuring out the correct combination of charms had. He’d wanted them to look normal while they said ‘Support Cedric Diggory – the real Hogwarts Champion!’ but when they switched to ‘Potter Stinks!’ he wanted them to light up, and it on top of it all he needed to make them impossible to tamper with, otherwise what was the point.

Blaise refused to be kept up by his project, so Draco had moved everything to the common room. He was the only one up, and it had given him enough room to really spread everything out and work. Finding an appropriate material to hold the charms had been half the battle, and he’d kept sending Winky to the manor to grab tin or copper or silver or some other random metal. An iron and copper
mix ended up holding all the spells best, and Millie had come out to find him and Winky carefully melting and mixing metal together in the middle of the common room over a roaring fire that was in Winky’s control. Because Millie’s great, she’d offered to help instead of yelling at him.

But he’d done it, and he’d left a huge basket of them next to the door of the common room. Everyone had grabbed one, from the first to the seventh years. So now he’s sitting in potions class, and the Slytherin half of the common room has his buttons pinned to their chests. It’s oddly satisfying to see people wearing his spellwork.

The Gryffindors are furious, which is delightful. Hermione is glaring at him something awful, but he thinks that has more to do with his charm integration than anything else. He’s pretty sure she hadn’t known he could do that. Ron is scowling, but Draco can tell he’s amused by the way his eyes are crinkling in the corner. All the other lions are outright glaring at him, and he loves it. He learned young that any press was good press if you smiled prettily enough.

Harry comes rushing into class, barely avoiding being late. He stops in front of the Slytherin half, blinking. The look of exasperated irritation his soulmate gives him isn’t staged at all, and he’d start laughing if it wasn’t undignified. “See something you like, Potter?”

“Nope, just a bunch of slimey snakes,” he says, and maybe they’ve been spending too much time together, because Draco can read the question in the tilt of Harry’s head and his raised eyebrow.

He gives the tiniest of shrugs, and reaches into his robes for his wand. He’s down to start a fight if Harry is, especially since their last one got interrupted. At least if they get thrown out of the classroom, Snape won’t get a chance to be too horrible to Harry.

They trade insults, and Hermione gets involved, which he hadn’t been expecting, but her unsubtle looks at his wand and then down at herself, he figures she wants him to curse her instead of Harry. Which he doesn’t get, but sure, the more of them he gets in a fight with the merrier, he guesses. He uses the same disfigurement curse that he’s been planning to throw at Harry last time, before Moody had interrupted them.

Harry throws the same curse back, but it doesn’t hit him, and hits Goyle instead. Draco very nearly rolls his eyes. Harry has pretty good aim and they’re like ten feet apart. The only way he could miss him is if he did it on purpose.

Snape finally starts acting like an actual teacher and puts a stop to it, and sends Goyle to the hospital wing. But he doesn’t send Hermione. Her teeth are growing past her chin now, and if someone doesn’t do something they won’t stop. Draco knows the counter hex, but he can’t use it, obviously. The worst part is he knows Snape knows it too, but if he hadn’t bothered to cast it on Goyle he’s definitely not going to cast it on Granger.

“She needs to go to the hospital wing!” Ron says angrily.

“She looks fine to me,” Snape says coolly, and Draco wants to throw the curse back at him. Can the man pretend to be an adult for two minutes?

Hermione’s eyes are filled with tears, and he really hadn’t planned for this, for Snape not to let her leave. Lavender Brown gets to her feet and snags Hermione’s elbow, “Come on, I’ll take you to Madame Pomfrey.”

“I didn’t say you could leave,” Snape says silkily. Draco glances around him, and he’s not alone – no one in their year looks impressed with their head of house right now.
Lavender takes out her wand, and with a quick twist of her wrist she forces the classroom door open. “We’re not asking permission,” she snarls, and pulls Hermione away.

Snape’s face is thunderous, and there’s definitely a detention in their future. Everyone else settles into their seats.

Except for Harry. Of course.

“So do you have anything to add, Mr. Potter?” Snape asks, clearly itching for a reason to give him detention.

Harry opens his mouth, which is never a good sign. Luckily, he’s saved by a tentative knock on the door. Every looks over to see Colin Creevy hovering in the doorway, reluctant to step inside. “Um, sorry, I don’t mean to interrupt. But all the champions are getting their wands weighed. So, uh, Harry has to go. With me. Now. If that’s okay?”

Snape turns his back and pretends like Colin isn’t there, but doesn’t do anything when Harry stiffly gathers his bag and walks out the room.

He catches Pansy’s eye. She shrugs, and he sighs before focusing on the spidery instructions written on the blackboard. He has to make sure he knows how to make this potion perfectly so he can teach it to Hermione later.

~

Maybe if Harry hadn’t already been so upset when he stepped into that room, he would have been able to handle it better. But all he can think of is Hermione crying, and him just standing there and doing nothing. He didn’t deserve to be a champion if he couldn’t even stand up for his friends.

The knowledge that Hermione hadn’t wanted him to stand up for her didn’t help. She’d made frantic motions behind her back telling them to stay seated, which he’s pretty sure is the only reason Ron didn’t march to the front of the classroom and punch Snape in the face. Ron’s tall, and strong. He could probably break something if he tried.

So he’d done what his friend wanted him to do, and he shouldn’t feel bad about it, but he does. He feels bad about this whole Triwizard Tournament situation, so when Rita Skeeter hooks her arm in his and tries to pull him away from the others while cooing about him being the other Hogwarts champion, he snaps.

“Don’t touch me!” He slips from her grip, glaring, and backs over to the other champions. The way they crowd in closer, closing ranks around him even though he knows they’re mad at him, makes him feel even worse. He’s not brave and kind like them. He doesn’t belong here.

“Harry dear,” she says, voice and smile saccharine sweet, “I just need a few minutes, a private word if you will, for my article.”

She reaches for him again, and Fleur leans forward to grab her wrist, glaring. Her French accent comes out even thicker when she’s angry. “He said not to touch him.”

“Is this really necessary?” she says, and the calculating look in her eyes reminds him of all the horrible things Pansy had said about her. She may seem like just a tacky gossip reporter, but he should remember that she’s dangerous. Anyone that can make Pansy wary is dangerous.

“Everyone’s curious about the second Hogwarts champion.”

“There is no second Hogwarts champion!” he steps forward, placing a hand on Fleur’s shoulder to
let her know she can let go of Skeeter’s wrist. She does, and Skeeter pulls it back to chest, rubbing at it more than can possibly be necessary.

“Can I quote you on that?” she asks, delighted.

Harry has faced Voldemort himself, and somehow the dark lord managed to be less annoying than this woman. “Yes. There is only one Hogwarts champion, and it’s Cedric Diggory. He earned his place here, same as Fleur Delacour and Viktor Krum. I’m stuck here thanks to the goblet, but I do not represent Hogwarts. Cedric does. He’s the best we have, which is why he’s here.”

“So who do you represent?” she asks.

“Nothing,” he says, “I’m not a champion. I’m collateral damage from a faulty enchanted goblet that was made a thousand years ago.”

She looks way too pleased with his answer for him to sleep well tonight. He’s debating whether he should say more, or let it lie, when an arm settles over his shoulder and guides him away. “Come on,” Cedric says, voice warm. “We have to get our wands inspected.”

Harry blinks, and glances over. Both Fleur and Viktor are smiling at him, and he flushes, scratching his nose in an attempt to hide it.

He hadn’t been trying to get them on his side by saying those things, he’d just been angry. But he does feel a whole lot lighter now that they aren’t mad at him.

~

“Hey, Malfoy, wait up! Draco!”

It’s his free period and he’s on his way back to his bed, because he hasn’t slept in over a day, and he wants a nap, for Merlin’s sake. He has training with the Slytherin quidditch team after dinner, and Cassius couldn’t care less about him being sleep deprived if he tried for a week. So he’s incredibly tempted to ignore that voice and keep walking, but he just knows he’ll regret it. He sighs and turns around, “What?”

Susan Bones catches up to him, then taps the button on his chest and asks, “Got any more of these?”

He stares. “Why?”

She gives him an unimpressed look. “To wear, obviously. I asked a group of second years, and they said you made them.”

“I did,” he says. Before the Hufflepuff’s display when Moody cast the Imperio charm on Pansy, and Susan winking at him, he would have found this to be a very strange conversation. “I can make you one. I think they’re might be a couple left over in the common room, actually, I can grab one and give it to you at lunch,”

Susan smirks. It’s very uncomfortable for him to see a Hufflepuff smirking. “No, that’s not what I meant. I don’t want it just for me – I want it for my whole house. A hundred fifty should cover it.”

His jaw drops. “Are you crazy? No way your whole house will wear them! They’re too – fair.”

“Exactly,” she says, “Do you know what’s not fair? Harry getting thrown into the tournament, and taking the spotlight away from Cedric. It’s not fair to Harry, or to Cedric, and for the record? My whole house is pissed about it.”
He crosses his arms and looks her in the eye, searching for any signs of deceit. “Fine. But I’m leaving in the Potter Stinks part.”

“Sure,” she says, “I like Harry, but he’ll have to get over it. He can take a joke – it’s so juvenile anyway, I hardly think he’ll stay awake at night crying over it. Why’d you pick it?”

“I didn’t want them to say something the professors could get upset about,” he says, and not that the last thing he wants to do is actually hurt his soulmate’s feelings. “The point is to wear them, not get them confiscated and banned.”

Susan gives him a calculating look, and she reminds him way too much of her aunt. “Okay, great, when can I have them?”

“I can do them tonight, I guess,” he says. It’s won’t take all night since he actually knows how to make them, and he can have Winky melt the metals together while he’s in the abandoned classroom with everyone. It’s unfortunate that the spells have to applied to the metal while it’s still in its liquid form to stick, otherwise he’d have Winky pour and set them too.

“Great! I’ll get them from you at breakfast. Thanks Draco!” Susan waves at him before going in the opposite direction. He can’t believe he’s consorting with Hufflepuffs these days. Harry is having a horrible influence on him.

He can worry about that later. He has a solid three hours before transfiguration if he sleeps through lunch, which he’s absolutely planning to do, and he’s not going to waste any more time worrying about Susan Bones.

Harry and the other champions don’t get released until after lunch has passed, and Hermione has arithmancy with the Hufflepuffs after, so Harry doesn’t get a chance to see her until dinner. Krum isn’t sitting next to her today, instead he’s at the Ravenclaw table and surrounded by people asking him questions. He seems comfortable with it in a way Harry doesn’t think he’ll ever be, but his gaze keeps slipping over to the Gryffindor table. More specifically, to Hermione.

He throws his arms around her from behind, and he didn’t used to be a touchy person, he’s pretty sure he can blame the Weasleys for this. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine!” she says, patting his hands and trying to twist around in his arms to look at him. He lets go and sits beside her, Ron on her other side. “Really Harry, it wasn’t a big deal.”

“You were crying,” he says. Anything that makes his friends cry is a big deal. He blinks and adds, “Your mouth looks different.”

She flushes and Ron snorts. He flicks her in the arm, “Big fat crocodile tears, weren’t they Hermione?”

“What?” Harry asks. “What are you talking about?”

“They weren’t fake,” she says after glancing around to make sure no one is bothering to try and eavesdrop on them. “I’m a frustrated crier, you know that. But – I may have, well, exaggerated. Just a bit.”

“Did you really need to go through that whole master plan just to change your teeth?” Ron asks. “I know you told Draco to hit you with the curse, and that can’t have been your only reason. Did you tell Lavender beforehand to walk you out, or did she just do it out of the kindness of her heart?”
“You told him to hit you?” Harry asks, confused. “When?”

“During class,” he says, “Harry, come on, she wasn’t subtle.”

“I was, actually,” Hermione says before he can answer. “You’re just unnaturally perceptive sometimes.”

Ron’s face scrunches up, like he’s trying to figure out whether or not he should take it as a compliment. Harry thinks it is, although he also thinks that Hermione didn’t mean it as one, considering how irritated she’d sounded when she said it. He doesn’t get a chance to voice any of this before a plain brown barn owl swoops down in front of him and drops a scroll onto his plate.

He unrolls it, then reads the short note a half dozen times. He doesn’t get it.

In the thirty seconds that he’s looked away, Ron and Hermione have managed to get into another argument. “Guys!” he says, leaning over so he can physically get between them. “Look at this.”

It says: Tonight. Midnight. Flamel’s fireplace.

It’s in Remus’s handwriting, and he knows the other two recognize it thanks to all of his hand graded essays. “Flamel’s fireplace?” Hermione says quietly. “Is that a shop name or something? Maybe he wants you to meet them in Hogsmead.”

Ron shakes his head, “If it is, I’ve never heard of it. Besides, he’s meeting them on our next trip there anyway. It has be someplace in the castle – maybe where the philosopher’s stone was kept? I don’t remember there being a fireplace anywhere.”

Harry looks over at the Slytherin table, then stuffs the letter back into his bag. “We’ll ask them tonight when we meet up. If they don’t know, then I’ll send an owl telling Remus he has to be more specific.”

~

Draco still wants to sleep for a week, but he feels about a thousand time better after his nap. Cassius wants them to run laps around the lake right after dinner, so he and the rest of the Slytherin team aren’t wearing robes. Instead he’s in his quidditch practice undergear, so basically just too tight pants and a long sleeve. They’re not flying, so it would be silly of him to put on his full gear. He makes sure to smirk at every appreciate glance that comes his way.

“Why are you eating dinner in your pajamas?” Fleur asks in French, elbowing Crabbe out of the way so she can sit next to him.

He flicks one of his peas at her. “As if I would sleep in anything but silk. I didn’t want to go back to my room to change.”

“And you like the attention you get when you wear tight clothes,” she smirks, elbowing him in the side.

He sniffs, putting his nose in the air. He’s lucky Pansy is deep in her own conversation and Blaise abandoned them for Millie as soon as they started speaking French, otherwise they’d never let him hear the end of that one. Like Pansy has any room to talk, with her short skirts and unbuttoned shirts. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Her smile softens, and she switches over to English to say, “I think I have changed my mind about Harry Potter. He is not so bad, and it is not fair that he is stuck being in the tournament.”
Draco is kind of relieved, because he didn’t want Harry to have to deal with the other champions giving him shit on top of trying to stay alive. But he can’t say any of that, so instead he rolls his eyes, “Not you too! He’s an attention seeking moron.”

“Don’t be rude,” she says fondly, then kisses his cheek. “Do not worry. You are my absolute favorite Hogwarts student, Harry Potter included.”

Several boys and girls are giving him jealous looks, and it takes everything he has not to preen at having their eyes on him. The irony of him always complaining about Harry being attention seeking is not lost on him.

By the exasperated look on Fleur’s face, it’s not lost on her either. Luckily, she’s too nice to call him on it.

~

That night, Harry is running late coming from Hagrid’s, and he had in fact made Harry rock cakes and pat him on the back and let Fang slobber all over him. None of that should make him feel better at being forced to participate the death tournament, but it does. He expects to be the last one to arrive at their abandoned classroom. But he gets there and looks around their classroom in confusion.

“Where are Ron and Draco?”

“Draco had quidditch practice, he should be here soon,” Blaise says.

“But they still haven’t found a suitable place to fly, so I don’t know what’s taking him so long,” Pansy complains, seemingly more focused on shaping her nails than her missing friends.

Hermione rolls her eyes, head buried in book. “I have no idea where Ron is, he got a letter about an hour ago and ran out of the common room.”

Harry’s eyebrows draw together. That doesn’t sound like Ron – he hopes everything is all right. But if something were wrong, he would have heard it from either the twins or Ginny. He thinks.

The door is thrust open, and Ron strides inside, grinning. “You will not believe what I found out!” He looks around the room and his smile drops. “Where’s Draco? I was late on purpose! I was trying to make an entrance, and the bastard isn’t even here to appreciate it.”

“My apologies,” his soulmate’s voice drawls.

Ron jumps and whirls around, jabbing Draco in the chest. “Don’t sneak up on me like that!”

“I didn’t sneak, you just didn’t notice me. I’m pretty sure those are two different things,” he pushes Ron forward into the classroom and closes the door behind them.

Ron huffs and boosts himself up to sit on top of one of the desks. He’s so tall that it seems more for show than anything else. He basically could have just gone on his tip toes and achieved the same thing. “You sneaked. It was very sneaky. I have been snuck up on.”

“I literally just walked in behind you,” he answers.

Harry means to say something to that, but finds he can’t say anything at all because his tongue is glued to the top of his mouth.

He’d seen how Draco was dressed during dinner, entirely covered but with everything clinging to him like a second skin, and he’d done his best to ignore it because he’d also seen Fleur kiss his
soulmate’s cheek, and if he thought about any of that in any combination for too long he would literally explode.

Now is worse. Draco’s hair is a mess, and he’s literally dripping with sweat, making the already tight clothes cling to him in an even worse way. He pushes his hair out his eyes, and it’s just short enough that he can’t put it in a ponytail, but long enough that it keeps getting in his way.

“Why is it so hot in here?” Draco complains, and this has to be a nightmare, because he reaches down and yanks his shirt up, using the bottom of it to wipe the sweat from his forehead. Harry doesn’t know how well Cassius’s insane training will translate once they’re back on a broom, but it’s certainly dong – something.

This is the worst and he wants to die.

Pansy wolf whistles, causing Draco to drop his shirt, thank merlin. “Putting on show, Draco?”

That was definitely the wrong – or right – thing for Pansy to say, because he raises an eyebrow. Then in one fluid motion he pulls off his shirt entirely, hand on his hip and standing tall as he quite obviously flexes. “Why? See something you like?”

Blaise just sighs like he sees this all the time, and considering they share a room together he very well might. Pansy transfigures her nail file into a fan just so she can lean back and fan herself dramatically, but the overall effect is ruined by how hard she’s biting her lip to keep from laughing. Hermione glances up from her book only long enough to roll her eyes.

“Oi!” Ron says, “I came here with very important information to share, you know. I refuse to be upstaged by your abs. Put those away.”

Draco sighs like he finds them all very bothersome, but casts a scourgify charm on himself to get rid of the dirt and sweat from his body and clothes. He doesn’t put the shirt back on, instead banishing it back to his room and summoning a tank top for the French quidditch team the Quiberon Quafflepunchers. It’s the same color as the player’s uniforms, meaning a bright, obnoxious pink.

“My eyes have suffered so much tonight,” Ron complains.

“Your entire room is Chudley Cannons orange, I won’t accept any criticism from you,” Draco says, finally putting it on. It should look ridiculous on him, but it doesn’t, and Harry thinks he might have a problem.

He realizes it’s probably pretty weird that he hasn’t said anything for the last several minutes. This is hardly the first time he’s seen Draco shirtless, he made him strip just a couple weeks ago so he could see for himself the damage Moody had done. But for some reason this is … different.

Hermione puts her book aside. “All right Ron, we’re all here and we’re listening. What’s your very important news?”

Ron spreads out his arms, beaming. “The good news is I know what the first task is! The bad news is it’s dragons. You’re going to have to get past dragons. The other good news is that my brother Charlie is here. He says hi, and that he hopes you don’t die.”

“DRAGONS?” Draco and Hermione yell.

Blaise eyes go wide as galleons. Pansy drops her file-turned-fan.

He looks entirely too pleased with himself, Harry thinks, considering he’s basically just told them
that Harry’s going to be a snack for an overgrown lizard. How is he supposed to get past a dragon? “Please tell me Charlie has some advice on how not to get eaten.”

“Not really,” Ron admits, “he shouldn’t have shown me the dragons in the first place, it was seriously against the rules. He could get in a lot of trouble if his boss finds out.”

“We’ll go ask Hagrid,” Hermione decides. “He’ll know about them.”

Draco nods, “Let’s go right now. There’s only a couple of days until the first task, we don’t have time to waste.”

Everyone gets up, like all six of them are just going to go traipsing down to Hagrid’s hut in the middle of the night. Which first of all, no, and second of all he has to meet Remus and Sirius somewhere in like an hour, and he doesn’t even know where.

Whenever he’s the voice of reason, it’s a sign that things have gone horribly awry.

“Guys,” he says, “I’ll ask him tomorrow. I need to talk to him about the quidditch pitch anyway. I need to find Flamel’s fireplace, whatever that is.”

“What?” Blaise asks. “What are you talking about?” Harry takes the note out of his pocket and hands it over to the Slytherins. Pansy snatches it from his hands and holds it up so they can all read it. “Flamel the alchemist?”

Draco hits his forehead. “Obviously! It’s the alchemy classroom.”

“Not the classroom,” Pansy corrects, “the office attached to the classroom. The classroom fireplaces aren’t attached to the floo network, but the offices are.”

“Let’s see the map,” Blaise says, holding out his hand in Hermione’s direction.

She pulls it from her bag and hands it over. “I don’t understand, we don’t have any alchemy classes.”

“Yeah, now.” Pansy says. “Do you think abandoned classrooms appear out of thin air? Hogwarts used to teach a lot more subjects. Alchemy is one of them. But after Flamel stopped teaching, it fell out of practice.”

“Everyone was so busy trying to make their own philosopher’s stone, that they didn’t bother learning the rest of alchemy,” Blaise adds, unfolding the map.

They all crowd around it, and the thing is the map shows where the walls of the castle are, because that’s something they could figure out by sending out a spell to track the stone work. But knowing where a room was didn’t tell them what was inside of it. Harry’s eyes get caught on the defense office – does Moody ever sleep? It seems like whenever Harry looks at the map, the man is in his office.

“You know the most about alchemy,” Pansy says, looking at Draco. “Where do you think it is?”

He rolls his eyes, and his arms are unfairly distracting in that tank top. “It’s mostly a goblin art nowadays, I only know about it at all because we employ some in Japan and Korea.” His eyes get pinched at the corners. “Really, I should go ask Luna. Her mother was an alchemist. But also whenever we talk about Pandora, there are tears, and we don’t have time for that right now.”

“She cries when she talks about her mum?” Ron asks sympathetically. Harry just knows he’s thinking about what he’d do if anything happened to Mrs. Weasley.
“No, I do. Luna doesn’t cry, she just looks disappointed, which is somehow a thousand times worse. We’ll grab her if we need her,” he decides, then leans over the map, squinting as he uses his wand to drag and focus in on different parts of the castle. “Alchemy is too volatile for the classroom to be on the upper floors, so it’s probably in the dungeons. I’d want it to be as far from the potions classroom as possible, because those two overlapping can really only end in something exploding.”

“There!” Hermione jabs the map with her wand, and a corridor in the back end of the castle takes up most of the map. “It’s got a connecting door like the other classrooms with offices do, and the walls around it are twice as thick, like the ones around the potions classroom. That has to be it.”

Everyone blinks. Draco manipulates the map to look at the potions classroom, and the walls around it are thicker than everywhere else. “I never noticed that before. Good catch.”

Hermione smiles, and tries to not look as pleased as she feels. Harry asks, “How are we all getting there? We won’t all fit under the invisibility cloak.”

Blaise and Pansy share a quick glance, then look back. Pansy says, “You’re meeting with Professor Lupin and your godfather, right? We’ll sit this one out. Lupin doesn’t know we’re friends with you guys too, and there’s no reason for us to be spreading that information around willy nilly.”

“He wouldn’t say anything!” Harry protests.

Pansy rolls her eyes. “We know that. He can obviously keep a secret, that’s not the point. No reason to give him another secret to keep if we don’t have to.”

“We can all go back to the common room, and you three will talk to Remus,” Draco says, but he’s frowning.

Harry is disappointed, because he’d wanted Draco to be there. But he can’t say that, because it makes him sound like a kid. It’s not important, not really, but Draco won’t be able sneak away during Hogsmeade, and it’s just – he wants his godfather to get along with his soulmate. Remus already knows Draco, and likes him, kinda. But Sirius doesn’t, and it’s not like there’s a lot of opportunities for them to meet.

Maybe it’s better if he’s not there? Sirius and Remus don’t know that they’re soulmates, no one knows outside the six of them. So it’s probably better if they’re not seen together so much, even by people who know they’re friends.

All of this perfectly true, so why does he feel so miserable?

Ron claps him on the shoulder, “Actually, I still have that transfiguration essay to do, and Hermione promised to help me write it. So we’ll head back too, if that’s all right.” Hermione gives him weird look, like she’s surprised he’s doing school work willingly, but doesn’t disagree.

“Oh,” he says, shoulders drooping. “Yeah, that’s fine.”

Draco crosses his arms, “He shouldn’t go alone! What if the classroom is dangerous? Or something goes wrong with the floo?”

“Then you go with him,” Ron says. “You’re the one who knows the most about alchemy.”

“You don’t have to,” Harry says immediately, and hopes he isn’t blushing, or if he is that no one notices. He’s lucky he doesn’t have skin like Ron’s, his is way too pale to hide anything. Then again, Hermione’s blushes are always super noticeable, and her skin is darker than his.
He tries to think of universe in which he could ask his friends how noticeable his blushes are without dying of embarrassment, and fails.

Draco shrugs, “It’s – fine, I don’t mind. I’m all caught up on my homework, so you know. It’s fine.”

“Okay,” he says, and Draco won’t look directly at him, so at least he won’t notice any blushing Harry may or may not be doing. “Cool.”

He thinks he hears the sound of Ron smacking his hand over his face, but by the time he looks over he’s busying himself with putting all of Hermione’s books in her bag.

~

They take Harry’s invisibility cloak to the old alchemy classroom, and it’s a large cloak, there’s plenty of room for the two of them as long as they stick close. But after awkwardly bumping into each other a half dozen times, Draco’s had enough, and he settles his arm over Harry’s shoulders, pulling him against his side. He feels slightly less awkward about it when Harry’s arm encircles his waist and settles on his hip, right where his soulmark is.

Merlin, has Harry always been this warm? Everyplace they’re touching feels as if it’s burning.

The classroom is a mess, and the adjoining office is the same, dusty and broken, and just walking inside ends up with both of them doubling over in a coughing fit. Harry pulls out his wand, “Scourg-”

“Wait!” Draco grabs onto his wrist. “I’ll have Winky do it. She was really happy when I asked her to mix metal for me, I think she feels neglected.”

“You know in the time it took you to say that, we could have cleaned this place up already,” Harry points out.

He rolls his eyes, “Welcome to the redundancy of house elves. If you can afford them, you don’t need them.”

He snaps his fingers three times, and Winky appears in front of them. He still gets a kick out of seeing his crest on her. He’d said to take whatever cloth from his room that she wanted to make clothes from, and she’d clearly listened, because she’s wearing a blue silk toga-dress that she must have made from his old sheet set, and it looks a lot better than what most elves wear. Elves can’t use magic to make their clothes, but don’t tend to be gifted with sewing skills, and so most of them just end up wearing pillowcases. He’s becoming more and more impressed with her fashion choices.

“Yes, Master Draco?” she asks, going into a deep curtsey. The next moment, she sneezes hard enough to send her stumbling back a few steps.

“Clean this place up, and start a fire,” he orders.

She snaps her fingers, and two cups of steaming tea appear in front of them. She snaps again, and the dust disappears, and then two the chairs place themselves in front of the ornate desk in the corner of the office. “Yes, Master Draco.”

He can take a hint, and he doesn’t want to get in her way, so he grabs his teacup out of the air and sits at the desk. After a moment of hesitation, Harry follows suit. “Don’t look,” he warns quietly, “it will just give you a headache.”

Harry frowns, and doesn’t listen to him, of course. He looks behind him, watching the room
apparently clean itself before his eyes – furniture being fixed, alchemy equipment getting cleaned, stray papers sorting and organizing themselves, books getting stacked onto bookshelves of their own volition. He can see flickers of Winky out of the corner of his eye, but he knows better than to try to focus on her. He learned that the hard way when he was a kid.

After a couple of stubborn moments, Harry turns back to him, looking a little green. “I don’t understand.”

“Drink your tea,” he says, and doesn’t continue speaking until Harry picks up his teacup. “House elves can accomplish things one of two ways – magic, or doing it by hand. But doing it by hand takes too long, so they – speed it up.”

Harry continues looking at him with a completely blank expression. At least he’s drinking his tea. “If you’re about to tell me house elves can control time to do the dishes, I’m out. I’m leaving the whole wizarding world, okay, I’m gone.”

He rolls his eyes, “They can move really fast. Faster than the human eye can process. Don’t stare at them unless you want a stomach ache and an unearned sense of vertigo.”

“All done,” Winky announces.

They turn around, and the entire office is sparkling, a fire burning cheerfully in the newly polished fireplace. He beams, “Very good, Winky. You’re dismissed.” She’s gone in the next second. His tea cup is once again full, and plate of biscuits appears discreetly near his elbow. Gingersnap – his favorite. “She really is a fantastic house elf.”

“If she’s so great, why did Crouch get rid of her?” Harry asks. He goes to grab a gingersnap for himself, but a second plate appears, containing treacle tarts. Draco supposes those must be his favorite, by the dumbfounded look on his face.

He shrugs, “She probably messed something up in that forest – it wasn’t a mistake she took your wand, and whatever she was supposed to be doing instead was important enough that Crouch got rid of a loyal and talented elf over it.”

Harry is starring at him again. “You don’t think her taking my wand was an accident? Have you asked her about it?”

He almost makes a derisive comment about Harry’s intelligence, then catches himself. Muggle raised, muggle raised, why must he always forget that his soulmate is muggle raised? He’s lucky Harry knows up from down most days. “House elves can’t divulge secrets of their former masters. I mean, they can, and they probably won’t die. But it’s risky, and it’ll hurt. Otherwise it really would end up like slavery – house elves have access to too much, know too much, and even the Gryffindor noble families wouldn’t let them leave their service with that kind of knowledge if they could just talk about it to whoever they wanted whenever they wanted. They really would be stuck working for families forever, even if no one was happy about it. Or the families would just kill them.”

Harry is looking green again, and there’s no too-fast elf to blame it on. Draco hasn’t figured out if this is something he should apologize for by the time a hoarse voice calls out, “Harry!”

Sure enough, the head of Draco’s criminal cousin is floating in the fireplace. Harry throws himself on the ground in front of it, and he is so, so glad he called Winky to clean everything. “Sirius! You look better.”

He does, he looks more like a proper pureblood than a living skeleton, trimmed hair and his eyes no
longer sunken deep into his face. That’s probably due to the man who’s head that appears next to him – that of Remus Lupin. “Harry,” their former professor says warmly, then he looks over and up. “Draco, fancy seeing you here. How unexpected and shocking.”

Getting his soulmate back has only made Remus more of a bastard. Draco hadn’t thought that was possible. “You know, I’m thinking silver should be a new trend, I kind of miss those buttons. You never know when they might come in handy.”

Sirius looks positively outraged, and Draco worries for a moment before Remus lets out a booming laugh. His grin is positively wicked, and Draco decides to put decorum to the side to sit next to Harry. He’s already wearing a bright pink tank top, it’s not like he has all that much pride left to worry about it.

(His father had taken him to France for his first game when he was six, and they’d been his favorite team ever since. His parents despaired at the amount of hot pink in his wardrobe, but really they only had themselves to blame.)

“I think I’ve missed you,” Remus says.

“Like a crucio to the spine,” he agrees, but he’s smiling, he can’t help it. Remus had been one of the only teachers that Draco had ever gotten along with and liked, even if they’d spent most of their relationship in a state of mutually assured destruction.

Sirius frowns, “I have no idea what’s happening.”

“I don’t either,” Harry confides, “I just don’t question it, they seem to be enjoying themselves.”

Draco thinks they’re getting a little side tracked. “So!” he says brightly, “The first task is dragons. Any advice for Harry on how not to die?”

That sucks all of the good cheer out of the room, and for the next couple of hours they talk through several things that conceivably might work. He doesn’t say this out loud, because he’s not a complete asshole, but none of them sound very promising. If they don’t figure something out soon, he’s about to be down a soulmate.

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Harry wants to catch Hagrid before the day properly begins, but also he was up half the night brainstorming ways to survive a dragon, and also being filled in on things like Karkaroff’s former Death Eater status and some unsurprising yet terrifying news that his nightmares might actually be based in reality, since the woman he saw Voldemort kill is actually a real woman who’s gone missing.

On the bright side, Sirius seems loads better. Remus does too, happier, less haggard. They’re both so worried about him, and so kind to him. Even after he and Draco sneak back to their respective dorms, he spends a long time staring up at the ceiling and thinking about what it would be like to live with them, to be able to never return to the Dursley’s and instead get to spend the summer with his father’s best friends, with his godfather, with people who like him and care about him and almost certainly wouldn’t ever make him sleep in a cupboard under the stairs.

Which obviously just depresses him, since that’s not a choice he gets to make, apparently. Hagrid’s confused yet cheerful face greets him. “Harry! ‘Ello!” He gets a closer look at him, “Ah, ye heard ‘bout the dragons, then?”

“Dragons?” Harry says, playing dumb for a second just to see the split second of panic on Hagrid’s
face on spilling yet another secret. “Just kidding! That’s why I’m here actually. Hypothetically speaking, if someone had to get past a giant fire breathing lizard, how would they go about doing that?”

Hagrid gives him a disapproving look, but he’s not very good at them so he drops it a moment later and steps aside. “Ye better come in. Yer in luck – I jus’ made rock cakes!”

If they’re just made, that means he might be able to eat them without breaking his teeth, which would be nice. Hagrid has chairs, but Harry goes and sits by the fire instead, mostly because then Fang lopes over and tries to fit as much of himself onto Harry’s lap as possible. He balances the plate of rock cakes Hagrid gives him on the dog’s back, and holds the mug of tea he makes for him in both hands.

He likes Hagrid’s hut. It feels like the Weasley’s, almost, someplace safe and warm where he always feels welcome. “Dragons?” he prompts.

“Hypothetically,” Hagrid says sternly, but he’s also not very good stern, and just ends up looking concerned. “Ye can’t out magic them. Ye can try to distract them, but if yer comin’ for them, yer what they’ll be focusin’ on. Dragons are stronger, faster, and smarter than ye are, Harry. Especially ye. The other champions have three more years of schooling than ye do.”

“Great,” he says miserably. The rock cake is still edible if he soaks it in his tea for half a minute, so there’s that.

Hagrid pats him on the head, and Harry kind of hates how that makes him feel better. “There are spells, but none ye can learn in a day. But there’s one thing yer better at than anything else, one thing that you’re better at than anyone else, I think.”

“What’s that?” he asks, but a second later he gets it. “You want me to try and outfly a dragon?”

“Their movements will be limited – yers won’t be. Yer fast, and smart, and ye have the bes’ broom on the market. I think yer best chance is to fly.”

He groans and falls forward until he’s resting his head on Hagrid’s knee. Fang is squished beneath him, but is nice enough not to cause a fuss about it. “Speaking of flying, I don’t suppose you’ve found a place for the quidditch teams to practice? Angelina is going spare.”

Hagrid settles his massive hand on Harry’s back, and he wishes his could just stay here forever, in Hagrid’s hut with Fang and tea and rock cakes. “Aye, tell ‘er to come see me.”

“Ohay,” he says, and he can’t stay, in fact if he doesn’t hurry up he’s going to be late to class. So he pushes himself up and on his feet. Hagrid is still sitting, so Harry can almost look him in the eye without straining his neck. “Thanks, Hagrid. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Anytime,” he says, but his voice comes out kind of rough, and his eyes are little shiny.

Harry throws his arms around Hagrid’s neck, squeezing as tight as he can, and then bolts before he dies of embarrassment.

~

They all have a free period before lunch, and Draco isn’t surprised when he gets a message from Harry saying to meet him in their classroom. He has charms with the Ravenclaws right before it, and he’s loves charms, but the class itself can get rather boring. He usually finishes the day’s work in about twenty minutes, and then spends the rest of it researching and testing on his own. Or, well,
that’s what he’d like to do. The other Slytherins are well aware he’s good at this stuff, so he helps anyone who’s struggling. Unfortunately, the Ravenclaws don’t actually care that he’s a slimy Slytherin once they figure out he’s the best in charms in their year. (He’s pretty sure he’s the best in charms in the whole school, but he can’t say that because he’ll sounds like a nerd.) So he ends up helping them too, which is – the worst.

Last time he’d shown up at Flitwick’s office to ask a question, he’d shoved a bunch of first year essays at him, given him a grading rubric, and said he’d help him when he finished. Draco knows he’s basically been acting as Flitwick’s aide since the start of the year, but that’s a position that he’s not even supposed to be eligible for until sixth year, and he has a reputation to maintain, so he hasn’t said anything about it. He’s pretty sure no one in class has said anything about it out of fear he’ll refuse to help them anymore.

So when Flitwick asks him to stay behind, he nods Blaise and Pansy off. “I’ll catch up,” he promises. They already know to head to the classroom, so he’s not worried about it. He sits on top of the desk and leans back on his hands. “What’s up, Professor?”

He’s pretty much the only teacher Draco actually likes. That probably has something to do with him being the only one he doesn’t actively talk back to or who isn’t his incompetent head of house, but he’s not going to think about that too deeply.

Flitwick frowns, never a good sign, and says, “Those buttons you made.”

He resists the urge to stiffen. All the Hufflepuffs are wearing them, and he’d gotten cornered by Lisa Turpin while he was handing them out at breakfast, so by tomorrow all the Ravenclaws will be too. “What about them?”

“That’s an impressive bit of spellwork,” he says, and Draco relaxes instantly. “How did you do it?”

Draco goes through it quickly. Figuring out the correct metal combination and order for the charm integration had been the hardest part. Everything else had been pretty basic. When he finishes, Flitwick is still frowning for some reason. He didn’t do anything wrong, the buttons work exactly as he intended, he doesn’t know what he’s done to earn a frown. “You don’t have to, this isn’t an assignment, and you won’t be graded on it. Could you write an academic paper about how you did it?”

Merlin, that sounds awful. He did it all from memory, but if he writes an academic paper on it then he’s going to have to pull a ton of charms papers and source everything properly, and write out all his equations. He didn’t even do half of them, just guessed and hoped for the best. “For extra credit?” he asks, even though he doesn’t need it, because he’ll do it, he’s going to make Hermione write out his equations for him, but he will do it.

“Of course,” Flitwick answers, “no rush, just whenever you get to it.”

“Sure,” he says, and tries not to act as gloomy as he feels.

Judging by the amusement in Flitwick’s eyes, he doesn’t do a very good job of it. The man is three feet of pure evil. Maybe that’s why Draco likes him so much, actually.

~

Harry had already had the idea in his mind when he left Hagrid’s hut, but then he sees the Daily Prophet, and sees his scowling face splashed across the front page. Clearly his words to Skeeter hadn’t done any good at all, because basically the entire article is about him and his wavering bravery in the face of certain death, and his selfless desire to push others up in front of him. Viktor
and Fleur get a couple of paragraphs dedicated to them, and Cedric gets a single line. He’s furious, and he refuses to be complicit in this. The goblet spitting out his name means he’s forced to compete, to actually try, but that’s all it means. Cedric is the true Hogwarts champion, and Harry’s not going to take that away from him.

Harry is pacing, waiting for Draco to get there, and everyone must be able tell he’s agitated, because they’re silent, even Pansy. That’s a little worrisome. If he looks upset enough that Pansy isn’t giving him shit, then he should probably lighten up.

Draco walks in, and the door’s barely shut before he blurts, “Hagrid said the best way to get past dragons is to fly around them. I’m going to lend my broom to Cedric.”

There’s a moment of stunned silence.

“That’s the stupidest idea you’ve ever had, and you’ve had a lot of stupid ideas,” Blaise says.

“I know you want to do the right thing,” Ron says, frowning, “but this might be the place where noble crosses over into stupid.”

“It’s definitely the place noble becomes stupid,” Hermione adds.

Pansy isn’t saying anything. Instead she’s watching Draco, which tells Harry he should probably be doing that as well. His soulmate’s lips are pressed into a thin line, and he’s so mad he’s shaking. “Are you suicidal?” he asks with the type of quiet, controlled anger that has Harry unconsciously taking a step back. He looks like his dad. “You give Cedric your broom, and you’re just, what? Going to make a run for it?”

“I don’t know,” he says, “but I have to do this. I’m telling you, not asking your permission.”

Draco snarls, and it’s almost comforting to watch his stone mask fall away. “I said don’t die, I said survive, and you come to me with this. Are you just going to have a nice chat with the dragon? Oh, please don’t kill me, I’m an idiot but I don’t taste very good. Do you have an ability to speak to dragons hidden up your sleeve? Because otherwise I really don’t see how this ends with anything else but your death.”

Oh. Oh, now there’s an idea!

He sees the moment Draco figures out what he’s thinking. He scowls and puts his hands on his hips. “No, absolutely not. No! That’s insane, and I refuse to help you. Good luck doing it on your own, because that’s the only way you’re doing this.”

“It’s a great idea, and we should have thought of it earlier,” he says. “Come on, it’s perfect. I just have to cast one little sonorous spell, and I’m golden. This is way better than a broom.”

“It’s dangerous and idiotic,” Draco snaps.

“Yeah,” he says, because he can be a little self aware sometimes, “but it’s also awesome.”

Hermione rubs at her temples, “Please tell me you’re not talking about what I think you’re talking about.”

“Oh, I am,” Harry says. “Come on Draco, you’re better at charms than any of us. You cast it when you were twelve, you can definitely do it now.”

“Of course I can. The question is, why should I? This is ridiculous.”
Draco’s angry, but it’s his normal ruffled, scrunchy faced anger, not the cold and quiet one, so Harry’s grinning as he takes a step closer and nudges his soulmate in the side. “Of course it is, every year here is ridiculous, it’s always someone trying to kill me. I would like one year where no one tries to kill me. But I can’t control that. I can control this.”

“You’ll have to reveal to everyone you’re a Parselmouth, if you do this,” Draco says. “You won’t be able to hide it anymore.”

He shrugs, “Good. They can think it’s a dark trait if they want. I’m not their golden boy, I’m a kid who’s sick of people trying to kill me. Besides, it’s like you said – my ancestors developed it first, before Voldemort or Slytherin, and they don’t get to make it a dark thing just because they were dark. They didn’t create it, and it doesn’t belong to them.”

Draco almost looks impressed, and it doesn’t matter that Harry only half-believes what he’s saying. He knows he’s angry enough now to not care about the backlash he’ll get later, and that’s all that matters.

“Okay,” Pansy says, “what are you guys talking about?”

Harry waits, but neither Draco nor Hermione move to explain. So he grins and says, “When we were stuck in the Chamber of Secrets, Draco summoned a wyvern to help me. He’s going to summon it again.”

~

Harry doesn’t want to do this in front of the entire school, so he uses the Chimera map to find Cedric after lunch. He’s in the library, and not many other people are, so he grabs his broomstick and that’s where he goes.

He turns the corner, and Cedric’s there, but he’s not alone anymore. Cho Chang, the very pretty Ravenclaw seeker and Cedric’s girlfriend, is there too. They’ve got a stack of books in front of them, and Harry’s heart sinks when he sees they’re about defensive spells and hexes. Cedric has no idea what the first task is.

“Harry!” she says, startled.

Cedric looks up, bags under his eyes, but smiles when he sees him. “Hey, Harry,” he greets, then jerks his chin at his broom, amused, “Going flying?”

“Er, no, I mean, uh – can I talk to you alone? Just for a few minutes.” He doesn’t know Cho very well, and this is already going to be awkward enough without an audience.

She frowns, but Cedric leans over to kiss her cheek. “It’s okay, Eun-hae. You should take a break anyway.”

“Eun-hae?” he repeats, and as soon as it leaves his mouth he’s aware it wasn’t quite like Cedric said it.

He’s proven right by her grimace. “It’s my name. And all right, if you’re sure.”

She gets up to leave, and he really does have very important things to discuss with Cedric. But, “I thought Cho was your name?”

“It’s a nickname,” she says, and she sounds defensive. He didn’t mean – well, anything, he was just surprised. “Like your name. It’s not Harry on your birth certificate, is it?” He must be silent for a beat
too long, because she looks mortified. “Oh, merlin, is it? Sorry, I just assumed.”

“I don’t know,” he says, because no one has called him Harold his whole life, no one has called him anything but Harry. But maybe it is a nickname. He has no idea. “Maybe?”

She’s smiling at him now, and he’s so relieved that she doesn’t seem offended that he smiles back. “Well, I suppose I can’t fault you for not knowing my name if you don’t know your own. It’s my mother’s maiden name. We’re basically the same person, so my dad called me Little Cho as a kid, and it stuck. Besides, Eun-hae is hard for a lot of people to say, and I got tired of correcting them. So I go by Cho.”

“Sorry,” he says again, because he had absolutely butchered her name when he tried to say it.

“Don’t worry about it,” she says, and it makes sense that she and Cedric are dating, they’re both so nice. She squeezes Cedric’s hand, then heads out of the library. She leaves all of her things behind, so she’s probably just going far enough to give them some privacy, and not to take a break like Cedric had suggested.

As soon as she’s gone, Cedric drops his head onto the table and groans. “I haven’t slept in days, I have no idea what I’m doing, and she’s going to dump me for someone who’s less of a disaster.”

He blinks. “That seems unlikely. Should I call her Eun-hae or Cho?”

Cedric tilts his head enough to look at him, “I’m mostly the only one who calls her Eun-hae, she prefers going by Cho. So I’d call her Cho. I mean, I wouldn’t, because I call her Eun-hae, but if I was you, then me as you would call her Cho.”

Ow. Cedric really does need to get some sleep. He sits in the chair across from him, and licks his lips before leaning closer. “It’s dragons.”

He sits up straight at that, eyes narrowed. “What?”

“The first task, it’s dragons. Fleur and Viktor already know, their school heads told them, and I found out because … well, it doesn’t matter how I found out.” Cedric has paled, and he’s looking at his stack of books, and nothing inside of them will do any good against a dragon. “You can’t be stronger or smarter than a dragon. But,” he places his broom on the table between them, “you can be faster.”

Cedric’s eyes are huge, and he’s wide awake now. “I don’t understand.”

“The best way to get past a dragon is to fly,” Harry says, “you’re a brilliant flyer. But you ride a school broom because you want to play fair, and a Cleansweap isn’t going to cut it. Take mine. The Firebolt is the fastest broom on the market, with the best response times.”

“What are you going to do? Do you have another Firebolt?”

He shakes his head, “No, I’m doing something else. It’s pretty stupid, and more flashy than practical, but it will also piss a lot of people off, so. There’s that.” He pushes his broom closer, “Take it. I’m not going to use it either way, so you have no reason to refuse.”

Cedric looks between him and his broom. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because you’re the Hogwarts champion, and I want Hogwarts to win,” Harry says, trying to sound earnest and firm at the same time. “Me winning isn’t a victory, it’s just an insult to the rest of you. My only goals here are to survive and piss people off.”
There’s an uncomfortable moment when Cedric just stares at him. But then a grin breaks out over his face, and he reaches over to clap him on the shoulder. “Thank you, Harry. I – just, thank you. Really.”

An answering grin stretches out over his face. “No problem.”

He passes Cho on his way out, and waves as he leaves. She looks confused to see him leaving without his broom, but waves back anyway.

~

It’s the middle of the night, and Draco and Winky are hard at work creating more buttons when his mirror goes off. He wouldn’t normally answer it in the common room, but they’re the only ones there, so he flicks it open. “Hey, is everything okay?”

“Fine,” Harry says, “you’re making buttons for the Ravenclaws, right?” He nods. “Can you make like – twice as many?”

“What? I mean, yeah, sure, but why?” he asks. He glances over at Winky, and she nods, disappearing to get more metal to melt together.

“I want one, and I want the rest of Gryffindor to wear them too,” he says.

Draco rolls his eyes, “It really ruins the purpose of them if you approve, you know.”

“You made them to see if you could, and to be dramatic,” Harry scoffs. “I want everyone at Hogwarts to wear them. I’d see if the Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students would do it too, but that seems like overkill.”

“A little, and unless I grabbed some upperclassmen to help with the charms work, I would literally die trying to make that many, so please don’t.” He pauses, then says, “You’re really serious about this not being a Hogwarts champion thing, aren’t you?”

Harry glares, “Yes, because I’m not. It’s not fair.”

“Hufflepuff,” he says fondly. “All right, fine. If you’re still alive in two days, I have an idea for that, and I’ll pull an all-nighter so you can make a statement. Are you happy now?”

“Delighted,” Harry says dryly, then closes his mirror.

Winky appears at his elbow, holding a tray with two small cups of espresso. “Master Draco will be needing this.”

“Very good,” he says, and knocks them both back in quick succession. It’s only after that he realizes she’d spiked them with pepper up potion.

She is the *best* house elf.

~

Cedric’s face when he shows up to breakfast and sees all four houses wearing buttons proclaiming him the real Hogwarts champion is absolutely worth the shouting match Harry had gotten in with basically his whole house.

Harry catches his eye and winks, obnoxiously shining the badge of on his chest. It switches to flashing Potter Stinks! and he doesn’t pause at all.
Krum is back at their table today, sitting across from him and next to Hermione, and he rolls his eyes so hard Harry’s surprised they don’t fall out of his head. Harry sticks his tongue out at him, but he feels lighter than he has since his name popped out of the goblet.

~

It’s the night before the first task, and Draco and Harry are under the invisibility cloak, sneaking out to the forbidden forest in the middle of the night, because they’re idiots. He should have put his foot down, should have refused to help with this completely ridiculous endeavor. But if he had, Harry would have just attempted to summon it on his own, and his all power, no control spellcasting combined with trying to summon a large, dangerous magical creature could only end in disaster.

They find a clearing close to the forest’s edge, because they’re not trying to get killed by some angry creature that calls the forest home, and step out from under the cloak. Harry stuffs the cloak back into his pocket, and Draco is always impressed by how small it can become. “Are you ready? If this thing eats me, I’ll be very cross.”

“If it eats you, I’ll be very cross too,” Harry says. Draco glares, and he cracks a grin, “I’m ready. Go on.”

“This is such a bad idea,” he says, his last token protest against this insanity. Then he raises his wand and focuses. It’s not like Abigail, who he’s summoned hundreds of times and who he knows so well. He thinks back to two years ago, to the fury and the triumph, to the roar of the wyvern, to its powerful wings and sharp, judgmental eyes, how Harry had said it had laughed at them at the end.

“Serpensortia!”

There’s a tugging sensation, then a wyvern bursts from his wand. It’s the same color as the one he’d summoned last time, a greenish-grey, but that’s all gets a chance to see before Harry knocks him to the ground and steps in front of him, hypnotic hissing falling from his mouth. Draco risks a glance up, and the giant beast is watching them, head cocked to the side. He hasn’t tried to eat them, or made too much noise, so there’s that.

“Is it the same one?” he asks. Even looking at it more closely, he can’t really tell. Harry looks down at him and nods. Draco figures if he tries to speak, it will just come out as Parseltongue, not English. “Is it going to help?”

The dragon thrusts his head around Harry and down, and Draco is convinced that he’s going to die. But instead it just looks at him for a long moment. Then it’s tongue darts out of the its mouth, like Abigail’s does when she’s tasting the air, and grazes the side of his face. He guesses it understands English.

“It’s okay,” Harry says, speaking carefully and slowly, “he’s going to help. His name is … uh, it doesn’t translate to spoken languages well. He likes you.”

Draco stares into those giant black eyes, and he should really be terrified, but now he just keeps drawing comparisons between this half-snake, half-dragon creature, and his snake back home. “I’m going to call him Payne.”

“You are the worst at naming things.” The wyvern lets out a strange not-quite hissing sound. Harry sighs, defeated. “He says Payne is an acceptable name.”

This is stupid, but tonight has just been a long series of stupid decisions. So he raises his hand and presses it against Payne’s head, then sweeps it up with the pattern of his scales. When his arm doesn’t
get bitten off, he does it again.

That’s how Draco end up in the forbidden forest in the middle of the night, petting a wild wyvern named Payne.

~

Harry shows up for the first task, in the tent with the others, and the first thing out of his mouth is, “Absolutely not.”

Fleur and Viktor are in battle robes in their school colors. Cedric’s is only in Hufflepuff colors. There’s another one hanging that’s red and gold, clearly for him, and – no. Just no.

“It’s okay,” Cedric says, warm. “They need to differentiate us somehow.”

“I’m not wearing those,” he crosses his arms. He’s wearing his quidditch training gear, which is already in Gryffindor colors, and that’s bad enough. Cedric’s the same, and he’s a little surprised Viktor isn’t dressed to fly. He’s a professional quidditch player, it makes the most sense for him to do this on a broom.

“You must,” Fleur says, “they offer protection. Battle robes are spelled to help prevent damage, you cannot risk it.”

Harry bites his bottom lip, thinking. He’s absolutely willing to risk it, but if Draco finds out he’s refused to wear them, he’ll kill him. “I’ll be right back.”

It’s pretty much impossible to go up to the stands unnoticed, so everyone’s eyes are on him as he walks up to the edge of where most of the Slytherins are sitting. He can practically feel Draco’s glare, but he refuses to look up at him. “Hey,” he says to Cassius, the only person he really recognizes in the clump of upperclassmen, “tell Parkinson I need to talk to her.”

Cassius looks at him suspiciously, but he’s not a bastard like Flint, so he turns and whispers to the person above him, who does the same, all the way up to the top rows where Pansy is sitting. She sighs and turns to Draco, who is indeed glaring at Harry. But he takes out his wand and carefully levitates Pansy over the stands and places her on the ground next him.

“What do you want, Potter?” she sneers. There’s a warning on her face, and he knows he needs to be careful, but he also needs her help.

“You’re good at transfiguration, right? And cloth altering charms?” He knows she is, but he’s not supposed to.

She puts her nose in the air, “Obviously.”

“Cedric needs some help with robes. Will you come with me?” he can’t ask for himself, because there’s no reason for her to say yes with everyone watching them. But he needs her to say yes.

She flicks her hair over her shoulder, “I suppose, if it’s for the real Hogwarts champion.”

He leads her back to the tent, mindful of everyone’s eyes on them, and holds the flap open for her. He follows her inside, and everyone looks confused. “Pansy?” Fleur asks.

She shrugs, then looks to Cedric, “What’s wrong with your robe? Besides the obvious.”

“Can you change the color?” Harry asks, “Can you make it the color of all the houses, and make
“You don’t need to do this,” Cedric insists, “really, it’s fine.”

Pansy ignores him, and taps her wand against her hand, considering. “Yes,” she says, “on one condition.”

When she leaves the tent twenty minutes later, Cedric’s robes are still yellow, but a huge Hogwarts crest is on his back, and it’s covered in an embroidered pattern of the house mascots – the biggest, of course, being a snake that crawls along the border of the robe. She’d warned that her final spell to make them move wouldn’t last very long, but Cedric had been so enthralled watching the moving badgers encircling his wrists that he hadn’t said anything.

She’d spelled Harry’s robes black, devoid of any defining marks, except one – a bright green Potter Stinks! embroidered across the back.

Worth it.

~

Harry can’t even be surprised that he’s going last and that he’s facing the Hungarian Horntail, that’s just how his life seems to work. When he steps out, Fleur is being treated for a large wound on her side, and Viktor is having bright orange burn paste applied to his chest. But Cedric catches his eye and beams. Harry’s Firebolt is by his side, and he doesn’t look like he got a scratch on him. Good.

The crowd is mostly booing him, but he’d told everyone to do that, so it doesn’t bother him. He looks to the judges, and tries to channel Blaise as he gives his most mocking bow. Then he turns back to the Horntail. She’s furious, standing over her clutch of eggs and snapping her jaws at him. She looks as if she’d like nothing more than to bite him in half.

He pulls out his wand, and takes a deep breath. Once he does this, there’ll be no hiding it, and there will be a backlash. He turns his wand on himself and casts, “Sonorous!”

The magic encircles his throat, and he can feel it take hold. It’s time to do this.

In a booming voice loud enough to be heard by every single person in the stadium, by everyone in Hogwarts, loud enough to reach past them into the forest, he shouts in Parseltongue, “IT’S TIME!”

People are screaming, and there’s a rush of noise as everyone tries to talk over each other. He ignores all of it, and he waits.

He hears him before he sees him, and he knows he’s there when people really start screaming. Payne circles the air above them, then lands besides him, half serpent, half dragon, and completely terrifying. He’s about half the size of the Horntail. Harry reaches up and climbs onto the wyvern’s back, settling in the place right above his wings at the base of his neck. He could end the sonorous charm now, but he won’t. He wants them all to hear him. Payne beats his massive wings and takes flight, circling the furious Horntail. “She can breathe fire. I can’t breathe fire.”

“I know that,” Harry says, “Can you get me close enough to grab the egg or not?”

“No,” he answers, “I like you, but not enough to die for your human games.” The Horntail shoots a column of flame and Payne flies out of the way. “She says if you come near her eggs she’ll swallow you whole, then spit you out and set you on fire.”

Harry blinks. Wait – no way – “You can talk to her?”
“Obviously,” he answers, doing a barrel roll just for kicks, “I am a dragon.”

Unbelievable. “Can you tell her I just need the golden one? It’s not a real egg.”

Payne roars, loud enough to shake the stands. The Horntail stops snapping, and looks up at him. She lets out a low rumble, which Payne returns. “She says you can have it, but she’s mad. She wants the humans to know she’s mad.”

“I think everyone knows,” he says. But when Payne tells him what she has in mind, he buries his face the wyvern’s neck to hide his laughter.

Payne translates his agreement, then gets back. She spreads her wings and takes flight, and she seems so much larger now. She knows he’s not going to attack her eggs, so she’s not staying close to the ground to protect them anymore.

Luckily, all he has to do for this part is stay on. Payne makes a show of goading her, and flying just out of reach while doing unnecessary flips to avoid her fire, when he could have just flown out of the way. She’s straining against the chains, slackening and then pulling against them to weaken them. Harry can see the dragon trainers clustered at the edge, looking worried, and he makes a note to apologize to Charlie for this later.

The chains holding her snap, and she goes shooting into the air, releasing a triumphant roar. “Get ready,” Payne warns, diving towards the ground.

“I hope you know Draco is going to be furious,” he says, adjusting slightly so that he’s kneeling on his back instead of sitting on it.

“Your boy needs to lighten up.” Harry rolls his eyes, but then the Horntail comes underneath them, snapping at Payne’s tail. Payne switches direction, flying into the air and past the Horntail.

Well. Here goes nothing.

He jumps from Payne’s back, and there’s a terrifying moment where he’s sure he’s about to fall to his death. But he lands on the dragon’s back, and he starts to slide, but she makes a sharp turn so he rolls enough to grab onto one on the spikes on her back. “Climb up to her neck!” Payne says, making a show of chasing her, of trying to get him back.

She’s flying into the clouds, so he’s basically climbing straight up. But he grabs the spike in front of him, and hauls himself up, feeling with his feet until he can use her back spikes like a very awkward ladder.

The space where her neck and back meet is clear, and he settles there, wrapping his arms around her neck.

This whole death tournament might be worth it, because this is the best moment of his life.

Riding Buckbeak was awesome, and Payne is basically like the best rollercoaster in the world. But she’s all tightly coiled power coupled with a sense of ease in the air. She should be straining to lift herself, but it almost feels like the air is working with her to get her where she wants to be. He looks down, and the stadium is getting steadily smaller. Payne is right underneath them, and this is the highest he’s ever flown.

He’s freezing, but it’s amazing. They break through the clouds, and she slows down, adjusts herself so she’s flying in lazy circles. Harry can’t see anything beneath the clouds, but it doesn’t matter. She’s warm, and the air is cold, and he never wants to land. Payne glides next to them. “Are you
okay?"

He takes out his wand to end the sonorous charm, then says, “This is the best thing ever.” He’s tightens his arms around her neck and rubs his face against her scales. He’s cuddling a dragon. Magic is awesome.

Payne makes the same breathy laughter. “She says you’re all right, for a human.”

“She’s amazing,” he says. He has never understood Hagrid so well as he does in this moment. She looks back at him, and he beams and waves. She snorts smoke rings in his face.

“She says she’ll take you back down and give you the golden egg. Do you want me to come with you?”

“No,” he says. Being without his translator and protector is a little scary, but it’s for the best. “I don’t want them to try and grab you. Hide in the forest until tonight, and go back to the place where Draco summoned you two hours after sunset. Draco will be there to send you home.”

Payne flies close enough to push his head against Harry’s chest. “Until next time,” he says, then flies away.

She flies in circles for about twenty more minutes, and he’s definitely taking way longer to complete his task than anyone else. Good. She does a couple flips, and looks back at him each time, so he’s pretty sure she’s showing off, which is fantastic.

She heads down, but once they break through the clouds she tucks her wings close and goes heading into freefall dive. He throws his arms in air, screaming in delight. As they get closer he can see everyone panicking, and a group of dragon trainers on the ground. She snaps out her wings and glides over the stands, and Harry leans over to wave at everyone. He’s never seen so many shocked faces in one place before. She settles on the ground next to her nest, prim and proper like she hadn’t just broken free of her chains and flown away.

He carefully slides off her back onto the ground. Except his legs are basically frozen jelly. His knees buckle and he falls on his ass. “Ow.”

She leans her head into her nest, and delicately picks up the golden egg with her mouth. She holds it out to him, and he reaches his hands between her very sharp teeth to take the golden egg. “Thanks.”

She settles back over her nest and curls around it, closing her eyes and falling into a well deserved slumber.

There’s still nothing but dead silence. Then Ron jumps to his feet in the stands and starts clapping and yelling. The twins are behind him not a moment later, and soon everyone’s cheering for him. The dragon trainers edge carefully closer, wands out.

Charlie skips all of that and runs over, dropping to his knees besides him. “Harry! Are you hurt?”

He’s so pale that his freckles stand out in sharp contrast, and he feels bad for making people worry, but also it was amazing. “I’m great,” he says, “I can’t feel my legs, but I’m good. I rode a dragon!”

“I saw,” he says, grinning. He hadn’t known Harry was a Parselmouth before this, but it seems like he doesn’t care. Judging by the deafening cheers from the stands, they don’t care either. He doesn’t think it’ll be that easy, but it’s nice. “Technically, you rode two. I’m very jealous.”

“It was fun,” he says honestly. It’s possible the lack of oxygen up there has left him a little loopy, but
he can’t bring himself to mind all that much.

Charlie is laughing at him, but that’s okay, he likes Charlie so it’s allowed. “Come on, dragon rider, on your feet. Time to get your scores.”

He pulls Harry up, and holds him steady when he threatens to fall again. He looks over at the judges’ table. None of them look happy.

Harry then makes the mistake of looking for his soulmate in the crowd, and wow, Draco looks mad.

Really mad.

He’s in so much trouble.

Chapter End Notes

re: cho’s name. it just .... bothers me that her first name is a last name. i asked my korean friend if there's any first name cho could be short for, and she said not really, so i decided to go with it being her nickname and her mom's maiden name. which is a weird nick name, but the consensus we reached was "as good a reason as any" so. yeah. my friend is also the one who picked eun-hae for cho's name.

i hope you liked it! feel free to follow / harass me at: shanastoryteller.tumblr.com
Draco is going to save himself the heart attacks, and he’s going to *murder* his soulmate. Harry is beaming as the judges scowl at him, and he’s going to wipe that smile off of Harry’s face and strangle him.

Harry did technically get the egg, but he loses points since it took him five times longer than the other champions.

“Draco, darling,” Pansy says, draping herself against his side so she can whisper in his ear, “You’re going to break some bones if you don’t let up.”

He blinks, uncomprehending, and Pansy’s eyes flicker down to his other side. He follows her gaze, and he’s grabbed Blaise’s hand in his own. His friend’s hand is crushed in his grip, and there are wounds from where Draco’s nails have dug into his skin. “Merlin!” he lets go, guiltily looking up at Blaise, who merely raises an eyebrow. “Sorry. I – sorry.” He takes out his wand, and mumbles a healing charm under his breath, then rubs away the dried blood with his thumb.

“It’s fine,” Blaise says, taking his hand back to flick Draco in the ear. “I’ll live.”

“Sorry,” he repeats stubbornly, flicking his eyes over to Harry. “I just–”

“If you make me say it’s fine again, I’m going to hit you,” Blaise threatens.

Draco’s shoulders loosen, and he smirks. “You can try.”

Blaise is stronger and faster than he is, but that’s what magic is for. He can’t get hit if he doesn’t get caught.

~

Dumbledore had awarded him a high score for his “daring and ingenuity” but the rest of the judges had just been pissed, so he gets the lowest combined score out of all the champions. Good. He’s ridiculously relieved to hear he’ll have three months until the next task. He wonders if he can throw dragons at that one too. That would be nice.

By the time he makes it back the tent to return the battle robes, everyone else is already gone, and he can’t help his disappointment. They all got to see his trial, but he wasn’t able to see any of theirs, and he wants to hear about what they did. He knows Cedric flew, but not what Viktor or Fleur did.

He showers in the quidditch locker room before heading back to the castle, more to avoid the crowd and reporters than anything else. With a quick scourgify, his clothes are clean of sweat and dirt, so he just puts them back on and sneaks around so he doesn’t have to use the castle’s main entrance.

He thinks he’s pretty clever until someone grabs the back of his shirt and yanks him into – a garden shed, maybe? There’s a lot of shovels, and it’s very dusty. He sneezes. “Are you sure you don’t want to wait to have this conversation? Maybe cool down a little. Also, were you just – waiting for me to walk by? How did you know I’d come this way?”

Draco practically snarls at him, fistig his hands in the front of his shirt and shoving him against the
door. It’s not his cold, scary anger, but his fury, and Harry isn’t so worried about that. He’s still elated from his dragon ride, but bites down on his grin. This is not a smiling matter.

“What the fuck do you think you were doing?” Draco hisses, “I couldn’t see you for nearly a half hour! The trainers cast locator spells, so they knew you were close, but they didn’t know if you were hurt or falling or if that great beast had simply swallowed you whole—”

“Draco!” Harry wants to touch his shoulders, but can’t quite manage to reach it with Draco’s hands pressed up against his chest. Instead he grabs onto Draco’s waist and jerks him closer, until Draco’s elbows bend and they’re nearly pressed up against each other. It has the desired effect of shutting Draco up, but now Harry’s mouth is dry, and he’s forgotten all the very good reasons he had for helping a dragon break temporarily free and riding her into the sky.

His soulmate’s eyes are so very blue.

Draco sighs and drops his head forward so it rests on Harry’s shoulder. “I said no stupid, foolhardy Gryffindor heroics, Harry. Is that really so much to ask?”

Oh, great, now he feels guilty. “It wasn’t heroics. Payne could talk to her, and she just wanted to put on a show. I wasn’t in any danger.”

“What if you’d fallen? Good intentions won’t matter when you have a broken neck!”

“One of them would have caught me if I had,” he says with more confidence than he feels. He’s sure they would have tried, at least, but they were definitely too close to the ground when he’d jumped from Payne’s back for it to have been anything even close to safe. “I didn’t mean to worry you.”

“You never do,” Draco says, finally raising his head. “Don’t – don’t do something like that again. Please. Not for the tournament, at least, not for something that doesn’t matter.”

“Okay,” he says, because Draco looks genuinely upset, and that’s the last thing Harry wants. He knocks his foot against Draco’s and says, “It was kind of cool, though, right?”

Draco rolls his eyes and steps away. Harry lets his arms falls back to his side, but misses the warmth of Draco under his hands. “I’m going back to the castle. Wait at least five minutes before following me. I’m still mad at you, just so we’re clear.”

He pushes Harry out of the way and leaves the shed, nose in the air. Harry should maybe be worried about how good of a look arrogant is on his soulmate.

Fleur finds him as he’s walking into the castle, and she throws her arms around his neck. “Draco! I have been looking for you!”

He hugs her back, pleased. She’d come in second in the first task, right after Cedric. “Sorry, I had to take care of something. Why are you looking for me? You should be celebrating!”

“I am!” She grabs his hand, “We are, on our carriage. I want you to come! And your friends, Blaise and Pansy.” Some of her enthusiasm leaves her, and she wilts. “Viktor is celebrating on his boat. I am sad there is not a place we can all celebrate together. We have all succeeded today!”

He stares at her, and he has a great idea. “Winky,” he says, and Fleur startles as his house elf appears at their side. “Can you clean up the Shrieking Shack by tonight?”
“Yes, Master Draco,” she says promptly. “Winky is a quick elf.”

“Excellent. Get to it.” She’s gone before he’s even finished speaking. He looks to a confused Fleur. “How’s your disillusionment charm?”

“Fantastic. Why?”

He definitely doesn’t deserve her suspicious stare, he’s done absolutely nothing to warrant it. “My dear Fleur, we’ll celebrate now amongst ourselves. But tonight? We’re throwing a party. And everyone’s invited.”

~

His next move is to track down Blaise, which ends up being rather easy, since he’s studying herbology in their room. He looks up at Draco’s entrance, and his face drops into a scowl. “I hate that look, it never ends well from me. Whatever you want, the answer is no.”

“Don’t be like that, it’s time to put all of your mother’s training to use!” he says cheerfully. That gets his attention. “You want me to write something?”

“No.”

“…You want me to marry a man for his money, kill him, and make it look like an accident?”

“Blaise!” Draco pus a hand to his heart. “Mrs. Zabini would never! How could you say such a thing about your own mother?”

“I’ve met her,” he says dryly, “Well, those are the two skills she’s impressed upon me, so I’m not sure what else you could need me for.”

“We’re throwing a party in the Shrieking Shack. Durmstrang, Beauxbatons, and Hogwarts fourth year and up.” He pauses, considering, then tacks on, “Plus Luna.”

Somehow, Blaise looks even less amused. “You want me to host?”

“You’re good at it,” he says honestly. “Besides, it can’t be me, I have a reputation to maintain.”

He sighs, more wearily then Draco thinks his request warrants. “Maintaining your reputation is a real pain in my ass. Sure, whatever, hosting a rave for three schools and mostly seventh years sounds like a lot of fun and not stressful at all.”

“Blaise,” he says, admonishing, “this isn’t going to be a rave. It’ll be a small, sophisticated event.”

He’s reaching for his wand, and Draco backs out of their room before he can use it. Now he needs Luna. She’s his cousin, and he’d invite her regardless. But. Her dad has an entire cellar of alcohol that he doesn’t keep inventory of at all, and she’s good enough at summoning charms that he can absolutely use that to his advantage.

Although, if he gets there early he can just pop out to the Three Broomsticks. Madame Rosmerta is a good enough sport about underage drinking that she’ll absolutely sell him whatever he needs, as long as he buys it at three the market value.

It’s so refreshing to be able to plan for something that doesn’t have the lingering possibility of death or imprisonment.
All of the fourth years are hanging out in the boys’ dormitory, since they can’t go to the girls’ dorm. Ron is the one who gets the message, sent by Blaise. It’s a time, and a place, and beneath it, written in the boy’s perfect cursive is: *An event to celebrate the three Triwizard Champions. And that twat Harry Potter.*

Harry laughs out loud when he sees it, but he has no idea what Blaise is planning. They find out everyone in their year and above got one, a tiny slip of paper that seemingly just materialized in their hands. Ron must see his confusion, because he claps him on the shoulder and says, “House elves. They must have recruited a couple of the castle ones.”

“Should we go?” Neville asks uncertainly. “It’s from a Slytherin. What if it’s a trap?”

Lavender gets to her feet, “It sounds fun! Where’s your sense of adventure, Neville?”

“My grandmother keeps it in her handbag,” he says, “under lock and key, and under threat of permanent grounding.”

She snorts, but holds out her hand to him, “Come on. If your grandmother comes to beat you up, I’ll protect you.” Neville doesn’t look the least bit convinced.

“Let’s go,” Harry says getting to his feet. “Can’t be worse than the first task, right?”

They sneak down as a group, and thankfully the common room is empty. The place they were told to go is one of the side exits to the castle. It’s next to the herbology classroom and leads to the greenhouse.

Draco and Cho are there, and everyone pauses, confused. There’s a group of Ravenclaw fifth years standing in front of them, and Cho and Draco tap them each on the head and murmur a spell they can’t quite hear, then in the next moment they’re gone. Wait – no, they’re not gone, but they’re blending in to the background, only barely visible by their movements. They slip out the door, nothing more than faint outlines.

“The hell?” Ron mutters.

“It’s a disillusionment charm,” Parvati says. “It’s seventh year Charms magic.”

“Correct,” Draco’s voice cuts across to them, “We still have some more people to get through tonight, so hurry up. The longer it takes you all to get there, the longer it is before we can join you.”

Cho waves them over, smiling, “It’s all right! You guys are almost the last ones, we did the older years first.”

“What’s going on?” Seamus demands, his hand clasped in Dean’s. “Where are we going?”

“Go to the Whomping Willow, pick up the long stick, and poke the knot. Follow the sounds of music,” Draco says.

Neville squints, “Is that a code?”

“Hurry up. Or you can make a run for it clear as day and just hope no teachers are looking out their window,” Draco glares.

Cho coughs to hide her snort of laughter. She doesn’t do a very good job. Harry doesn’t want this to
end in an argument, so he walks over to her and flings out his arms, using his most put upon voice to say, “Do your worst!” She laughs out loud this time, and it cuts down on some of the tension. Ron walks over to Draco, and the rest of their group looks a lot less wary.

She taps her wand to his head, and there’s the feeling like a cold egg being cracked over him. “Thank you for what you did,” she whispers, reaching out to squeeze his arm. “I don’t know what Cedric would have done otherwise.”

He flushes and ducks his head, and is only a little comforted by the knowledge that she can’t see him blushing. “Anytime,” he says, and then heads outside before she can say anything else embarrassing. He walks over to the Whomping Willow, and waits until the rest of the fourth year Gryffindors have joined him to poke at the knot, temporarily freezing the tree. He glances behind him, and Ron’s taken position at the back of the group, eyeing the tree suspiciously. Good. If the tree starts moving before all them get down there, then Ron will know what to do.

They all make it through, and he and Hermione take the lead, since they’ve been here before, and Ron stays at the back of the group, just in case.

They’re about halfway through the tunnel when they hear the music. It starts out low, just a thumping beat, but it gets louder the farther in they go. By the time they get to the entrance of the Shrieking Shack, it’s deafening. He tries to open the door, but it’s locked. Harry and Hermione trade confused glances, then Hermione knocks on the door.

The door opens, and suddenly there’s no sound at all. The absolute silence after the loud music is jarring. Blaise is standing there, prim and proper, with a prim and proper sitting room behind him, completely empty. “Password?” he asks, looking down at them.

“We weren’t told a password!” Lavender protests.

“No password, no entrance,” he informs them.

Hermione looks like she’s considering just blasting her way past, and Blaise takes a subtle step away from her. “Can we have a hint?” she asks.

“No,” he says. Clearly his fear of Hermione doesn’t outweigh his love of drama. Well, there’s a reason Slytherin isn’t known for being the smart house.

Ron snorts, and they all look back at him. He crosses his arms and says, “Potter stinks.”

Blaise almost smiles and says, “Correct,” before slamming the door in their faces. Hermione reaches for her wand, but before she can grab it, the door opens again. The music is blaring, although Harry can’t see from where, and the shack is lit with zooming lumos charms that act as strobe lights. It’s filled to the brim with students from all three schools, and up against the back wall is what looks like enough alcohol to get all of Hogsmeade plastered, never mind a couple hundred teenagers.

“Is it … bigger in here?” Hermione asks in wonder, stepping through. Parvati and Lavender abandon them to run for the bar, Seamus and Dean a step behind them.

“Fleur and Draco did it.” Harry turn to see Cassius standing there, a tray of smoking shots floating behind him. With a wave of his wand, a shot floats over to hover in front of each of them. “Welcome to the not-rave, in celebration of the three champions, plus Potter.” He grabs one of the shots and raises it to Harry, “Riding that dragon was inspired.”

“Thanks,” he says, amused. “So, the Slytherins are hosting a not-rave because…?”
Cassius knocks back the shot, seemingly unaffected even as smoke pours from his ears. “Technically, Blaise is hosting. But Draco’s the mastermind behind this, and he’s roped the rest of us into it because that’s what he does, the annoying little brat. He and Fleur cooked this up, you’ll have to ask them.” He pauses, considering, then says, “Actually, don’t. We’re trying to have a nice quiet rave in the middle of the night filled with underage drinking, we don’t need anyone to start a duel.”

Two arms settle over his shoulders before he gets a chance to answer to that, and Fred and George are crowding in on either side. “Cassius, my good man,” George says cheerfully. “How’s that transfiguration essay going? Well? You know I’m always eager to help, if you need it.”

Cassius does another shot, flicks the glass at George’s forehead, and walks away. George doesn’t do anything to stop it from hitting him, but he does catch it before it hits the floor. He looks oddly disappointed.

Ron takes his shot, rolling his eyes. “Your flirting sucks.”

Harry thinks Ron’s missed the mark completely until Fred bursts out laughing and George turns as red as his hair. “I’ll murder you in your sleep,” he threatens, but flounces away still blushing.

Fred grabs Hermione’s shot and takes it himself. Hermione can’t seem to decide if she’s offended or not. “When did you learn to drink alcohol, ickle Ronniekins?”

“Thanks to you melting off my tongue with an acid pop when I was five, I’m pretty immune to the burn of a little alcohol. So thanks, I guess.” As if to prove his point, he takes Harry’s shot and knocks it back. He looks about affected as Cassius was – so, not at all.

Fred looks delighted. He links his arms with Ron’s and drags his away. “Time for your first drinking contest, dear brother!”

Hermione sighs, “I better follow them. Coming?”

“Viktor’s here, somewhere,” Harry says, scanning the crowd. “Don’t you want to see him?”

She freezes for a second, and Harry wonders if he said something wrong, if something had changed between them that he hadn’t noticed. It’s very possible. Her entire face turns bright red, “I’m sure he’ll find me, don’t worry about it. In the meantime, I should make sure Fred doesn’t kill Ron. I’ll see you later.” She disappears into the crowd before he can think of a response to that. Now he’s sitting in the corner of the party alone, without alcohol. Even he knows that’s pathetic. Where did Dean and Seamus go? Wait, maybe he doesn’t want to hang out with them – they always end up making out at some point, and Harry really doesn’t want to be the third wheel to that.

“Hey, Harry,” someone presses a butterbeer bottle into his hand, and he looks down to see Ginny standing there, Luna at her side. They’re both holding bright red, smoking drinks.

“You’re not supposed to be here! Either of you!” he protests, glancing around. He hopes none of the other younger years are here. What’s the point of having a secret entrance and a password if Blaise is just going to let anyone through?

Ginny rolls her eyes, “Relax. Draco invited Luna, and she invited me. Draco was real pissy about it.”

“He’d be nicer if you weren’t so mean to him all the time,” Luna says reproachfully.

“I’m not being mean to him! Trust me, he would know if I was being mean to him,” she insists. The thing is, Harry knows she’s right. Her bat bogey hex is the stuff of legends. The door slams open, the music drops, and she sighs, “Speak of the devil.”
Draco and Fleur are standing there, pale and glittering, looking like a matched set of fae. Cho is edging into the crowd, a look of exasperation on her face that people wear around Draco an awful lot. Fleur’s in a powder blue dress that it’s way too cold for her to be wearing, and Draco’s in pants that look like they had to be poured on. “Welcome!” Fleur says as she steps forward, lovely and charming with her thick French accent. “Thank you all for coming. As you know, this is a party in celebration of all three champions completing the first task.”

They all cheer, Harry as loud as he can. He’s glad they’re leaving him out of this – they earned this. He’s just stuck with it.

“But it is not only for us,” she says once they quiet down, something wicked in corner of her grin. “Please give a round of applause for Harry Potter, our very own dragon rider!”

“Oh no,” he says quietly, face burning. His shoulder hunch around his ears as people turn to him, but then there are hands on his waist, hoisting him in the air. He looks down, and Cedric and Viktor are the ones lifting him up on their shoulders. “Guys! Stop it!”


Viktor joins in, and soon everyone else is too, chanting his new title in cacophony of sound, and he really hopes someone put up some sort of sound muffling charm, otherwise the residents of Hogsmeade are going to be hearing some very weird things.

He wants to stay grumpy out of principal, but it’s pretty impossible to do that when Cedric and Viktor are lifting him above everyone else, and they’re all yelling and clapping for him. Draco is leaning against the wall, and he’s not cheering for him, he can’t, not while they pretend to still be enemies. But he looks amused, and soft in a way he probably wouldn’t allow if everyone’s attention wasn’t planted firmly on Harry.

Draco rolls his eyes and jerks his head to the side, clearly telling him to just go with it, and the last bit of restraint Harry has falls away. He raises his arms in the air, beaming, and the chants and cheers get louder.

Next time he needs to make a patronus, he’ll think of this moment.

~

Hermione is going to be annoyed when he tells her they need to brew a double batch of pepper up potion, but the morning after the party Draco distributes them to the rest of their year, as well as the quidditch team, since they’d helped serve and clean up after.

Everyone else who’s hung over and exhausted just get to suffer.

It had been a resounding success. Hogwarts had actually felt united for the first time, all three schools had actually felt united. It has been fun, and no one had gotten in a fight, no one had started anything, he’d kind of expected someone to get too drunk and too rowdy and to ruin it all, but it hadn’t happened.

Millie had gotten sloppy drunk and dragged Neville onto the dance floor, and he’d been too flustered to stop her. Susan had kept an eye on Luna and Ginny all night, and he owed her something nice for that. If anyone had tried anything with them, he would have been the one starting a fight, but thankfully he hadn’t needed to.

The highlight of the evening had absolutely been a drinking contest that had been down to Krum and Ron, a bunch of passed out and queasy people surrounding them as they stared each other down.
Draco had been rather impressed by how long Cho had lasted – she’d turned bright red about three shots in, but hadn’t seemed otherwise affected. Until around three quarters in when she’d walked over to Cedric, silently climbed onto his back, and passed out.

Neither Ron nor Krum had vomited or fallen asleep or stopped drinking by the time it was time for everyone to go back to the dorms, so they’d called it a tie, shook on it, and swore to beat the other next time.

Draco and Fleur had cast the disillusionment charm on everyone, since Cedric insisted they let Cho sleep instead of waking her up and forcing her to help them. Cedric had tried to help, but he was crap at it, so they’d just sent him back to the castle.

Draco and Blaise had been the last people back, and they’d stumbled into bed just as the sun was rising, so they were going to have to go through today on about three hours of sleep.

Worth it.

~

Everyone expects Ron to be too hungover to go to class. Harry expects Ron to be too hungover to go to class.

Instead he gets up like every other day, yawning and cracking his back. “Wow, I’m starving. Hurry up everyone, I want to eat, like, everything.”

Harry didn’t really drink, so he’s fine. Neville is curled in his bed in the fetal position. Seamus is doing okay, but Dean's about two seconds from keeling over. “What the fuck,” he says flatly. “Are you even human?”

“A hungry human!” Ron confirms, pulling on his school uniform. Harry can’t tell if he’s genuinely oblivious or if he’s just being an asshole. “If you don’t hurry up, I will abandon you for eggs, and bacon, and toast, and sausage. Don’t think I won’t.”

Dean looks like he’s going to throw up. Ron is definitely doing this just to be an asshole.

When they get to the great hall, Viktor is seated at their table with Hermione, and they’re sitting next to each other. Like, right next to each other. Had something happened last night when he hadn’t been looking? Probably.

Ron scowls. Harry elbows him, and his face smooths out. “Hey,” Harry greets, probably too loudly as he sits across from Viktor. Ron slides in next to him and starts loading up his plate, pointedly not looking at either of them. “Uh, so, last night was fun.”

Viktor has bags under his eyes, and he’s hunched over his cup of coffee like someone might try and take it from him. There’s nothing on his plate but a stack of toast that it doesn’t look like he’s touched. He watches, wide eyed, as Ron bites into his sausage with one hand and mixes bacon into his eggs with the other. “Ronald, you are very impressive. I really do not think I would have won if we had kept going.”

Ron freezes, and he looks up. There’s a moment when Harry worries that Ron will snap, or something worse, but then his shoulders relax and he smiles. “Thanks. We all have our skillsets. Drinking insane amounts of alcohol is mine.”

“You would get along well with my grandmother,” Viktor says seriously.
Ron laughs out loud at that, but is cut off as his brother sits next to him. “Hey George,” he greets, then stops, and turns to fully face his brother. “Fred, what are you doing?”

Harry blinks, and Hermione leans forward, intrigued.

“What are you talking about? I’m George,” he says, ruffling Ron’s hair.

“Telling you guys apart hard enough without you making it even more confusing,” he complains, messing up Fred’s hair in return. “Is there a reason you’re pretending to be George, or do you just like watching the world burn?”

Fred is clearly considering if he should continue lying, but he just sighs. Harry wouldn’t have noticed if he wasn’t looking for it, but his demeanor shifts the tiniest bit, becoming more controlled, tighter. He hadn’t even realized that he’d notices the twins held themselves differently until now. “He needs an alibi. Please don’t blow it. Since when can you tell us apart, anyway?”

“Since you guys developed personalities. It took you long enough,” he puts an obnoxiously large bite of eggs in his mouth. “Besides, you’re a shit alibi, everyone knows you switch places and would lie for each other. If you wanted to actually be effective, you should have had Lee take a Polyjuice potion, then the two of you should have made an appearance together. You suck at this.”

Fred glares, but he’s clearly pulled between disgusted at his brother’s eating habits and impressed at his idea.

Harry is constantly surprised at how many people know how good Ron is at chess, and still think that he’s just a pretty face. He just doesn’t normally care to do anything about it.

~

Blaise needs to head to the greenhouse early to check on his final project – some sort of weird hybrid plant that’s going to give him nightmares – but Draco sleeps right through breakfast. He has Winky bring him a croissant that he crams into his mouth on his walk to the transfiguration classroom.

They’re still working on animal transformations – this time a hummingbird into a water pitcher. Pansy does it on the first try, but he’s too distracted to do it properly, so his pitcher ends up being pure white, completely lacking any type of pattern, which is rather unlike him. Usually he and Pansy will compete to see who can make the more elaborate object. She pretty much always wins, since she’s just better at transfiguration than he is, but he can’t even focus enough to play that game with her today.

He pulls himself together a little during charms, but not by much. Harry managed to not get killed during the first task – barely – so Draco has an idea for their next step of the Potter Stinks campaign. He ends up staying behind to talk about his extra credit research paper with Flitwick, but heads over to their abandoned classroom right after.

They’re all exhausted, so if any of them were smart, or had some self preservation instincts to speak of, they would spend their free period taking a nap, not meeting up. He steps inside, and is instantly amused to see that at least some of them had had the right idea.

There’s a small mountain of chair cushions in the center of the room, and Hermione and Pansy are curled up on top of it, sound asleep. “Don’t they have beds?” he asks, not speaking quite loud enough to wake them.

Blaise snorts and Ron rolls his eyes. “When we got here, Pansy was already like this. Hermione just joined her.”
“Please tell me what your grand master plan is so I can go to bed,” Blaise pleads. “I’m so tired, Draco. I’ll die this way. My body will collapse and turn to dust.”

“Unlikely,” he says dismissively, “I think it’s time to take a page out of Skeeter’s book.”

“Extortion?” Ron asks.

“Lying?” Harry adds.

“Poor fashion sense?” Pansy chimes in, now apparently awake. Hermione has half rolled on top of her and buried her face in Pansy’s shoulder, so Pansy’s not making any sudden movements in an attempt not to wake her up.

He hates them all. “No. We’re going to write an article. Well, I’m going to make Luna write an article, technically.”

The Gryffindors look disappointed. Ron says, “That’s it?”

“Fighting a house fire with explosions just makes you look like an asshole who’s too sensitive to handle criticism,” he says. “Fighting fire with fire and winning is much more impressive, so that’s what we’re going to do.”

Blaise yawns, then adds, “It’s more important for us to make Skeeter look like a hack than it is to destroy her. Are you sure you want Luna to write it, though? She’s hardly a credible source.”

“She’s been editing her dad’s stuff since she was nine. None of us are going to be better at this than she is. But,” he concedes, “we can’t have her publish it under her own name. No one will take it seriously, and Xeno will murder her. Or, I don’t know, he’ll look vaguely upset while having a conversation with the kettle, which amounts to about the same thing to Luna.”

“Will we really be able to keep her identity a secret?” Harry asks. So far the only reliable way any of them have found to keep a secret is only telling it to the people in this room, and if they’re going to get Luna to write and publish an article, that’s going to take a bit more than the six of them.

Pansy shrugs. “Probably not, but that’s even better for us. Say Skeeter makes a big deal out of finding out the identity of the journalist – and then it turns out it’s a thirteen year old girl. Brilliant. Her dad will still be pissed though, which is less brilliant.”

Draco turns to Harry, “We need to get Cedric on board, obviously. Can you do that? You know him the best out of all of us.” Cho had offered to help Draco with the disillusionment charm, and he liked her well enough, but he wasn’t nearly close enough to her to ask for a favor.

“Sure,” Harry says, and he’s got bags under his eyes. He’s not acting as tired as the rest of them, but Draco knows that Harry often has trouble sleeping, and he thinks this is the first time he’s actually seen him look sleep deprived, which is hardly a good sign. “I still have to get my broom back from him anyway.”

He resists the urge to do something ridiculous, like cup Harry’s face and press his thumbs against the dark purple bruises beneath his eyes. He’s still supposed to be mad at him, anyway. “Maybe get some sleep before you go do that? You look like crap.”

Harry cracks a grin. “You always say the nicest things to me.”

“You’re a fucking mess, pull yourself together,” Draco says, but he’s smiling. Harry’s eye crinkle at the corners, and he takes a step closer, almost without really thinking about it.
“I’m working on it,” he says, and his voice sounds – different, lower than usual, and now Draco’s turned his whole body towards him, and he’s not sure why really, just that he wants to be – closer.

Wait.

He’s supposed to be mad at Harry, damnit!

Draco huffs and turns away, crossing his arms and putting his nose in the air. “I’m going to go talk to Luna,” he declares, walking out the classroom even though he’d basically just gotten there.

His cheeks are flushed, and he can’t think of why, they’d just been talking for Merlin’s sake!

Being a teenager is a nightmare.

~

Harry asks Cedric to meet him by the great lake just after dawn to get his broom back, and if Cedric has anything to say about the incredibly strange time and location for such a simple thing, he keeps it to himself. Luna has already agreed to help, and Harry thinks it’s kind of adorable how much she looks up to Draco and how willing she is to go with all his strange ideas just because he’s the one asking. It’s pretty obvious to anyone that actually knows the two of them that Luna is basically the little sister that Draco never had.

He means to lead with asking Cedric if he’s willing to let Luna interview him, to get straight to the point.

But Cedric greets him, yawning a “Hey, Harry,” as he holds out the Firebolt, and Harry takes it with numb fingers.

Cedric always has his shirt buttoned up, and now that Harry is thinking about it he wears a high necked undershirt with his quidditch uniform, but he’d never thought there was a reason for it.

It’s early, and Cedric is tired, and his tie is clumsily and loosely tied, and the bag on his shoulder is pulling his shirt to the side. It’s not much, but it’s enough that Harry can see it, and knows instantly that it’s probably not something he was supposed to see.

“Your shirt,” he says quietly.

Cedric frowns, then raises a hand to his chest and sighs. He readjusts his shirt so his soulmark is hidden once more.

It’s not a black circle. It’s – some sort of lizard.

Cho doesn’t wear high neck shirts. He knows for a fact there’s no soulmark on her collarbone.

“I won’t tell anyone,” Harry promises instantly.

Cedric gives him a rueful grin and runs his hands through his hair. “I appreciate that, but it’s not a secret. I just don’t like to advertise it, it always raises too many questions that are a pain to answer.”

“Oh,” Harry says, and he’s literally burning with curiosity, but if Cedric doesn’t want to talk about it then he won’t ask.

Cedric smirks, like he knows exactly what he’s thinking. “It’s okay, I don’t mind if it’s you. I’ve met my soulmate, and it’s not Eun-hae. My soulmate is – nice. She’s an auror, and from an old family, and my dad was thrilled about the whole thing. But we’re not together, and we’re not planning to
ever be together.”

Harry blinks, opens his mouth, then closes it again. Luckily, Cedric looks more amused than insulted. “I don’t understand,” he says finally, “whoever she is, she’s your soulmate.”

That matters. Doesn’t it?

“Ah,” he looks away and rubs the back of his neck, and Harry wants to take it back, it’s none of his business, and Cedric’s a good guy. He shouldn’t pry. “I – look, I know I’m only a couple of years older than you, so this is going to sound preachy and pretentious, and like I’m kind of an ass. But can I tell you something? Something that I wished someone had told me?”

“Of course,” he says, confused. It’s still too early for anyone but Hagrid and the house elves to be up, so it’s just them, standing at the edge of the great lake at barely past dawn, the air still chilly and heavy in the air.

Cedric meets his gaze squarely and says, “Love isn’t something that just happens. You have to choose it, and you have to earn it. Even when it’s hard. Especially when it’s hard. I don’t know if you’re marked, but if you are, I want you to know that having a soulmate, even meeting that soulmate, isn’t a guarantee of love and happiness. I think, at best, a soulmate is a possibility. It’s a possible happy ending, and if you want to take a chance on that, to work for that, then you should. But I’ve already found my happy ending, and it’s with Eun-hae. I love her. I choose her every day, and every day I work really hard so that she keeps choosing me back. That’s what love is. Not some marks on our skin, but hard work.”

It seems like the opposite of everything’s Harry been told, of everything he’s been banking his future on. But – it’s not, really. What he feels for Draco, what he hopes he and Draco will one day become, it didn’t just happen. Draco changed, and he changed, and they tried really hard to change together. Harry doesn’t think he could fall in love with the Draco he met in first year, with the man that Draco looked like he would become. But this Draco? The one who tries so, so hard all the time for his friends, for Harry, who’s consistently met Harry halfway even when he didn’t want to, when he didn’t agree or understand?

Of course. His relationship with Draco seems easy now, but only because they both put in so much work to become the type of people who could be friends with each other. If neither of them had changed, then Harry wouldn’t be interested in Draco at all, no matter the iris on his hip.

Cedric puts his hand on his shoulder, frowning. “Harry? Are you okay?”

There’s something knowing in his gaze, but he’s not going to ask, which is good because Harry doesn’t know what he’d tell him. “Yeah, sorry. Can I ask, is Cho okay with … everything?”

“I’d met my soulmate before we started dating, so she’s known all along. I was twelve at the time, and my soulmate was sixteen, so obviously nothing was going to happen. But she had a boyfriend, and then I had Eun-hae, and then she graduated, and now she’s trying to get this uptight guy who just started at her work to go out with her. We’re good friends, she’s great, I just don’t want to date her. And she doesn’t want to date me.” Cedric smiles and ruffles Harry’s hair. “A soulmate isn’t a life sentence. It’s just – an opportunity. One you can take, or not. It’s up to you.”

“You don’t think it’s destiny?” he asks, even though he already knows the answer.

Cedric rolls his eyes, “I’m a Hufflepuff, I don’t believe in destiny. I believe in creating the future you want to have, and the future I want is with Eun-hae. I think Cedric Chang has a nice ring to it.”
“Me too,” Harry says, grinning. “By the way, the reason I asked you to meet me here at daybreak was so I could ask – are you willing to sit down for an interview for an article to be ghost written by Luna Lovegood?”

That is so clearly the last thing Cedric was expecting to hear, and Harry has to bite his lip to keep from laughing. “Oh, uh, sure. Lovegood? Really?”

“She’s going to be a great journalist one day, apparently,” he says. “It’ll be fun.”

Cedric looks unconvinced, but he’s too nice to say anything, and also too nice to go back on his word to do the interview now that he’s agreed to it. So, an all around successful morning, as far as Harry’s concerned.

~

Draco wants to find Rita Skeeter, skin her alive, and roast her over an open fire. The article splashed across the front page of the Daily Prophet is all about Harry’s Parseltongue abilities, and how it’s clearly a mark of his dark influences. The overall article is disgustingly complimentary, and boils down to how the Parseltongue is a clear sign that Harry’s influenced by evil, but is fighting valiantly against his dark side for the good of the wizard world.

Somehow, it’s so much more insulting than if she’d just called him an evil, dark wizard and called it a day.

Pansy’s arm settles across his shoulders, and she leans over to whisper in his ear, “Breathe, darling, before you catch some unwanted attention.”

He forces himself to listen to her, forces himself to relax. He has a lazy smile on his face when he turns his head to press a brief kiss to Pansy’s cheek, “Thanks.”

“Mr. Malfoy,” his head of house says, suddenly towering right above them, and if it wasn’t for years of practice at being snuck up on by Snape, Draco would be in the middle of a heart attack. The man must have sort of sneaking spell cast on him, it’s the only explanation. “If you can pull yourself away from Ms. Parkinson, your presence is required in the kitchens.”

“Why?” he asks, but he’s already getting to his feet and brushing non-existent dust from his robe. He was here so early in the first place because he wanted to know if Cedric agreed to the article, but Pansy would tell him.

Snape turns on his heal and walks away, which is about what he expected. It’s a pain to keep up with Snape without looking like he’s trying to keep up with him, which Draco is pretty sure he’s doing on purpose. What a dick.

They step into the kitchens, and Draco is pretty sure he’s not supposed to know the entrance, so he has no idea why he’s being brought here. He knows about it already, of course, but he’s not supposed to.

He hears the yelling first, and it’s so surprising he stops in his tracks. It’s – it’s not people, but house elves. Why would house elves be yelling? Did someone burn dinner?

Then there’s a scream, and he recognizes it, it’s Winky’s. He runs forward, pushing Snape out of his way and bursting through. It’s one of the strangest sights he’s ever seen. What looks to be all the castle’s elves are clustered around, yelling, and in the middle is Dumbledore standing there looking serene as ever, McGonagall holding back Dobby of all elves, and Filch, holding Winky back by her ears.
“Get your hands off of her!” he shouts, stalking forward.

“Mr. Malfoy,” McGonagall begins, but he ignores her.

He grabs Filch’s wrist, digging the nail of his thumb in between the tendons until he yelps and lets go. Winky, sobbing, runs behind him and buries her face into his robes. “You little brat,” Filch growls, towering over him with a snarl.

Draco refuses to be intimidated by a squib who doesn’t know how to use a toothbrush. “Don’t ever touch my elf without my permission again. I won’t be so considerate next time.”

Filch narrows his eyes, but before anything can go any farther, Dumbledore says, “Now, why don’t we all calm down? I really do think we should contact Mr. Malfoy’s father before we go any further—”

Draco cuts him off, “Winky is my elf, so she’s my responsibility. It’s my magic she’s tied to, not my father’s. What’s the meaning of all this?”

“She started a physical altercation with a Hogwarts elf,” McGonagall says, and Draco doesn’t like the way she’s looking at him at all. It’s a little too contemplative and not judgmental enough. “This one, in fact.” Her hand is still fisted in the back of Dobby’s ridiculous t-shirt.

He blinks. That really wasn’t what he was expecting. “Why would she do that?”

Winky steps forward, still clinging to his robes. Her tear-filled eyes are narrowed in anger. “He is saying horrible things about Master Draco! About my master! It is not okay!”

“Dobby is only saying true things!” his family’s former house elf insists. “Dobby knows the truth! Malfoys are awful, sneaking, lying, and rotten! Bad! Winky’s master is bad!” Now that Draco’s looking, he can see the beginning of a bruise forming around Dobby’s eye.

Merlin above. Winky punched him in the face.

“You take that back!” Winky wails, “Master Draco is good! He saved me! He is not bad, he is good!”

“Enough,” he says, and her mouth clicks shut. He pinches the bridge of his nose. “Winky, tell me the truth. Did you start a fight with this castle elf?”

“He is saying mean things!” she says.

He looks down at her, frowning, and she hunches her shoulders. “That’s not what I asked.”

“I is the one that started the fight,” she whispers, hanging her head.

“I see,” he says. What a mess. “You are never to do that again, do you understand? It’s an order. You may end a fight. You may not start one. I don’t care what they say about me – my reputation is my concern. Not yours.”

She sniffs, and lets go of his robes to clasp her hands behind her back. “Yes, Master Draco. I is sorry, Master Draco.”

He looks back over to Dumbledore. “It is, however, quite impolite for an elf to speak ill of another elf’s master. I am intimately acquainted with Dobby’s behavioral issues, but perhaps that is something that could be addressed going forward?”
The rest of the elves around them went silent when he arrived, and it’s disconcerting, those dozens upon dozens of eyes watching this whole thing silently.

Dobby shakes his head, “Malfoys is bad! You is bad, and you is hurting Winky!”

Draco ignores that, instead choosing to look down at Winky. Her little hands are curled into fists, and she looks angry enough that she could almost set Dobby on fire with fury in her eyes alone. But she stays silent, and still. Good.

“That’s enough,” McGonagall says, shaking Dobby by the back of his shirt. “Thank you, Mr. Malfoy, we will take that under advisement. I believe we’re done here.”

“Allbus,” McGonagall says, appalled. “Surely that’s not necessary? She was provoked, and Mr. Malfoy has ensured she won’t do it again.”

“We don’t tolerate violence at Hogwarts,” he says, “she broke the rules, and harmed someone, and must be punished for it.”

What an asshole. This isn’t a punishment for Winky. It’s a lesson for Draco.

“Hands on the oven should do it,” Filch says gleefully.

“I think a few restricted meals will be just fine,” McGonagall says, but she looks uncomfortable. “I’m sure Mr. Malfoy could use the break on his magic.”

Either burned hands or getting partially cut off from his magic, the only way Winky has to survive. Maybe Hermione has a point. Even if they can’t get rid of the house elf system, there has to be something better than – this. Winky shouldn’t be punished for her loyalty.

Dobby’s eyes are wide and regretful, so that’s something, and Winky simply looks resigned. This isn’t fair, and beyond that he doesn’t like it. He doesn’t give a crap that Dumbledore is the headmaster, about his long list of accolades and titles, about any of it. If he thinks he can manipulate and push Draco around, he’s got another thing coming.

He’s a Malfoy. He’s not going to take this shitty attempt at a moral lesson from Dumbledore, of all people.

“Hands on the oven, you said?” Draco asks, mind made up. “Ten seconds is the standard in my house. I assume that will suffice?”

“That’s acceptable, Mr. Malfoy. I truly am sorry about this,” Dumbledore says. He doesn’t sound sorry.

Winky goes to move forward, but he places a hand on her shoulder. “Winky is not a castle elf. She’s mine, and therefore her actions are my responsibility. You understand, of course.”

Draco walks forward, head held high as he rolls the sleeves of his robe up in precise movements. The elves part for him, and Draco merely touches the wand in his pocket to cast a levitation charm to lift a bubbling pan of something off the stove.
“Mr. Malfoy, stop this instant!” McGonagall demands. She sounds panicked. Good.

The burner is red hot and encased in a small ring of flames. He slaps his hands against the stove top, and the sizzling of his flesh is instant. He bites his tongue to keep from crying out, and his mouth fills with blood that he has to swallow down. The flames lick up and over his hands, burning more than just the parts that are pressed to it’s surface. It’s excruciating, and keeping his hands against the burner is the hardest thing he’s ever done, watching his skin bubble and burn from the heat.

“It’s been ten seconds,” Snape says quietly.

He lifts his hands up off the stove top, taking a deep breath before carefully lowering the pot back on top of the burner. It hurts so badly he wants to collapse right there, a sensation like he hands are being pierced through with needles, over and over with each throb of pain. He turns around, and everyone’s staring at him, the house elves looking at him with eyes as large as dinner plates. McGonagall has her hand pressed to her mouth, and Filch is disgusted. Snape and Dumbledore’s faces are completely blank.

“Are we done here?” he asks, and hopes there’s no blood on his teeth.

“Yes,” Dumbledore answers, not even a hint to what he’s thinking, “I believe we are.”

“You need to go to the hospital wing!” McGonagall insists, “Come, I’ll escort you.”

He sneers, and it’s difficult to look condescending when he’s in this much pain. “That’s unnecessary, Professor. If you’ll excuse me.”

He turns on his heel and walks away, the elves parting for him once more. He hears McGonagall call after him, but he just picks up his pace.

If he goes to the hospital wing, his parents will be alerted. That’s pretty much the last thing in the world he wants, so he’s going to have to figure something else out.

~

Harry goes to the great hall after his chat with Cedric, and is a little bit disappointed that it’s still mostly empty. Pansy is sitting at the Slytherin table without Blaise or Draco, which Harry’s kind of surprised by. He figured Draco would want to know what Cedric said, and half expected him to be awake and waiting for him.

He heads over to the Gryffindor table, where Angelina has commandeered a large section with what looks like training plans spread out all across it. She’s just as crazy as Wood half the time, and he’d missed the last practice because he was studying for the first task. She’d understood, obviously, but she hadn’t been happy about it. Going over the training schedule with her seems like a good way to make it up to her.

Except he’s halfway to the table when two girls step into his way, and he nearly walks into them. “Padma, Parvati,” he greets, taking a step back so he’s not standing literally right in front of them, “Uh, can I help you?” He doesn’t know them nearly as well as he does Fred and George, so he’s glad they’re in different houses, otherwise he’d never be able to tell them apart.

They share a glance, and Padma says, “Our grandmother was a Parselmouth.”

That hadn’t been what he was expecting. “Oh! Uh, cool. Are either of you?”

“No, and if we were, we wouldn’t tell anyone. Just like my grandmother kept it a secret her whole
life, like her father did, and like her great grandmother did. We have a history of it in our family, although no one currently has the ability.”

This feels like a conversation that he’s not qualified to have. “Uh. Sorry?”

Parvati doesn’t respond to that and continues, “It’s regarded a dark ability. Ever since Salazar Slytherin, ever since You-Know-Who, it hasn’t been something that people can just do. It’s had a stigma attached to it.”

“Everyone seems okay so far?” he says. “A couple articles aren’t so bad. I’ve had worse for less. Besides, screw them. We had it first, right? It belongs to us.” Besides, and he’s not going to say this, Slytherin and Voldemort are just two people. Apparently, there are more good Parselmouths in the Patil family alone than the ones that ruined it for everyone else.

“It will get worse,” Padma says ominously. She’s been spending too much time around Trelawney. “But that’s not our point. You’re Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived. You can get away with doing what the rest of us can’t. So, what we’re trying to say is – thank you. For not hiding, for telling everyone what you are and what you can do. Maybe one of our kids will have the ability, and maybe they won’t have to hide it. Maybe people will start associating Parselmouths with you instead of dark lords.”

Parvati adds quietly, “It was a sign of being blessed by the heavens, before. It meant you were god-touched. Our family used to take great pride in how many Parselmouths we had. So – thank you.”

Yep, this is absolutely a conversation he isn’t prepared to have. He feels like he’s navigating a minefield. “Er, sure. Anytime.”

They seem exasperated by him, which he’s used to, but they don’t roll their eyes, which is new. “See ya, Harry,” they say in unison, their somber air peeling away from them like the first layer of an onion. They walk out of the great hall, dark heads bent together.

As literally the only other Indian students, he could probably ask them for help, or at least book recommendations. But also the Patil twins intimidate him, and the only thing he truly feels comfortable going to them for is fashion advice, and he has Pansy for that. Anything else would be too humiliating.

Maybe he should just as Draco for help. He’ll know where the history books are, at least, and will probably only make fun of him a little bit.

~

Draco walks down to the Slytherin common room, cursing the fact that he only knows one person who’s any good at healing charms. He’s not half bad at them, and could probably heal the burns himself if he could hold his wand. Healing spells are tricky at the best of times, and there’s a big difference between casting a first year levitation spell without the correct wand movements, and doing the same with something meant to knit his flesh back together.

“Draco! What happened?” He’s cursing, but he looks up, and it’s just his cousin, no demonic red haired hip attachment in sight. Luna’s eyes are wide, and she reaches out so her hands are hovering over his, clearly wanting to help but knowing better than to try and touch.

“Don’t worry about it,” he says, slipping into Japanese because if Luna’s skills with her mother’s language get rusty, his mum will somehow make this his fault. If Xeno would speak to her in literally anything but English or Latin, they wouldn’t have this problem. “What are you doing down here
anyway?”

Her eyes narrow, “Your hands are a burned, bleeding mess.”

“I’m well aware of that, thank you. Why are you down here? What do you want?”

She bites her lip, then reaches into her bag and pulls out a roll of parchment. It takes him all of two seconds to recognize it as the charms essay on the effect states of matter had on banishment that Flitwick had assigned all the third years. “I’m pretty sure getting my help counts as cheating.”

“You’re not officially Professor Flitwick’s aid, so it’s not officially cheating,” she says. She’s definitely spending too much time around Ginny. He wishes he could think of a way to dissuade that.

“Stick it in my bag for me, I’ll take a look at it tonight and get it back to you tomorrow,” he says, giving in. She’s going to write the article about Cedric for them, he can help her with her essay. He’s a harsher grader than Flitwick is, anyway.

Luna does as he says, neatly tucking it along the seam. “Are you really not going to tell me what happened?”

“Scram,” he says, switching back to English. “Everything’s fine. I’m fine. Don’t be late to class.”

She gives him an unimpressed stare that she had to have learned from Ginny, then walks away. He really doesn’t like the influence that girl is having on his cousin.

When he finally makes it to the Slytherin common room, it’s pretty much deserted. Even Millie has left already, and he’s going to be late for Potions. At least Snape will know why. He can think of only one useful person who might still be here.

He walks to the sixth year rooms, going to the one at the end and kicking the door because he can’t knock. It takes about forty five seconds of continuous kicking before the door opens and Cassius snarls, “WHAT?” His hair is stickup up every which way and he’s got deep purple bruises beneath his eyes. He’s also keeping his door mostly closed, clearly trying to hide whatever’s behind it, and Draco doesn’t have the words to describe how much he doesn’t care about whatever secret Cassius is trying to hide. He holds up his hands, and all the anger drains out of Cassius. “Shit. What happened to you? Why aren’t you in the hospital wing?”

“How are your healing charms?” he asks, ignoring both those questions.

Cassius is wary, which is not a good sign. “Fine. Not good enough to fix your hands.”

“It doesn’t have to be. Just heal them enough that I can hold my bloody wand, and I’ll do the rest myself.” He holds out his right hand, “Here, you don’t even have to cast on both of them, just my dominate hand will do.”

“Draco. Go to the hospital wing,” Cassius says, “This is stupid.”

“If you don’t help me, I’ll find someone who will,” he says, “and when someone who’s not as good as you fucks it up, you’ll have to find another chaser for the quidditch team. One who has hands. Or I’ll try and cast with broken hands, mess something up, and get my hands cut off for my trouble. Or you can stop whining for two seconds and do a level one healing charm.”

They stare at each other for a long moment, then Cassius sighs and says, “You’re kind of a dick, you know that?”
“I’ve been called worse by people I like better than you,” Draco says, “Now, if you could please make yourself useful?”

He sighs, but pulls out his wand and points it at Draco’s right hand. He takes a deep breath, steadying himself, then says slowly and carefully, “Episkey.”

It’s weak, but it works, and the wounds heal just enough that Draco thinks he get enough motor control from his hands to actually perform some spells. It seems to dull the pain more than actually heal anything, but he’s not surprised. Episkey is largely guided by the castor’s will, and it’s obvious Cassius is too worried about messing up the spell to actually do anything truly helpful. “Thanks,” he says, instead of pointing any of that out.

He pulls his wand from his robe, and points at his left hand. He makes sure the wand movements are precise, but doesn’t bother to do them slowly. “Tergeo,” he casts, vanishing the dead tissue that had been burned away. Cassius makes a retching sound, and it’s humorous enough that Draco can mostly ignore the pain. “Episkey,” he says, but he’s not afraid, he doesn’t hesitate. He knows what he’s doing. The wounds don’t disappear, but they do look to be about a week old, and thanks to the magic they won’t scar. It’s not perfect, any actual healing student would laugh in his face, but it will do. He switches hands, being more careful to cast correctly with his left hand, and repeats the process.

His hands aren’t completely healed, but they’re no longer burned and bleeding, and he can use his wand correctly. It’s good enough. He’s tempted to cast it again, but layering healing spells in too short a time frame is tricky, and it’s better if he just waits and heals a little bit more each day instead of risking a magical backlash.

“You know,” Cassius says, “you’re kind of scary.”

Draco blinks, not understanding. “You’re scary. Brush your hair,” he says, then walks away. If he runs, he’ll probably only be a little late to class.

~

Harry notices Draco’s hands during potions, notices how pretty much every Slytherin in the room demands an explanation, but Draco pretends like nothing is wrong. Snape had almost looked … impressed when Draco had shown up to class, which meant nothing good.

Of course, he doesn’t get a chance to question him until that night, when they all meet up in their classroom.

“Finally!” Blaise says as soon as he steps inside, “He won’t tell us anything, maybe he’ll tell you!”

“There’s nothing to tell,” Draco says stubbornly. “You’re all making a big deal out of nothing. Shouldn’t we be focusing on figuring out what Harry’s screaming egg means?”

Ron’s got longer legs, so he reaches Draco first. He grabs his wrists and holds them up, so they can all see the red, half-healed wounds on his hands. “What happened? How did this happen? They look old, but you didn’t have them this morning according to Pansy. Did Snape do this?”

Draco ineffectually tries to pull away, then gives up. “Not everything is Snape’s fault, you know. I’m not perfect at healing charms, this is as good as I could do.”

“You performed a healing charm on yourself? That’s dangerous! Healing magic is very volatile, who knows what could have happened!” Hermione exclaims.
“Oh, my mistake, I should have gone to – who, exactly, to heal me? If I went to the hospital wing or Flitwick, they’d notify my parents, which isn’t happening. We’re still fighting.”

“How did you get hurt in the first place?” Harry asks. “It can’t have been just an accident. If it was, you wouldn’t be wasting time trying to lie to us.”

He crosses his arms. “I’m not lying!”

“You’re not telling us the truth, either,” Blaise says, scowling.

Harry walks forward, until he’s close, probably too close. Draco swallows. He holds out his hands and says, “I tell you everything. Always. What are you trying to keep from me?”

His soulmate says nothing, starring at him for a long moment in silence. Then he sighs, and places his hands in Harry’s. “It’s really not that big of a deal. I just didn’t want you guys to over react.”

Harry rubs his thumb over the back of Draco’s hands, careful not to hurt him. The red welts look especially grotesque against Draco’s pale skin. He keeps holding his hands as Draco tells him what happened, about what he did. About what Dumbledore forced him to do.

When he finishes, they’re all quiet. Draco has his head tilted back, not looking at any of them, an embarrassed blush high on his cheeks. “Why did you do it?” Blaise asks, a calculating look in his eye. “She’s just a house elf.”

Hermione scowls, but Ron elbows her in the side before she can say anything.

Draco shrugs, “If my options are bending to Dumbledore’s will or burning my hands, well.” Some of his nonchalance peels away, and he adds on, quieter, “Winky didn’t deserve to be punished. She’s a loyal elf. A good elf. If we punish loyal, good elves, then – then the line between what we’re doing now and what it would be unacceptable for us to do gets that much thinner.”

“Oh,” Hermione says, so softly that she probably didn’t mean to say anything at all. Now she has the same look on her face that Blaise does.

Draco coughs and takes his hands back, crossing his arms. Harry’s hands feel oddly cold now that they’re not holding Draco’s. “Anyway, whatever, it’s fine. I’ll keep healing them, and in a few days they’ll be back to normal and it will be like nothing happened. Okay? We have actual problems to worry about.”

“Like what?” Pansy asks, forcing a smile that almost looks natural.

“Like the fact that we need to get Luna’s article published in the Prophet, otherwise there’s no point, and I have no idea how to do that. All the connections I have to the Prophet are my mother’s, and normally I’d have no problem cashing in a favor in her name, but–”

“You’re fighting,” Ron finishes.

Pansy turns to Blaise, “Isn’t your mum dating someone at the Prophet?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he says dryly, “my mother would never stoop so low as to get involved with someone in that income bracket. They’re just sleeping together.”

“Gotta make a living,” Pansy says, and Harry snorts. “Well, I have a crazy great aunt that’s a big contributor, but getting her to agree is going to be a pain.”
“Longbottom might know someone,” Blaise says, “His family is big enough that they’ve got their hands in about everything. Or the Browns. I could ask Lavender.”

“I could ask Susan,” Draco suggests, and Harry raises both his eyebrows. Is he talking about the red headed girl in Hufflepuff?

The Slytherins start throwing around family names, and mentioning specific people that Harry’s never heard before. He looks over at Ron, who rolls his eyes. “Upper class nonsense,” he whispers so only Harry and Hermione can hear them, “We could just send it in anonymously, and they’d probably publish it. It’s such an obvious snub to you that the Prophet won’t be able to resist. They thrive on this crap, and they’d love for you and Cedric and to have a rivalry.”

“Are you going to tell them that?” Hermione asks.

He shakes his head, “Nope. It is better if we can get it published officially, and they enjoy this time of stuff.” He pulls a deck of cards out of his pocket. “Exploding snap?”

She laughs and the three of them play a game while the Slytherins argue amongst themselves. Tomorrow Harry’s going to have to get up early to head to Hogsmeade, but it’s worth the lack of sleep to just be able to hang out with everyone.

He can’t keep from stealing glances at Draco’s hands, and he has to push down a spike of anger each time.

~

It’s nearly dawn by the time Draco, Blaise, and Pansy stumble back to their common room. They all freeze in the doorway.

“Uh,” Blaise says, “did we miss something?”

The common room is always clean, of course, but now – it’s nearly sparkling. The curtains, formally basic green velvet, have been embroidered with a silver snake pattern, and the black leather couches look good as new, no scratches or parts that have been obviously patched with magic. The walls are – grey? He’d always thought they the stone was black, but apparently that was just a few hundred years of smoke and dirt. The tables and chairs have been polished, and the chair cushions have been replaced. Tapestries Draco has never seen before are now hung up along the wall, as well as several new portraits who’s inhabitants look just as intrigued to be there as they are to see them.

“Winky,” Draco says, and she appears with crack, head bent. She’s in a grey silk dress with a complicated collar and high waist. Her sewing skills are improving. “Did you do this?”

“Mip helped,” she says, twisting her hands together.

“Why?” he asks, baffled.

She hunches down. “I – I is wanting to say sorry to Master Draco, for – for – because of – because.”

“It’s very impressive,” he says honestly, and can’t help himself from feeling touched she went to the effort. “But it was unnecessary. You are my elf, and therefore my responsibility.”

Winky finally looks up at him, glaring, and says fiercely, “Master Draco is my master, and therefore he is my responsibility!”

She vanishes with a crack. Draco blinks. He hadn’t expected that, and has no idea how to react to it.
Blaise yawns and says, “I can’t believe I just heard an elf say therefore.”

“Let’s go to bed,” Draco declares, “before today gets any weirder.”

Pansy kisses them both on the cheek before stumbling to her room, and Draco and Blaise head in the other direction. He’s asleep before his head hits the pillow.

~

Harry is, once more, up before dawn. He’d gone to bed earlier than the others, but not by much, and tomorrow he’s planning to sleep the whole day away. Why do they keep doing this? What do the six of them have against a decent night’s sleep?

If this were for anyone else but Sirius and Remus, he would absolutely still be asleep. As it is, he pulls himself out of bed, gets dressed in the dark to avoid waking anyone, and walks over to Hogsmeade. It’s a visiting weekend, so he doesn’t have to use the secret passageways, but it’s so early that he’s the only one there.

Which raises a question he hadn’t thought to ask until just now – how are they meeting? The Three Broomsticks is open for breakfast, but not for a couple more hours. He stands in front of the door, confused and it’s a little eerie to be in the village this early. There are a couple people awake and walking around, but not many, and it’s strange to see the normally bustling and crowded village so empty.

He’s still trying to figure out if he’s supposed to knock or something when he hears a soft bark. He looks over, and sure enough there’s a giant black dog peaking around the side of the building. “Padfoot!”

The dog’s tail starts wagging, and then he disappears around the corner. Harry hurries to follow him, and is led to a back entrance of the pub. Padfoot scratches at the door and let out another soft bark. The door opens, and he slips inside, Harry following him in. It looks like a room used for banquets or parties, and he only has a moment to look around before his eyes land on his former professor. “Remus!” he says, beaming. “You look great.”

He really does. He’s wearing new robes, and he doesn’t look tired for once. He’s standing taller, prouder, there’s something about him that can’t be attributed to new clothes and a few good nights’ rest. It’s like he’s finally comfortable in his own skin.

“See? He said the new robes made him look stuffy. I said they made him look dashing,” a gravelly voice says, and Harry spins around. Sirius is back in human form, and he looks better too. He still seems a little too thin, a little too pale, but his eyes are bright, and the smile around his mouth seems genuine.

Harry throws himself at his godfather, wrapping his arms around his waist and burying his face in his chest. He then freezes, wondering if maybe he shouldn’t have done that. They’ve been trading letters for months, but this is only the second time they’ve met in person. Maybe that was strange, and he shouldn’t be this happy to see him.

He doesn’t have much time to second guess himself before Sirius has him in a crushing grip, one hand across his back and the other cradling the back of his head. It’s weird, he’s been hugged before, by his friends and even some adults, but when Sirius hugs him it feels – parental, almost, although he really wouldn’t know from personal experience. But he thinks he’s right.

“We were so worried!” Sirius whispers, holding him impossibly tighter for a moment. “Dragons,
how could they send you to face dragons? But you did brilliantly, you were amazing – you rode a
dragon! And you can speak Parseltongue–”

“Right,” Harry says, trying to swallow down his fear.

Sirius pulls back, but keeps his hands on Harry’s shoulders. His face smooths into seriousness, and
he says, “Your dad would be so proud of you, Harry. Even more proud of you than I am.”

“Yeah?” he asks, lighting up.

Remus comes over, placing one hand on Sirius’s back and ruffling Harry’s hair with the other.
“Yeah. Your great aunt was a Parselmouth, and he’d always admired her. He’d be so happy to know
you inherited her ability.” He smiles, something admiring and proud in his gaze that makes Harry
stand a little straighter. “He’d be even prouder of you for telling everyone, for not hiding who you
are. Your great aunt never told anyone outside of the family what she could do, because of what
people would say.”

He wants to just take the compliment, but he thinks back to what the Patil sisters said, and they have
a point. “It’s easier for me. I can get away with it, in ways they couldn’t. I know the press will get
bored of being nice to me at some point, they always do, but even when that happens – I don’t think
I’ll get the same kind of suspicion and ridicule someone who’s not me would be under.”

Remus blinks in surprise, then his smile widens. “It’s never easy to go against people’s prejudices to
say who and what you are, no matter the dubious privilege of your fame. You’re doing a good thing,
Harry.”

He ducks his head, flushing, and changes the subject. “Did you guys just break in here? We could
have met somewhere else. Draco had Winky clean the Shrieking Shack, it’s actually pretty nice there
now. Well, relatively.”

“We rented the room from Rosmerta,” Remus says.

“I love that woman,” Sirius says, “She’s so willing to sell her morals away, I really admire that in a
person.”

He sounds completely serious. Harry knows that a good portion of the underage drinking that goes
on is due to Madame Rosmerta and her loose rules in regards to selling alcohol. The more money
she’s offered, the less questions she asks. Clearly that’s her policy across the board. Well. She’s got
to make a living, as Pansy would say.

“Come on,” he steers Harry into a chair then pulls one out to sit across from him. He kicks one out
for Remus as well. “We read the papers, of course, but tell us everything. How did you know there
would even by a wyvern in the forest to hear you?”

“Oh, Draco summoned him,” he says, “It’s the same one he summoned when we were in second
year to fight the basilisk.”

Sirius’s mouth drops open, “The what?”

“Oh Merlin above,” Remus says, “Minerva wasn’t lying? That really happened?”

Harry stares. “Why would she make that up?”

“Where and why did you face a basilisk?” Sirius demands. “Those are dangerous! And at twelve
years old?”
Okay, wow, this is going to take some time to go get through. Harry tries to quickly go through the events of his second year, but it ends up taking way longer because they both keep stopping him to ask for clarification. Yes, Hermione really did brew a Polyjuice potion in the girls’ bathroom. No, Ginny is not the actual heir of Slytherin. Yes, Draco managed to summon a wild wyvern and a giant ashwinder. No, Harry did not stab himself with the fang when he punctured the diary. Yes, tricking the Malfoys into freeing their elf was as fantastic as it sounds. By the time he gets to actually describing the first task, it’s nearly been two hours, and then that takes a half hour more.

He’s describing the judge’s faces, and Remus is biting lips to keep from laughing, while Sirius doesn’t even bother. He’s laughing so hard he’s clutching his stomach, half bent over the chair. It’s really good to see him laughing, it makes him look like how he looked in his parent’s wedding photo.

His laughter is winding down when Harry asks, “Hey, can I uh, ask you a weird question? Or like, a couple of them?”

“Of course,” Sirius says, wiping at his eyes. “Weird questions are what we’re here for.”

“Is my name Harry? Like – just Harry? It’s not Harold?”

The humor drains from both their faces, and he regrets asking. He likes it better when they’re smiling.

Remus says quietly, “It’s not Harold. Your name is Harry on your birth certificate.”

“James was always conflicted about having a British name,” Sirius says, lips quirked up at the corners in a poor imitation of his smile from just a minute ago. “Some days he liked it, others it annoyed him how he was one of the few people in the family that didn’t have a traditional name. So Lily came up with Harry. It was supposed to be – well, they didn’t want to have to choose. They didn’t want you to have to choose. So Harry, a good British name. And Hari, a good Indian name. It’s spelled the British way on your birth certificate, but – you were always meant to have both.” He slumps, and his sad excuse for a smile drops from his face. “I’m sorry you didn’t grow up with both.”

“Hey,” he really didn’t want to make them sad, “it’s okay.” He wishes he’d grown up differently, he wishes he’d grown up with parents who loved him, with someone who loved him, grown up not being the darkest person in whatever room he happened to be in. But he can’t change that, there’s no time turner powerful enough for that. “You can tell me what I’ve missed. Did my dad speak another language? He did, right? It’s a wizard thing, and he was a wizard.”

Some of the darkness leaves Sirius’s face. “Yes, of course. He spoke the most when we started Hogwarts, although Moony had outstripped him by the time we graduated. He spoke Latin and Greek, of course, but also Arabic, Hindi, Bengali, and Sanskrit. But his first language was Tamil.”

“Tamil?” he repeats. He’s never even heard of it before.

Remus speaks in a language he doesn’t recognize, words tumbling over each other too quickly for Harry to even being to tell them apart, but he likes the way it sounds, almost like a melody. It’s his father’s language. It was supposed to be his language too.

Harry can’t spend the rest of the day hidden away, people will talk, but he does he’s there with them until noon, listening to stories about parents from his father’s two best friends.
Time seems to move more quickly after that Hogsmeade weekend, and everything feels – calmer, easier. He still has the screaming egg to figure out, but things don’t seem quite so dire and rushed as they have for the past week. Classes return to normal, Krum is at the Gryffindor table every other day, plastered to Hermione’s side, Draco spends his spare time around the Beauxbatons students speaking in rapid-fire French, the quidditch teams practice together in a clearing Hagrid found for them, and Harry keeps writing Sirius and Remus.

He can’t get the sound of Tamil out his head. Sirius can speak it too, and he wishes he didn’t have to spend the summer with the Dursley’s. Maybe if he spent the summer with his godfather and Remus, they could start to teach him. He doesn’t know about Sirius, but he knows Remus is a brilliant teacher. But – it will have to wait. He’s always forced to spend the summer with the Dursleys.

He’s finally gotten back of the flow of the school year, which is why he’s completely unprepared when McGonagall reminds them all that the Yule Ball is coming up, and not so subtly remarks that the champions will be opening the ball with the first dance. This is a nightmare. At the very least, Ron looks like he agrees with him.

That night, Pansy sighs and pinches the bridge of her nose. “You forgot? How could forget? It’s a ball!”

“You need dancing lessons,” Draco says. It’s a statement, not a question, and Harry would be able to muster up some indignation if he weren’t completely correct. He’s going to have to dance in front of everyone, and he has no idea how to do that without looking like a disaster.

Ron is unimpressed. “We were busy. Who are you all going with, if you’re so prepared?”

“Viktor asked me weeks ago,” Hermione says, “I’m sorry, I should have known neither of you had asked anyone, but I forgot.” Ron almost says something to that, but restrains himself, for which Harry is grateful. That a discussion for another time, hopefully when none of them are there to witness it.

“I’m taking Luna,” Draco says, not looking at him. Harry shoves down his pang of regret. Draco might be his soulmate, but he’s not even an option. They could never go to something as public as a ball together, not while they’re pretending to hate each other. Harry doesn’t even know if Draco would want to go with him anyway. “If she doesn’t go with an older student, she can’t go at all.”

Blaise shrugs, “Lavender Brown asked me last week.”

“She’s a Gryffindor,” Ron points out.

“She’s hot,” Blaise answers, deadpan. “And a pureblood, and rich. Plus the Browns are technically still part of the Severan Dynasty, not that that matters anymore, but it will make my mother happy, at least.”

“Your mum wants you to date within the family? Scandalous,” Pansy teases.

Blaise rolls his eyes, “The Browns came to Britain about a thousand years before we did, I don’t think we have anything to worry about. I probably have more blood in common with you than them.”

“Wait,” Hermione says, eyebrows pushed together, “Are you … you don’t mean the Severan Dynasty, as in the decedents of Septimus Severus?”

“Is there another one?” Blaise asks. “I feel like I would have heard about that.”
“I always forget that you’re royalty,” Ron says.

Hermione looks stricken. Harry has no idea what any of them are talking about, as usual. “Uh, guys, an explanation? Please?”

“There’s being a pureblood,” Draco says, “then there’s Blaise. He can trace his ancestry back almost three thousand years, from Africa to Rome to Britain.”

“On my mother’s side,” Blaise points out, “who knows what’s on my father’s.”

“Oh, he’s surely a respectable pureblood, otherwise your mother wouldn’t have chosen him, whoever he is,” Pansy says.

Harry must still look confused, because Ron says, “Blaise is the direct descendant of Septimus Severus, the emperor of Rome for like fifty years.”

“One hundred forty five to two hundred eleven common era,” Hermione says. Harry doesn’t know how to describe the look on her face. He doesn’t think it’s a good look.

“Correct,” Blaise says, surprised. “He was also the head of magical sect of Rome, and while our reign as emperor of the muggles was short lived, comparatively, my family ruled for a bit longer among the witches and wizards.”

“About a thousand years longer,” Ron says dryly, and Harry’s mouth drops open. “Your family finally made it a democracy in, what? The thirteen hundreds?”

Blaise sniffs, “Twelve hundred thirty four common era.”

“And your family’s been in and out of positions of power ever since,” Ron says. “We should go with you to Italy sometime. I bet it would be interesting.”

Draco and Pansy crack up, and Blaise suddenly looks very put upon. “It’s a riot,” Pansy agrees.

“It’s not quite as bad as whenever Harry goes out in public, but it’s close,” Draco says.

“Regardless,” Blaise says, clearly trying to steer the conversation away from that topic, “the Browns are a branch of the family, however distant, and Mother will be happy that I’m playing nice. Besides, Lavender is more than attractive enough to make up for her house.”

Pansy must take pity on him, because she announces, “I’m going with Flint.”

Everyone goes deathly quiet. Harry clears his throat, “May I ask why?”

“No,” she answers.

“Oh,” he says, disappointed. “Okay.”

She grins, “Just kidding. I’m going with him because he’s got muscles on top of his muscles, and I’m going to climb him like a tree. As long as he doesn’t talk too much, I’m sure it will be a very enjoyable evening.”

“There are other cute boys, Pansy,” Draco says, pained.

Harry blinks. Why is he saying that? Is he looking at them?

As soon as the thought enters his mind, he wants to punch himself in the face. Can he chill out for
two seconds?

“No, Pansy’s right,” Hermione says, shaking off whatever had put her in a strange mood earlier. “Flint is a barbarian. But he’s a fit barbarian.”

“Can we please stop talking about this?” Ron asks. “I’m begging you. Anything else. Any other topic of conversation.”

“Did you see the cover of Witch’s Weekly?” Blaise offers. “Apparently, Harry has a harem. That consists of the entirety of the Gryffindor house. They quoted Finnigan, and of all the people to impersonate, I don’t understand why they chose him.”

“Oh, no, Seamus really did say that,” Harry says. “He and Dean went into a lot of detail, thankfully none of which was published. He told me he wanted to help get rid of all the articles about me having darkness or whatever just because I’m a Parselmouth. I don’t think this helped, really, but I appreciate the effort.”

Ron rubs a hand over his face, “Anything else? Can we just have a normal conversation, please?”

“No,” they all say at once. Ron glares at them all, but Harry honestly doesn’t know what he’d been expecting.

~

Draco is nearly finished with his ridiculous extra credit charms essay, but it means he’s been skipping their late night meet up sessions to work in the library. He ends up having to flip through almost every charms journal he’s checked out trying to track down the actual supported reason he’d chosen to do something, and not just write that he’d read it somewhere. He also ends up doing his equations himself, but he still has Hermione double check them. They’re all correct, which is nice, but he wishes he could be as accurate in all aspects or arithmancy, and not just the bits that correspond to spell building.

This means it’s well past the point when he should be in bed when he heads back to his room, and is actually creeping uncomfortably close to dawn. Why is he doing this? This essay doesn’t even count. He has a perfect score in charms, plus a good chunk of his free time is spent in Flitwick’s office helping him grade and plan out his lessons for the year. This essay is a pain, and useless.

Well, whatever, He’s nearly done with it anyway. It’d be even more pointless to go through all this effort to write it up, and then decide not to turn it in.

He’s so caught up in his thoughts that he bumps into someone as he steps into the Slytherin common room, sending them both sprawling to the ground. “What the hell?” he snaps, then catches sigh of bright red hair. It’s one of the Weasley twins, rubbing at his head and wearing pajamas that are a little too big on him. “What are you doing here? Who let you in?”

“Uh,” he says, pale and wide eyed.

It’s then that he finally notices the kiss marks all down his neck, and several pieces fall into place at once. “Merlin’s balls,” he says, “you’re sleeping with Cassius?” No wonder he’d been so concerned about Draco going into his room before.

George, it has to be George, slaps a hand over his mouth. “Please don’t say anything,” he whispers. “He’ll be really mad if anyone finds out.”

Draco realizes he’s the last person in the world that has any room to talk about keeping secrets, but
he likes George. He peels his hand away, “Are you sure it’s a great idea to be the dirty little secret of the guy you have a massive crush on? When did this start anyway? I thought Cassius kept telling you no.”

“The night of the party you threw. It – we didn’t – it was an accident,” he admits, “and it’s not just – he’s really nice, is the thing, he just doesn’t want anyone to know. He told me that from the beginning. So, it’s fine. It’s all fine. Please don’t say anything.”

“Do you want people to know?” Draco asks, and this look of pure longing flashes across George’s face before he can get control of it and smooth out his expression. “Oh, wow, okay.”

George grabs his shoulders, eyes shining, and this is wrong, he’s pretty much never seen either of the twins this vulnerable. He doesn’t like it. “Draco! Please. I keep your secrets. Keep mine. I know it’s going to end in disaster, okay? I don’t care.”

“I won’t say anything,” he promises.

George instantly relaxes. He ruffles his hair, whispers “Thanks,” and is gone down the hall towards his own common room.

Well, fuck.

~

They’ve just finished another group quidditch practice, one where Harry does his best not to too obviously stare at Draco and mostly succeeds, when Cedric comes up to him with a gleam in his eye. He’s instantly suspicious. “Harry, hey, are you busy right now? Have anywhere you need to run off to?”

“No, not really,” he says warily. “Why?”

“Krum approached me about having a bit of a friendly competition, since we’re both seekers, and since some clearly ill-informed people might say you’re the best seeker at Hogwarts, I thought you might want to join?” he asks. He’s clearly more invested in this than his casual offer indicates. Someone has money riding on this.

Everyone around them has gone quiet, not so subtly waiting for his answer. “Yeah, sure,” he sighs. “Right now? Is Viktor coming here?”

“We thought we might do it above the great lake, actually,” Cedric says. There’s something he’s not telling him.

He finds out what that something is when they show up, and it looks like most of the three schools have poured themselves onto the grounds, eagerly surrounding the great lake. Harry turns to Cedric, glaring, “I thought we were friends!”

“We are!” he says, swinging his arm around Harry’s around shoulders, “It’ll be fun! I won’t push you if you don’t want to, but you like attention as long as it’s for quidditch, right? This is a nice even competition, no faulty old goblet involved.”

Viktor is waiting for them at the edge of the lake, and he waves them over. Hermione is near the front of the crowd, just behind him and right next to Cho. “Okay, you’re right, fine,” he gives in, walking over with Cedric. He has missed flying in front of a crowd. “Who’s refereeing?”

“That would be me!” Fleur says, melting out of the crowd seemingly out of nowhere.
“I still can’t believe your school doesn’t play quidditch,” Cedric teases. “It’s an important skill!”

Viktor makes frantic cutting motions at his neck, but it’s too late, and Fleur raises a single eyebrow. “Oh, yes, well our curriculum does not support such … basic applications of magic. But I am sure your demonstration will be quite impressive.”

“Fleur is captain of our gliding team,” says a Beauxbatons student that Harry doesn’t recognize. “She could catch that snitch faster than any of you.”

“Clarence,” Fleur scolds, “Do not ruin their little game! It simply would not be fair if I joined.”

Harry and Cedric look at each other, and they’re clearly thinking the same thing. Viktor simply looks resigned. “Oh, but we insist,” Cedric says, “we would hate to leave you out of the festivities.”

“Oh, well, if you insist,” Fleur says, a gleam in her eye that almost makes Harry second guess himself. She holds her wand in the air, “Accio Nimbus!” Her broom comes zooming out of their carriage and stops in front of her. The Beauxbatons students cheer from their side of the lake. She taps herself with her wand and says a spell Harry doesn’t recognize, and her robes shift and change while she’s wearing them. Instead of loose, casual robes, she’s now wearing a skintight powder blue uniform that looks more like their undergear than anything else. She magics her hair up into a tight bun on top of her head and looks to them expectantly. Her shoes disappear completely, and at least she’s barefoot in the sand rather than anywhere else. “Ready?”

“I’ll referee,” Clarence volunteers, then looks to the others, “If that’s all right with you all?”

They all nod. Angelina pushes herself through the crowd and hands Clarence the snitch, making sure to wink at Harry before joining the rest of the Hogwarts quidditch players, who have pushed themselves near the front. He avoids looking at the Slytherin team, because he’s pretty sure he wouldn’t be able to stop himself from starring at Draco, which would be – bad.

Clarence casts a sonorous charm on himself, then addresses the gathered audience, “Hello everyone! The initial competition has expanded – both Harry Potter and Fleur Delacour will be flying!”

Everyone cheers. Was the competition between Viktor and Cedric something that had been planned far in advance? It had to have been, since everyone is here. People really need to start telling him things.

“The rules are simple. We will release the snitch thirteen times. The one who catches it the most amount of times is the winner. The one who catches it the least amount of times is the loser.” He turns towards them, “Mount up!”

He, Cedric, and Viktor get on their brooms. Fleur places her broom on the ground. “Up!” she commands, hand palm down, but as her broom rises she twists her hand up so her broom rises high above them.

“The hell?” Cedric mutters.

“Rise!” Clarence commands.

Fleur takes out her wand, points it at the ground, and casts, “Ventlabis!” The space in front of her shimmers with magic. She tucks her wand back in her sleeve, looks over at them, winks, and steps on the square of shimmering magic.

It shoots her into the air, and she’s several hundred feet up before she begins to fall back down. Harry panics, but it’s a wasted effort. She does a flip on her way down, then lands delicately on her
broom, feet planted firmly on the handle.

“Holy shit,” Harry breathes, “that’s the coolest thing I’ve ever seen.” Cedric nods in agreement.

“I said rise!” Clarence repeats.

They fly straight up in the air until they’re equal with Fleur. She’s smirking.

“How do you keep your balance?” Harry asks, in awe. “Do you stay standing the whole time?”

“Of course,” she says, and she loses some her smugness to say, “I can try and teach you later, if you would like.”

“Yes,” Harry and Cedric say, even before she’s finished speaking.

“I have tried before,” Viktor admits. “I am quite bad, but would not mind another lesson.”

They all focus on the ground as they see a glint of gold rise into the air, darting around them. Clarence’s magically enhanced voice reaches them in the air, although now that Harry looks down, he can see he’s not alone. Lee has apparently shown up to offer commentary. Brilliant. “Fliers,” Clarence says, “begin!”

It’s hard for Harry to focus, because he keeps wanting to look at Fleur. She rides her broom like it’s a surfboard, effortlessly moving in and around them, directing her broom with just her feet, which Harry hadn’t even known was possible.

Cedric catches the snitch once, and Harry and Viktor each manage to catch it twice.

Fleur catches it eight times.

Harry wonders how much of an uproar it would cause if he transferred to Beauxbatons solely to join their gliding team.

~

Draco is leaving arithmancy when someone hooks their arm in his and yanks him down the hall in the opposite direction of where he’d been planning to go. The opposite direction of the great hall, which contains dinner. He’s hungry!

“Susan,” he sighs, ineffectually trying to tug himself free. “Is this really necessary?”

“I want to talk away from prying ears,” she says, then shoves him into a broom closet. It’s entirely empty, and a little too spotless for Draco to be comfortable. Overly clean secluded spaces are usually a sign that someone recently had sex there. He’d really prefer if Susan didn’t drag him into sex closets. “Who are you going to the ball with?”

“My cousin,” he says. “She wants to go, and no one else was going to take her.”

“Find another date for her, and come with me instead,” Susan says.

Draco stares. “I’m flattered, really I am–”

“Oh, shut up. You have a pretty face, but pretty much all the wrong equipment. I’m not asking because I like you, I’m asking because I want to make a statement. You’re a fan of those, aren’t you?”
“What statement are you looking to make?” he asks warily. Hufflepuffs shouldn’t look so devious. It’s very uncomfortable.

“I’m a Bones, and you’re a Malfoy,” she says. “My aunt is eyeing the Minister of Magic seat, Fudge’s incompetence will get him sacked eventually, and I think it’s time we shook things up a little.”

“If you’re trying to use me to get to my father, I appreciate your ruthlessness, but you’re barking up the wrong tree,” he tells her. “My opinion wouldn’t influence his vote.”

“It would, actually, but I don’t care about your father. I care about me. Regardless if my aunt gets the appointment or not, I plan on following her footsteps into government. I won’t be able to do that if people think I’m just another one of Dumbledore’s puppets. Will it help my aunt if her favored niece is known as a moderate? Yes. Am I doing this more for my future career than anything else? Also yes.”

“And you think going to the Yule Ball with me will do that?” he asks, disbelieving.

She raises an eyebrow, “I think that ball will be crawling with reporters thanks to the Tournament, and we won’t make the front page, of course, that’s reserved for whatever bullshit they make up about Harry Potter. But we will get a mention in the society pages, and that’s the first step. I am a Hufflepuff, Draco. Slow and steady wins the race, and all that.”

“You could just rig the race,” he feels compelled to point out. Susan is unimpressed. “What do I get out of this?”

“I’ll owe you a favor,” she says.

It may not sound like much, but the Bones are a powerful family, and Susan is clearly shaping up to be a powerful woman. Besides, it’s not like going with her will be a hardship. She’s pretty, and smart, and has enough Slytherin in her that she’s not boring. “Yeah, okay, fine. Deal.”

“Excellent,” she says, far too pleased with herself. Draco can’t help but scowl. “Be sure to pick me up outside of my common room. I assume you know where it is.”

She slips out of the closet before he gets a chance to say anything to that, and he can’t even go after her. He has to spend at least the next five minutes in here before leaving, unless he wants rumors of him and Susan Bones floating about.

His stomach grumbles. Great.

~

The Slytherins had promised them dancing lessons, so even though it’s not a night that they’d normally meet up, Harry and Ron head to their classroom after finishing up the first drafts of their transfiguration essays. They were both planning on asking Pansy to check them over. Draco and Hermione were better at actually writing out the essay, but Pansy could glance through several feet of parchment in a couple minutes and tell them all the factual mistakes they’d made. It was impressive. And terrifying.

When they slip inside, everyone’s there but Draco. There’s music playing from what seems like nowhere, and Blaise is carefully leading Hermione across the room in a simple dance. “You’re pretty good at this,” he says.

She flushes. “Viktor has been giving me lessons. He’s a – very good teacher.”
Ron’s eyes narrow. Pansy bounces to her feet and says, too loud and too cheerfully, “Harry! Ron! You’re finally here. You know, if you need some assistance getting a date to the ball, I could probably help with that.”

“Oh, uh,” Ron rubs the back of his neck, “I got a date to the ball, actually.”

“What?” Harry says, “How? When? It’s been like two days!”

“Who?” Hermione asks intently.

The door slams open, cutting off whatever answer Ron had been planning on giving. Draco is scowling, and he says, “Harry, I need you to do me a favor.”

“Of course,” he says, startled, all thoughts about Ron and his date leaving his head. “What is it?”

He kicks the door shut behind him, “Take Luna to the ball as your date.”

Oh. Well, better than him having to find a date on his own. “Sure. I thought you were taking her, though?”

“I was. But Susan wants to use me a media ploy, and I agreed. Luna really wants to go, and I don’t want her going with just anyone. I’d push her on Longbottom, but he’s already taking Ginny.”

“He’s what?” Ron asks, “Since when?”

Draco rolls his eyes, “Relax, it’s Longbottom. Your demonic sister could chew him up and spit him out if she felt like it. I’d be more worried about him than her.”

Ron glares, but gives a one shouldered shrug because, well, he’s got a point.

“I’ll go with Luna, no problem,” Harry says. The thought of Draco going with Susan makes his stomach knot up, but he’s pretty sure he’s being ridiculous.

Blaise clears his throat, “Well, now that that’s sorted out, dance lessons? I’m not staying up late for this. I’m going to get a good night’s sleep for once if it kills me.”

“Dramatic,” Pansy says, but holds out her hand to Harry. “I actually have someplace to be too, so let’s get this moving.”

“Where are you going?” he asks, taking her hand. She places his other hand on her back, and rests her own on his shoulder.

“I’m meeting Flint in the astronomy tower. To help him study,” she says, and then laughs when they all groan. No one studies in the astronomy tower.

“Nice,” Hermione says, being spun around by Blaise. Harry likes boys, and he can admit Flint is well built, but he doesn’t get the appeal at all. Blech.

Draco offers his hand to Ron, who takes it. He has more of clue about what to do than Harry, because he settles his hand on Draco’s waist without prompting. They pass the next hour that way, with Blaise and Hermione smoothly dancing around the room and the rest of them – not so much. Ron gets the hang of it about halfway through, but he has to keep looking at his feet if he doesn’t want to step on Draco, who lets out an indignant yell that’s more drama than pain each time it happens.

Harry is a disaster.
He’s a seeker, he’s normally pretty good at physical stuff, but he just can’t focus. He keeps on bumping into Pansy, or stepping when he shouldn’t, or tripping over his own feet.

“Harry!” Pansy says. “Come on, you have to get this. You’re going to have dance in front of everyone, and reporters will be there.”

“Do you want to give me a panic attack?” he asks. “I’m trying!”

“Try harder,” she tells him unsympathetically. “I have to go, Flint is waiting for me.”

Blaise bows to Hermione, “Me too, I miss my bed. Hermione doesn’t need my help anyway.”

Harry runs his hand through his hair, frustrated, and Draco says, “I can keep going.”

“What?” he looks up, heart jumping into his throat.

“If Ron doesn’t mind. I can, uh, help you practice instead,” he says.

Ron steps away, “Nope, I don’t mind at all. You need it more than me, mate,” He claps Harry on the shoulder, then turns to Hermione. “Hey, will you help me with the transfiguration essay?”

“I thought you’d finished?” she asks, confused. “Besides, Pansy said she’d help.”

“Well, you know you love telling me how wrong I am, so won’t you look it over for me?”

She huffs, but says, “Sure.”

“Great!” he grabs her hand, “Let’s go.”

“Now?” she asks, startled, “Ron, it’s the middle of night–”

“Never too late for learning!” he says cheerfully, dragging Hermione out of the classroom. “Good luck, guys!”

The door slams shut behind him. It’s silent except for the soft swell of music, and Draco coughs before holding out his hand, “So, dancing?”

“Right,” he says, then has to swallow twice because his mouth is dry. He presses his hand against the small of Draco’s back, and Draco holds onto his shoulder, while their other hands are pressed together. “Sorry I’m so bad at this.”

“It’s okay,” Draco says, and for some reason they’re standing closer than he and Pansy were, but he can’t bring himself to move away. “Just – relax. It’s not that hard, I’ve been taking dancing lessons since I was a kid.”

“Yeah, it’s not hard for you because you’ve been taking dancing lessons since you were a kid,” he says.

Draco flashes him a grin, “If I can do this at seven, you can do it now. At least you’re going with Luna – she’s an excellent dancer, better than I am. She’ll make you look better than you are.”

“Great,” he says, “Uh – good. Excellent.”

They stop talking after that, except for Draco’s soft instructions. Maybe his problem was just that he couldn’t focus on Pansy, because with Draco he follows along easily, doesn’t step on Draco’s feet or trip over his own. He can feel the heat coming off Draco, and it’s not cold in here, the fire is roaring,
but he can’t help but be pulled to his warmth anyway.

Draco guides him through spinning him, and steps neatly back into his arms, smiling. “See? You can do this. You’ll be fine.”

“Yes,” he says, and swallows. “I – I know we can’t, of course, but I – I just want you to know. That if I could, I would have asked you to be my date to the ball.”

Draco freezes, and Harry stumbles, doing his best not to knock them both over. He bites his lip, worried he’s said something wrong, worried he’s ruined everything by speaking up too soon. “Really?” Draco asks quietly, something guarded in his face. Something hopeful and disbelieving that makes Harry feel like maybe he should have said something sooner.

“I wish I could go with you, and dance with you like this in front of everyone,” he says, because it’s pointless to try and turn back now. His heart’s beating so fast it feels like it’s going to burst from his chest. “I know we’re soulmates, but I don’t think that makes us inevitable. So – I want you, and I choose you. Because you’re you, not because of the marks on our hips.”

His smile starts out small, but then it grows, until it takes up half his face, and Harry can’t help but smile back. “You idiot,” Draco says warmly, “As if some mark could make me put up with all the crap you put me through. I like you, I want you, because you’re Harry. Just Harry. That’s all that matters to me.”

“I matter to you?” he asks, just to be sure, because this feels too good to be true.

“Obviously,” he says dryly and cups the side of Harry’s face in his hand. Harry places an arm around Draco’s waist and pulls him closer, until they’re pressed together, but can’t make himself move any further.

He doesn’t have to. Draco leans forward, carefully, slowly, and then only hesitates a moment before pressing their lips together. It’s his first kiss. Their first kiss.

Harry’s pretty sure this means he has a boyfriend now.

Chapter End Notes

i didn't get as far as i wanted, so i hope you're all enjoying fourth year, because apparently we'll be here for a while

you can follow / harass me at: shanastoryteller.tumblr.com

i post writing updates in my 'progress report' tag if that's something you're interested in keep track of <3
Harry loves quidditch. Loves the competition, the ticking clock, being part of a *team* and working together to win. But he just loves flying too, and when it comes to that – gliding is just better.

“You are very good at this!” Fleur praises from right beside him. They’re only about fifteen feet up in the air, but he feels comfortable enough that he could probably go higher. After losing his balance a few times, he’s finally centered itself, and his broom is as responsive to him as always.

Clarence is down below with Cedric, who’s still getting used to positioning and moving his feet on the broomstick so he has some actual control over it. Viktor is hovering next to them, and Harry leans back on heels of his feet and shifts his weight so he turns in a neat half circle to face him. “You said you were bad at this!”

“He is horrible,” Fleur says, not unkindly. “Look how he stands – stiff, all straight lines, no bend, no grace.”

“I can manage to stay on my broom, but that’s about it,” Viktor agrees.

“That’s more than some of us!” Cedric calls from below them, but he’s standing on his broom, moving it in small circles about four feet up in the air.

Clarence rolls his eyes, “You’re doing fine, especially for your first time! Most first years takes weeks to even stand without falling off.”

“Why does Viktor being stiff mean he’s horrible?” Harry asks, cautiously shifting his foot to adjust the height of the broom up then down. Fleur and Viktor keep level with him easily. “He clearly has control of his broom, much more than I do.”

Fleur sighs, “Gliding is an *art*, not a sport. Presentation matters, and Viktor is a statue on his broom. He centers his gravity, but then he does not *move.*” She leans to the side, and flips so she’s doing a handstand on her broom, as easy as breathing. “If you cannot carry your balance with you, you may be able to glide, but not well, and not for long.”

Okay, so he may have been unreasonably jealous of her hanging around Draco before, but he gets it now. Fleur is the coolest person ever.

“She’s right. I don’t fall off anymore, but I can’t do any of the tricks they can, and I look a lot sillier,” Viktor says.

Fleur shifts so she’s sitting on her broom, but sideways, one dainty leg thrown over the other. The transition is so smooth that Harry doesn’t even realize it’s happened until it’s over. “You do much better than many others! But it is not your strength.”
Fleur snaps her leg out, kicking Harry’s broom. He nearly falls, but manages to stay standing. “Hey!”

“You are better,” she says, ignoring his glare, “When your center moves, you follow it. I think you will be quite good with a little practice.”

“You said it’s an art?” Cedric asks, finally rising on his broom to join them. Clarence is standing on his own broom behind him, hands cautiously extended just in case he falls.

Fleur and Clarence share a grin. “There is a spell, to make our brooms trail colors. We compete based on how graceful we appear on our brooms, and which team can make the most beautiful picture. Sunrises and flowers are popular. We won one year by recreating Notre Dame.”

Harry wonder if there are any rules against a school having a gliding and a quidditch team. Because he knows Dean would love this. He’s decent on a broom, but he’s a fantastic artist.

“Enough talking,” Fleur commands, easily pushing herself to her feet. Harry’s never seen someone so comfortable on a broom before. He’s jealous, and he’s going to keep hounding Fleur for lessons until he can move that easily. “Time to practice your footwork. Try not to fall. It will hurt.”

“Falling is character building,” Clarence says, clearly quoting someone.

Fleur snorts, then does large, easy figure eights around them. “Half is willing your broom, the other is moving your feet,” she says. “Do not overly focus on one. Forget your feet, and you will fall. Stop working with your broom, and you will stop moving completely. Then likely fall.”

She’s a good teacher. By the time they finish, Cedric is still wobbling, but Harry can easily fly next to Fleur in loose circles and simple patterns. Viktor can too, but Harry’s starting to see what they were saying – he is too stiff. It’s nearly sunset, and none of them are eager to be in the forbidden forest after dark. Harry knows from personal experience that it just ends in things trying to eat them.

He also can’t help but be quietly, privately pleased. They like him. He’s younger, and he’s taking attention away from them, but the other champions really do seem to like him, smiling and joking and never treating him differently just because of the scar on his forehead.

It’s nice.

~

Draco does not want to get involved. They’re not even friends, it’s none of his business, and he doesn’t care.

Except, the thing is, he’s got a boyfriend now, he and Harry are dating properly. But. It’s still a secret, they still can’t tell anyone, and as much as Draco wants to send a howler around informing everyone of his new status as taken, he can’t. It has to be a secret.

This doesn’t have to be.

Draco knocks on Cassius’s door for several minutes until he yanks it open and snarls, “What?” He’s pulled his door open all the way this time, and wow, it’s a mess. George likes things neat, Draco’s shocked he spends any time in there.

“So, you and Weasley are fucking,” he says, then frowns and adds, “I’m talking about George. I’m assuming you’re not sleeping with more than one of them.”
He’d promised George he wouldn’t spill his secrets. He’d never said he wouldn’t talk to the one other person who knew about them.

Cassius pales, then grabs the front of his robes and yanks him inside before slamming the door shut. Completely unnecessary. Draco would have come inside of his own volition if he’d asked. “Who have you told?”

“No one,” he says, and doesn’t try to pry Cassius’s hand off of him because he’s pretty sure he can’t manage it without magic, and things haven’t disintegrated that much.

“Zabini and Parkinson, obviously,” he says, “that Bustrode girl, maybe. Who else?”

“No one,” he repeats, irritated. “I haven’t told anyone.”

Cassius finally lets him go, crossing his arms and scowling. “Blackmail, then? Extortion? I don’t know what I have that you could possibly want.”

Did he used to sound this ridiculous when he talked to Ginny? No wonder she was always mocking him. “Nothing. What are you so worried about, anyway? He’s a Weasley, not a muggle or a creature. He’s even pureblood, if a rather sorry one.”

“It’s none of your business,” he snaps. “Either make your demands, or bugger off.”

Draco looks Cassius over. He’s furious, and – and he looks scared, which he wasn’t prepared for.

His door swings open. “Tell anyone, and I’ll…” his voice trails off, and Draco raises an eyebrow. He’s a Malfoy. The Worthingtons are pure, and old, and rich. But he’s set to replace his father as patriarch of the Malfoy family, and Cassius is just a cousin to the head of his family. There’s pretty much no threat he could make against Draco that he’d be able to back up.

Draco lets the silence hang in between them for a moment, more to make a point than anything else, then says, “I won’t tell anyone. What could I possibly gain from that?”

He leaves before Cassius can think up a response. Maybe it’s for the best that the older boy refused to talk to him, that he didn’t let Draco say something stupid. But his secrecy nags at him. It irritates him, and he so rarely has an opportunity to confront the things that bother him, so he’s not willing to let this one lie.

Whatever. Cassius didn’t curse him, so it could have gone worse. He’ll give him a couple days to stew, then try again.

If he hurries, he can turn in his completed essay on how he made those buttons to Flitwick before dinner.

~

After hours spent gliding, he’s starving. And sore. He hasn’t been sore after flying since he was a first year, but gliding works out a whole new set of muscles that he doesn’t normally use. There has to be some exercises he can do to get his body more accustomed to gliding while he’s off his broom, right? Not that he has much time for that this year, but assuming he doesn’t die in this tournament, it will at least give him something to do while he’s stuck with the Dursleys. He’s the only member of the quidditch team that doesn’t fly over the summer, and they don’t seem to notice the difference, but he does.
“HARRY! Over here!” He blinks, turning away from the Gryffindor table to follow the sound of his name. Padma and Parvati are seated together at the Ravenclaw table, waving him over.

He walks over, and they don’t make room for him to sit, so he assumes this will be quick. “Hey guys. What’s up?”

The twins exchange glances, then Parvati says, “We’re probably over stepping our bounds, but we were wondering – what are you wearing to the Yule Ball?”


Both their faces drop. “Are you especially attached to them?” Padma asks.

“Not really. They’re just robes. Why?” He has no idea where this could possibly be going.

“You can tell us to stuff it,” Padma begins. Harry can only imagine saying that to either of them would end in one of them jamming a wand in his eye socket. “But – would you, maybe, wear Indian robes to the ball? It’s just, people are talking so much about you speaking Parseltongue, and I know you hate the attention you’re getting for all this, and dressing differently than everyone else will only get you more attention. But would you consider it?”

Harry wants the floor to open him up and swallow him whole. He hopes that one day he gets to a point where talking about his ignorance isn’t so embarrassing. “I don’t even know what Indian robes are, or where to get them.” Before this conversation, he hadn’t even known they existed.

Parvati actually looks chagrined. “No, we meant – would you wear them?”

“Sure,” he says, “but I don’t have any, so it’s a bit of a moot point.”

“We can get you a set,” she says, “we will be happy to get you a set, if you promise to wear them to the ball. We’re wearing saris, so you won’t be alone.”

It’s clearly important to them, and he doesn’t care what he wears. He doubts they’d put him in something ridiculous to embarrass him. Besides, if he can’t learn Tamil just yet, wearing robes from his father’s heritage sound – nice. It’s something, at least. “Yeah, okay. How much are they? I still have some gold left over from school shopping, but I can write to Gringotts if I need to.”

They both squeal and jump to their feet, and Harry takes a step back in alarm. “You won’t regret it,” Padma promises. “You’ll look fantastic. Our grandmother is a weaver, we know what we’re doing.”

“Well,” he says, blinking. “Should I run up to my room and pay you now, or?”

Parvati shakes her head, “Harry, please! We’re Patils, we’re hardly destitute. They’ll be a gift.”

“Oh,” he shifts his weight from one foot to the other. Is this how Ron feels whenever he offers to buy him something? “Are you sure? I don’t mind paying.”

“Accept our generosity before we take insult,” Padma says, but she’s smiling.

Not every pureblood family is rich, obviously, but from the way they’re talking, they are. Besides, he knows arguing with Parvati gets him exactly nowhere, and he can only assume the same is true of her sister. “Thank you for my gift. I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome,” Padma says graciously, then pulls at her sister, urging her to follow her out of the great hall. “We’ll get started on it right now. Bye Harry!”
“Bye,” he says, but they’re already gone.

He’s about to go back to his own table when Cho leans over from her place a couple seats away and asks, “Did I hear that right? You’re wearing traditional robes for the ball?”

“I guess?” he says, “I don’t really know. I guess I’ll find out when I get them.”

“Most people will just be wearing regular robes,” she says, “Everyone will be staring at you.”

He shrugs, “Better they’re staring at my robes rather than my scar. Besides, it seems important to them.” And it’s kind of important to him too, actually. But that’s a little too embarrassing to admit out loud.

Cho has a small smile on her face. “You’re sweet.”

Oh, merlin, here she is complimenting him again, and this time he had no disillusionment charm to hide his blush. “Thanks,” he says, “Uh, I’m going to go now.”

He retreats to the Gryffindor table and sits next to Seamus, who would never do something as awful as be nice to him out of nowhere.

When Draco leaves charms Luna is standing on the other side of the hallway, waiting. He sighs. “Go on without me,” he tells Pansy and Blaise, “I’ll catch up.”

He goes over to Luna, eyebrow raised. He’d already gotten her essay back to her, so he’s not sure what she could want. She starts walking down the hall without saying anything, and he sighs, but followers her until they’re someplace less crowded. “About Harry,” she says, then bites her lip.

“Do you not want to go with him? I’ll find someone else,” he says. Millie’s going with some girl in the year above them, but he thinks she’d agree to go with his cousin anyway, if he asked. “Or I can tell Susan I’ve changed my mind if you really want to go with me.”

She shakes her head. “Harry is fine. But – I overheard Cho and Padma talking, and – and he’s wearing traditional robes, and I was wondering – if I should – I already have dress robes,” she frowns. “Never mind. It’s not important. The wrackspurts must be buzzing in my ears. I should get some mint to take care of that.”

Only half of what his cousin says ever makes any sense to him, but he’s known her his whole life, so he can usually parse through most of her crap. “You’re not just British. If you want to wear dress robes, wear dress robes. But if you want to wear,” he has to wrack his brain for a minute, because he hardly keeps up to date on current Japanese fashions, “a kimono, then you should do that.”

“Mum always wore Western clothes, even before she met Dad,” she says quietly.

Draco snorts, “We were lucky if we could get Pandora to put on clean clothes. She always wore muggle clothes too, but that didn’t make her a muggle. She was an alchemist, Luna, she cared about practicality more than anything else. But this is a ball. Wear whatever you want. You usually do anyway.” He flicks one of her white radish earrings.

“I don’t even know where I’d get one, they’re hardly going to carry what I want in Diagon Alley,” she says. “Forget about it. I know you have to go, forget I said anything.”

“The wrackspurts tell you about my standing meeting?” he asks dryly. He should probably be a little
concerned that Luna knows he spends his time hanging out with Gryffindors, but she always seems
to know things she shouldn’t, and she’s good at keeping a secret.

She smiles at that, finally.

He hates this. If he wasn’t still fighting with his parents, he’d call up his Mum right now and she’d
take care of everything. But he is, so he can’t. “Look, I do have to go, but I’ll figure this out. Okay?”
She nods, and he gives her a quick one armed hug before leaving.

He hurries into their abandoned classroom, gives Harry a quick kiss, flips the rest of them off when
they make disgusted sounds, and settles down next to his boyfriend to help the rest of them research.
The second task is looming ever closer, and they still haven’t figured anything out about that stupid
golden egg.

Draco waits until they’re back in their room to talk to Blaise about Luna.

“You want my mother to take your cousin shopping for a kimono?” he asks flatly. “The ball is in
three days, Draco!”

Draco raises an eyebrow, “Your mum could cause a coup in a small country in three days, I hardly
think going clothes shopping is out of her repertoire. I don’t know if it’s actually a kimono, I know
that’s what muggles wear, or used to wear, but I don’t know about witches. But your mum will!”

“She’ll need to get special permission to come onto the grounds, and to take Luna,” he says, giving
in.

Not even Dumbledore would stand in the way of Zaira Zabini. At least, not without a very good

Blaise throws his pillow at him. “Shut up and go to sleep.”

When Harry shows up to see a plush blanket spread in front of a crackling fire, he can’t help but
grin. Personally, he would have been fine if they just hung out like they usually did, except just the
two of them. But Draco is kind of a romantic.

They couldn’t go out on a proper date, couldn’t kiss in Madam Puddifoot’s or sneak away to the
astronomy tower. But Draco insisted that secrecy was no excuse for laziness, and Harry’s glad now
that he hadn’t fought him on it.

“You’re early!” Draco says crossly.

“Sorry,” he says, but his grin is far too big for Draco to believe he means it.

He scowls, but a moment later steaming food and dishes appear on the blanket, no doubt Winky’s
work. The food is delicious, and they spend the entire time arguing about quidditch tactics, knees
touching as they sit cross legged on the blanket. Their dirty dishes disappear and treacle tart appears
in small plates next to them, and Draco and Harry race to see who can finish theirs the fastest, which
in hindsight is an absolute waste of treacle tart.

After, Harry hesitates, not sure if he’s moving too fast, if he’s being presumptuous. But Draco
presses his hand to Harry’s chest, and whispers, “Okay?” a second before he leans in to kiss him.
Harry moves forward, eager, and they lose their balance, falling over sideways, Harry landing
awkwardly on top of his soulmate. It’s an embarrassing display of clumsiness for two quidditch players, but Draco grins at him crookedly from underneath him, pale blonde hair spread out like a halo, and Harry really only has one response to that.

They kiss until Harry’s lips go numb and swollen, and then keep kissing anyway. Maybe they can’t go on dates like a normal couple, but making out for hours in front of a crackling fire seems like a pretty good substitute from where he’s standing. Or, well, laying.

They stay up too late, because every time one of them puts their foot down and says it’s time to leave, the other pulls him back and they keep kissing. Harry’s going to end up falling asleep in class tomorrow, but he really can’t bring himself to regret it. His body’s heavy and tingling, and if it weren’t for such ridiculous things like sleep, he feels like he could have spent all night kissing Draco.

He enters the common room, expecting to find it empty. It’s not. Ron and Hermione are seated at opposite ends of the couch, a small mountain of books between them. He thinks they’re working on their most recent potions assignment, based on the titles, but it might be herbology. Do they have a herbology assignment? He hopes not. “What are you doing awake?”

They both look up, and Hermione bites her lip to keep from laughing while Ron gives him a sly grin. “Waiting for you. I’d ask you the same question, but it’s obvious,” he says. “You’re going to want to cast a glamour on that, or maybe wear a scarf. Seamus might have a turtleneck you can borrow, Dean’s a biter too.”

“Biter?” he repeats, confused.

Hermione summons a mirror and offers it to him. It’s immediately apparent what they’re talking about.

He has deep purple bruises along his neck, and he’s gotten bruises before, obviously, but not like these. They’re the exact shape of Draco’s mouth. “I’m going to murder him!” he says, “How does he expect to keep us a secret if he does crap like this?”

“He bit you,” Hermione suggests, a wicked gleam in her eyes. He hasn’t seen any love bites on her from Viktor, but she’s smart enough to cover them up if she’s got any.

He thinks back, about pressing his body into Draco, and the startled sound he’d made when Harry had been kissing at his neck, and says, “I think I did.” It’s all a little hazy, honestly. There was just — warmth, and Draco, and their mouths.

Hermione turns away, like that will prevent Harry from hearing her laugh at him, and Ron’s not laughing at him, but the effort is causing him to turn nearly as red as his hair.

“I’m going to bed,” he says primly, sticking his nose in the air in a fair approximation of Draco, “I don’t need this kind of attitude.”

He ends up having to run up the stairs, because Hermione and Ron throw every pillow they can reach at him until he’s out of their sight.

~

Ron and Hermione are with Harry when McGonagall comes to retrieve him from the common room, and they give him concerned glances when she asks him to follow her, but they don’t say anything. She brings him to Flitwick’s office, and the excitable charms professor is standing on his desk. Draco, Pansy, and Blaise are there, and there’s a terrifying moment when Harry thinks they’ve been caught, but Pansy catches his eyes and gives an almost imperceptible shake to her head. He then
notices Luna half hidden behind Draco.

“What’s going on?” he asks.

“Miss Lovegood said you were escorting her to the ball, but that she did not know what you were
wearing,” McGonagall says, “and then Miss Parkinson insisted we get you, so that you could tell
inform Miss Lovegood of your clothing choices, and she could make her own appropriately.”

She’s trying to sound exasperated, but Harry can tell she’s amused and doing her best not to show it.

“Oh, um, actually I don’t know what I’m wearing either,” he confesses, “The Patil twins are picking
my robes.”

McGonagall coughs, almost managing to hide her snort of laughter, and says, “I’ll retrieve them.
With your leave to enter the Ravenclaw common room, Filius?”

“But of course, Minerva,” he says, and Harry thinks he might be enjoying this too.

Unfortunately, he’s not fully sure what this even is. “What’s going on?” he repeats, since he never
really received an answer the first time.

The fire in Flitwick’s office sparks and doubles in size as it turns a bright green. A second later, a
woman steps out of the fireplace.

Harry forgets to breathe. She’s tall and dark skinned, with a strong nose and full lips. Her black hair
is in hundreds of impossibly tiny braids that fall to her waist, with gold clasps glinting throughout.
Her dress is perfectly fitted to her, with long sleeves and a high neck. Delicate green piping covers
the dress which falls just below her knees, and her matching green shoes have a thin heel that adds
unneeded inches to her height. He can’t bring himself to look away from her rich brown eyes.

She’s the most beautiful woman he’s ever seen.

“Mother,” Blaise greets, stepping forward. He kisses her cheek, having to push himself on his tip
toes to manage it.

“Darling,” she returns, her voice like velvet.

“Zaira!” Draco beams. He takes her hand and bows, kissing the back of it. “How do you manage to
grow lovelier each time I see you? It’s practically criminal, how you outshine all those around you.”

Blaise sighs. Harry gets the impression that Draco does this often. Zaira arches an eyebrow, “Oh,
Draco, you flatter me so.”

“Flattery implies lies, when I only speak the truth,” he swears, hand over his heart.

“Merlin above,” Pansy says, so quietly that Harry’s pretty sure he’s the only one who hears her.

Zaira gives the appearance of smiling without changing her expression. “How will I manage
conversations with other men, when their words are vinegar to your honey?”

“Say the word and I’m yours,” he says, winking.

Zaira finally breaks, letting out a delicate laugh. “As always, I’ll keep it in mind.”

“Hello, Mrs. Zabini,” Pansy greets, now that Draco’s done being ridiculous. “It’s nice to see you
again.”
“Pansy,” she says warmly, “I am sorry to have missed your visits over the summer holiday. You’re growing into a beautiful young woman.”

For the first time since Harry’s known her, he sees her flush. She curtsies in response to the praise, and he wants to make fun of her for it, but he can’t blame her. “Thank you, Mrs. Zabini.”

Zaira holds out a hand, “Luna, dear, let me look at you. I haven’t seen you since you were baby.”

Luna hesitates, then steps forward, taking Zaira’s hand. The woman twirls her around and says, “Wonderful, you’re such a pretty girl.”

“I am?” she asks, wide eyed.

Draco frowns, but Zaira doesn’t miss a beat. “Of course you are. You have your mother’s face, dear, and there was hardly a woman more lovely than Pandora. I’ve heard you’re excelling at divination?”

She nods, “It’s not hard, I don’t think. You just have to listen.”

Harry has no idea what she’s saying, but Zaira nods as if this makes perfect sense. “And this is your escort?” she asks, turning to face him.

“Yes,” Luna says, “this is Harry Potter. He’s nice.”

“Hi,” he says, and being around the veelas didn’t even make him feel this way. But Mrs. Zabini is prettier than any veela he’s seen. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“You as well, Mr. Potter,” she says, “I’ve heard much about you.”

He grimaces. McGonagall returns, the Patil twins trailing behind her. “Sorry for the delay,” McGonagall says crisply, “the girls took a moment to firecall their mother. They have a request.”

“Mrs. Zabini,” Parvati says, and both the girls curtsy. “Could we please accompany you and Luna? I’ve heard so much about you, and it would mean so much if we could come.”

They’re both nearly vibrating they’re so excited. “Your mother gave her permission?” Zaira asks. They nod.

“Well, since you are picking Mr. Potter’s wardrobe, it would be useful to have you there to ensure they are coordinated,” she muses. “Luna, what do you think?”

Luna looks startled to be addressed again. “Padma is nice too. I don’t mind if they come.”

“Very well,” she says. She smiles at the rest of them, kisses Blaise’s forehead, and walks back to the fireplace. Harry doesn’t see her toss any floo powder in, but the fire roars green once more. “Follow me. Kakusareta district!”

Luna repeats her actions, as do the twins, until Harry’s left in Flitwick’s office with Draco, Pansy, Blaise and the professors. “I think that’s more than enough excitement for one night,” McGonagall says. “Shall I escort you back to your common rooms, or can you find your way there yourself?”

Draco snorts, gives a nod to Flitwick, and leaves the classroom without another word. Pansy and Blaise sigh before following him.

“Er, I’m good,” Harry says, “I’ll see you later, Professors.”
He stops by the common room to grab Ron and Hermione. He fills them in on the way, and is unsurprised to find the Slytherins in their classroom when they show up.

“Must you flirt with my mother every time?” Blaise asks, put upon.

“Yes,” Draco answers promptly, and when he sees Harry he grins. “Sorry, dearheart, I’ve loved her longer, surely you understand?”

“Who am I to get in the way of true love?” he asks dryly, sitting beside Draco. Their hands are barely touching, but he doesn’t want to do full on hand holding with everyone there, because they will make fun of them for it. “How did that even start anyway?”

Pansy snorts, “Draco had a huge, embarrassing crush on Blaise’s mum when we were kids. He got over it, Blaise teased him about it once, and he decided the most reasonable solution was to make Blaise regret having down that by leaning into it so hard that he’d never bring it up again.”

“Did it work?” Ron asks, grinning.

Blaise glares. “I think it’s going pretty well, personally,” Draco says. “I love your mum, she’s such a good sport about it.”

“She knows you’re just being annoying, and that I hate it,” he says, “Obviously she plays along.”

“Are they really going to Japan?” Harry asks. “Just to buy a dress?”

Hermione shrugs, “It’s just as easy to go to Japan by floo as it is Diagon Alley. Might as well do it properly.”

“Zaira speaks a little Japanese, and Luna is fluent, obviously. They’ll be fine,” Draco says. “Unlike Harry, if we don’t figure out this blasted egg. He’ll likely just be killed.”

Hermione reaches into her bag and pulls out a book that’s far too large for Harry’s comfort. “I got another tome on banshees.”

“It’s not banshees,” Ron and Pansy say together, then scowl.

“Well, it’s the best lead we have, and it’s better than just not preparing for anything at all,” she says. “So unless any of you have a better idea?”

They don’t.

Harry really hopes he doesn’t die. He just got a boyfriend, after all. He’d like to enjoy that at least a little before meeting his violent and painful end.

~

Everyone is staying over at Hogwarts over the holidays for the Yule Ball, so at least Draco doesn’t have to come up with an excuse as to why he’s not coming home. He misses his parents. He’s been returning his mother’s letters unopened, and his father hasn’t tried to send any at all, but he’s not surprised. Narcissa doesn’t have the patience for stubbornness – that’s a trait he inherited from his father.

He’s maintained the silent treatment since summer, but he draws the line at ignoring Christmas. Making and charming the badges had given him an idea. Out of delicate gold, he’d used fire and magic to create two hairpins for his mother, and a set of cufflinks for his father. He’d set a subtle
sparkling charm into the gold while it was still hot, so that it would lock in as the metal set. No matter how dark it was, they’d manage to catch the light just a little, to draw the eye of anyone close to the wearer. He sends them with Winky to the manor, but doesn’t know what to say, what to write. In the end he simply signs it *Love, Draco* and hopes it will be enough.

They’re still fighting, of course. But they are his parents.

The next morning he gets the expected gifts from his friends and boyfriend, but at the very bottom is small box wrapped in sparkling blue paper. He undoes it cautiously, not sure how angry his parents are, if their gift will be awful, like pretentious pureblood history books or something equally obnoxious.

Inside is a thick iron ring, seemingly plain, but Draco recognizes it immediately. His mother wears this ring next to her engagement and wedding rings. He picks it up with trembling fingers, and sure enough, inscribed inside is the Malfoy family motto: *Fais ce que dois, advienne que pourra.*

Do what you must, come what may.

It’s an heirloom, passed down his family for generations. His paternal grandmother gave it to his mother when she told her she was pregnant. He slides it on his finger, and it warms, ancient magic resizing it to fit.

At the bottom is a note, and he flips it open, not sure what he’s expecting to find. In his father’s hand it says:

*To a good son and Malfoy.*

He’s so, so thankful Blaise left already, because tears spill down his cheeks before he can stop them. He wants to run home, wants to throw himself at both his parents, but he *can’t*. He still doesn’t know what he wants, knows his father can’t simply renounce the dark lord when his brand is on his father’s skin, but Draco also knows that he’ll never be able to follow in his father’s footsteps, not in this. He loves his family, but – Millie and Hermione are his friends, Hagrid and Lupin are among the kindest people he knows, and he’d rather die than let a madman hurt any of them.

He loves his parents, and they love him. For now, that’s enough. It has to be enough.

~

Parvati shows up just as Harry’s starting to get worried, a bag hanging from the crook of her arm. She bustles into the boys’ room like she’s there every day. Neville squeaks and hides behind his curtains. Dean and Seamus are trying to tie each other’s ties and doing a horrible job. Ron had left a while ago to pick up his robes from Pansy, Harry assumes. He knows she’d taken the horrendous robes as a challenge and has been working on them in her spare time for the past couple of weeks.

“Wow, you’re so shiny!” he greets. Her top is a rich purple, while the rest of the sari is a fading purple wrapped tightly around her hips to knees, and then looser around her ankles, with the rest of it draped elegantly over her shoulder. It’s all edged in gold, with sparkling jewels studded throughout. She wears a thick necklace close to her neck, dangling earrings, and a matching bracelet on each wrist.

“Strip,” she commands, “I’m furious this wasn’t done sooner. What’s the point of overpaying for rush service if it arrives the same day it’s needed?”

“It is the holidays,” he feels the need to point out. “I’m putting on the pants myself, you can help with the rest.” If she sees he has a soulmark, the news will be all over the school within the hour.
She sighs like he’s being unreasonable, but pulls them out of the bag and hands them over. “Hurry up.”

He gets changed standing on his bed with the curtains drawn. The pants seem familiar enough, if far too tight for comfort. They’re a dark navy blue, and he doesn’t have much room in them, they narrow towards his ankles. He steps out, shirtless, and Dean wolf whistles. Harry flips him off.

“Now what?”

Parvati gives him a sleeveless shirt in the same shade of blue, and tells him to tuck it into his pants. Then she takes out a jacket and helps him put it on. It falls to the top of his thighs, and there’s a row of gold buttons up the front that Parvati does up with familiar efficiency. It splits at the bottom, so there’s a small gap at the bottom of the jacket. The collar is the same, raised and against his throat, but with a small cut in the front to his collarbone. “It’s a jodhpuri suit,” she tells him, carefully folding a bright green square of silk and tucking it into the one pocket on the left side of the jacket. “The muggles started it, but they’re all the rage right now.”

“It’s comfortable,” he says, surprised. Now that he’s had it on a for a minute, it feels less constricting. “I like the color.”

“We’re not done yet,” she says, reaching into the bag, “you are a wizard, Harry.”

It’s the same green as the silk square, but made of the same sheer material as her sari. When she shakes it out it just looks like a large square of fabric. It’s beautiful, intricate golden embroidery and beading, a border six inches high in some places of silken flowers and twisting petals, with pale yellow crystals evenly spaced out among the rest of it. “Wow,” he breathes.

Parvati looks pleased at his reaction. “Stand up straight, with your arms out,” she orders, and he does as he’s told. She stands behind him and throws the cloth on top of him. As soon as it touches him he feels a spark of magic, and the cloth shifts, enveloping him and shifting around him.

He’s finally allowed to look in the mirror, and the square of cloth has formed itself into a robe. It falls down so it almost touches the floor, and the sleeves are long and billowing. It doesn’t clasp in the middle, instead sticking to his sides so the front of the suit is still on full display even while it maintains the proper robe shape and silhouette.

Parvati comes to stand behind him and look into the mirror with a smug smile. “Not bad,” she praises, elbowing him in the side, “We’ll make a proper wizard out of you yet.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” he retorts, but he’s grinning so widely that he knows it’s not even a little bit believable.

~

Draco wears black dress robes with small blue buttons carved from topaz. Pansy says they bring out his eyes. He’s about to go meet Susan when Millie pops her head into his room and says, “Your cousin is here. She says she needs help getting ready. Also, I can’t believe you told her where our common room is.”

“I don’t tell Luna anything, she just figures stuff out,” he says automatically.

He opens the common room door. Luna is holding a tower of cloth in her arms so high she almost can’t see over it. “I need help tying things, and Ginny left already. Help?”

“We have to be quick,” he warns, and hopes Susan won’t be too mad at him. He takes Luna back to his room, and helps her into her robe. There’s a lot of fussy underclothes that he’s not certain what to
do with, but luckily Luna is, so he just follows directions. When he gets to her main robe, a handmade furisode with long trailing sleeves that had cost a fortune, he snorts. “Where did you even find this?” he demands.

“You can find anything in the Kakasureta District,” she says. It’s dark navy blue, but it’s not patterned with something normal, like flowers or clouds. Instead, cheerful white radishes with bright green tops are carefully sewn into the fabric. It matches her earrings, at least. The obi is green to match, and it takes him several times with her soft instructions for him to tie it properly.

He helps her slip on the raised wooden sandals, hopes she doesn’t fall, and says, “I have to go, I’ll send Pansy in to do your hair, I’m crap at it anyway.” He tugs on her hair to make a point before he leaves, then hurries out the door.

When Susan sees him, she huffs and says, “It’s rude to keep a lady waiting, Mr. Malfoy!”

“I don’t see any ladies around here,” he says, offering Susan his arm.

She snorts, brown eyes bright, and says, “Your attitude is appalling.”

“Yes, I’ve been told I have a rather large,” he pauses, “ego.”

Susan lets out a very unladylike bark of laughter at that, then hooks their arms together and marches them towards the great hall. She’s shorter than him by half a head, but he has to rush to keep up with her.

Clearly, she’s not into the concept of being fashionably late. Oh well.

~

Harry almost walks past Luna, because she looks so different than normal. “You look really nice,” he says earnestly. The Patil twins had done a good job matching them – even though their clothes look so different, they’re sporting the exact same shades of blue and green.

She walks a half step closer to him. “Thank you. You look like very pretty.”

The compliment is so unexpected he can feel his whole face turn red. “Oh, uh, thanks.”

They go to the side room first, since the champions have to open the ball. He steps inside, and the first thing he notices is Hermione standing next to Viktor. She’s in pretty red dress robes, and her normally bushy hair is sleek and falls several inches longer than it normally does. “I love your hair!” he says.

She turns to him, and beams. “Thanks! I had Lavender help me apply the relaxer potion, she uses it way more than me.”

“Oh, your robes are wonderful!” Fleur says from right behind him, having just entered the room, and he turns to thank her.

Which puts him face to face, or, well, face to sternum, with Ron. Pansy had done a fantastic job on Ron’s robes. They’re perfectly tailored, and she’d kept the frills, but made them smaller so they look stylish rather than ridiculous. The dark brown doesn’t make him look drab anymore, instead it makes him look adult. The robes call attention to his broad shoulders and make his blue eyes stand out even brighter than normal – they make Ron look older, and for once his height seems purposeful rather than gangly.
Fleur is on his arm, charmingly lovely in a pale pink dress that threatens to clash with Ron’s hair, but somehow she makes it work. She’s got on a pair of towering heels so the top of her head is just above Ron’s shoulders.

“You didn’t tell me you were going with Fleur!” Harry says.

He rubs at his nose and shrugs, “It was last minute.”

“He is tall, and the only one who looked at my face when he asked me. My standards are low,” she says. “I did not want to go with someone from my own school, in order to show inter school unity. Besides, I knew his friends would be opening the ball, and I did not want him to be left out.”

“Thanks,” Ron says dryly. “I’m tall and pitiful. You’re a real charmer, has anyone ever told you that?”

Fleur giggles, and Harry looks, but – he doesn’t think they like each other. He knows he’s hardly the expert on these things, but he thinks maybe they just came as friends. He hopes they did. Hermione is smiling now, but there’d been a split second where she’d looked – well, not happy. He hopes Viktor didn’t notice.

Cedric and Cho arrive, and Harry’s eyes widen. They’re not wearing dress robes.

Cho has on a long sleeve white top with an overlapping sideways collar. Both the collar and the end of sleeves is trimmed in blue. A dainty yellow ribbon is pinned to the left side of the top, right where the overlapping collar ends. The skirt is dark blue with a simple yellow pattern, and starts above her waist, right just above the bottom of her ribcage, and flows out long and full to the floor.

Cedric is wearing an outfit clearly made to match. He has on loose pants that bunch at the ankles, a long sleeved white shirt, and a long vest that goes to his knees with the same overlapping collar and pattern as Cho’s shirt, and the same yellow ribbon as her top. Both of their outfits are made of a thick, shiny material.

“I feel underdressed,” Viktor says, smiling, “You guys look dashing.”

“Thanks!” Cho says, grinning. “They’re hanbok. I wouldn’t wear one to a dance normally, but I heard Harry was going to be wearing something traditional, and I couldn’t let him have all the fun.”

“You look great,” he says earnestly, then amends, “You both do.”


He flushes. Ron claps him on the shoulder, clearly about to make fun of him, but he’s saved when McGonagall steps in and says, “It’s time.” She gives them a once over and graces them all with a rare smile, “You all look very sharp.”

She then walks out before any of them can respond, and then they hurry to follow her out onto the dance floor.

This is pure torture. Harry looks good enough to eat, and he can’t even risk staring at him too long without it being suspicious. This entire situation is unacceptable on every level.

He’s glad Fleur is here with Ron – he’s nice, which might be damning in anyone else, but Fleur isn’t used to nice. It looks like they’re both having fun, and he hopes it stays that way. Of course, he’ll
have to give her crap for her choice of date later for the sake of appearances, but she doesn’t take any of his complaints seriously, so it hardly counts.

Harry and Luna look great together, and as promised Luna carefully guides Harry through the opening dance while making it look he’s leading her, instead of the other way around. Hermione and Krum look lovely, but Cedric and Cho are the only ones that truly look like they know what they’re doing. They’ve also been dating for over three years, so he supposes they’ve had the time to get comfortable with each other.

The dance floor opens up to them, and Susan gives him an expectant look. At some point this will devolve from a stuff ball into a proper dance, but they’ve got another hour or so until that happens.

“I don’t really feel like dancing, you understand, don’t you?” he asks.

“I’ll murder you in your sleep,” she answers.

Draco bites back a grin. “Oh, well, when you put it that way.”

Susan is as good at this as he expected, steps confident and smooth as they twirl around the dance floor. He catches glances of Blaise and Lavender around them, but Pansy and Flint are tucked away in a corner. Pansy likes dancing, but Flint is notoriously bad at it. He makes a note to dance with her at least once tonight, and to make sure Blaise does the same.

Cameras flash around them, and he pulls Susan closer so he can lean down and whisper into her ear, “You know, I might end up being the one who looks like a moderate because of this. They might just think you’re so pure that you’ve deigned to take me as a date.”

Susan blinks, then scowls. “Well, Fudge, I didn’t think of that.”

That startles a laugh out of him. “Did you just use the minister’s name as an expletive?”

“It fits,” she answers, more reflexive than defensive. “Have you read his most recent press release? Like anyone cares about streamlining the process to get an apparition license when he’s threatening to raise the taxes on its maintenance. Pretty much everyone would rather wait an extra hour in line then pay a renewal fee every year, so putting them together like one negates the other just makes him look like an idiot.”

“There are plenty of the old crowd who doesn’t care about the fee,” he says, “That’s a poor people problem. How do you expect to be minister if you can’t campaign both sides effectively?”

“Am I campaigning right now?” she asks.

He dips her and then says, “Ms. Bones, if you expect to be minister of magic by the time you’re forty, then you’re always campaigning.”

Luna is really, really good at dancing, and Harry’s never felt so grateful. With Luna leading him, he manages to make it through the dance without looking like an idiot, and once they’re dancing in the crowd and not the center of attention, he even has fun.

Ron and Fleur dance up next to them. “Switch?” he asks.

“Sure,” Harry says, and in the next moment Ron’s arm is around his waist and Fleur and Luna are twirling away from them. Luna looks extra small next to Fleur, but her dancing isn’t at all effected by
the difference in height. “I can’t believe you asked out Fleur.”

“Everyone had cool dates, and I didn’t want to be left out,” he admits, dipping Harry. “She was the coolest person I could think of who didn’t already have a date.”

Well, he’s got a point there. “Your robes look good.”

He brightens, “Pansy did a great job! Hey, so we can keep dancing, but also Percy is around here somewhere. Want to go say hi?”

Ron would rather get his hand cut off than admit he missed his stodgy, stuck up brother, but Harry’s known him long enough to know better. “Sure. What’s he even doing here?”

“Chaperoning. His boss was supposed to do it, but he couldn’t show up, so Percy got stuck with it instead.”

Percy is only a year older than some of the students. Being here as a chaperone has to suck. “His boss is kind of awful.”

“Yep,” Ron says.

When they find Percy, he has a truly horrible scowl on his face, which Harry doesn’t get, because wrapped around his arm is a pretty young woman with short, bubble gum pink hair. They’re talking to Cedric and Cho – or, well, the woman is. Percy is just standing there and glaring.

Harry hesitates, wondering if they shouldn’t interrupt, but Cedric sees them and waves them over. “Ron, Harry,” he greets warmly. “This is my soulmate, Tonks. She’s just graduated auror training.”

Ron’s eyes widen, and he looks at Cho. But Cho is smiling and comfortable, and Harry hadn’t told anyone about Cedric’s soulmate situation because he didn’t want to spread gossip about things that weren’t his business, but now he kind of wishes he’d said something.

“They have me mostly on desk duty for now,” she says, grinning. “It’s not all bad. It’s where I met Percy, after all!”

Percy looks like he wants the floor to open up and swallow him. This is Hogwarts, so it’s impossible. “You didn’t have to come with me. You have a report on tracking spells that you need to complete by Monday.”

“You keep track of my schedule! How sweet,” she coos. “What kind of girlfriend would I be if I let you come to this on your own?”

“You’re not my girlfriend,” he says, but he sounds more weary than irritated.

“Yet!” she finishes cheerfully. “Is it the hair? I can change my hair.” Her bubblegum locks lengthen and turn a mousy brown. Harry blinks, taken aback.

Cedric frowns, but Percy rolls his eyes. “I don’t care what you look like.”

Tonks’s hair becomes a vibrant purple and shortens into a severe bob. For a moment true affection shines through before she’s back to grinning manically. “Nice to meet you, Harry. I see your date is my cousin.”

“You’re Luna’s cousin?” he asks.

Tonks frowns. “Well, I’m the cousin of her cousin, so close enough?”
“What?” Ron asks.

Cho answers, “Tonks’s mother is a Black. She’s Draco Malfoy’s cousin.”

“Don’t hold it against me,” she says, “Except you, Percy dear, you can hold anything against me you’d like.” Percy’s whole face turns bright red.

“I’m out!” Ron says immediately. “I’m gone, we are leaving, goodbye.”

Cho and Cedric are laughing, and Harry waves goodbye to everyone as Ron drags him away.

Draco has lost Susan to a crowd of Durmstrang students. He spends a couple of minutes waiting for her, but figures she’ll find him when she wants him. He goes searching for Pansy, but instead he finds Cassius, looking incredibly bored and leaning against the wall.

It takes him about half a minute to pick George out of the crowd. He’s having a good time, laughing and dancing with Fred and their dates, two of the Gryffindor chasers. Their robes hadn’t been as hideous as Ron’s, but Pansy had taken a needle to them anyway. They’re plain, but they fit perfectly thanks to her alterations, and George has never looked better.

“You could have gone with him, you know,” Draco can’t help but point out.

Cassius startles, then scowls at him. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’re the one that doesn’t want to be seen in public with him,” he says, “it hardly seems appropriate that you’re the one pining in a corner.”

“I will set you on fire in the middle of this ball, Malfoy, I swear,” he threatens.

It’s not an effective threat. He holds out his hand, “Want to dance? It’ll at least be less pathetic than … whatever you’re doing over here that’s clearly not pining.”

Cassius eyes him for a long moment. “I don’t understand you at all.”

“Is that a yes, or a no?” he asks. Cassius sighs, but takes his hand. He sets to leading, and Draco goes with it. Cassius isn’t a great dancer, but he’s not likely to step on Draco’s feet either, so he’s not going to cause a fuss about it. “Are you ready to talk about it, or are you still being pissy?”

“Fuck you,” he says, but his hands are still light and easy on him, so he doesn’t really mean it. Some of his defensiveness has started to melt away, so now he looks more confused than angry. Draco will take what he can get.

“On the first date? How forward! What will my mother say?” he asks, and grins when Cassius lets out an unexpected snort of laughter and loses his footing.

Harry had only planned on surviving the Yule Ball. But everything’s winding down for the night, and people are starting to trek back to their dorm rooms, and it was actually … fun. He’d lost count of the number of people he’d danced with, and he’d been awful for about half of them because he had no idea what he was doing, but no one had made fun of him, and everyone had just been nice, the whole night. It was like the party at the shrieking shack, where everyone had put aside their differences long enough to just be friends for a bit.
Fleur is saying goodnight to Ron, and she gives him a delicate kiss on both cheeks that makes his whole face turn red. Hermione and Viktor had disappeared over an hour ago, and Harry hasn’t seen them since. Draco had already whisked Luna away, and she’s rolled her eyes and given Harry a shallow bow before following her cousin, so now he’s just waiting for Ron.

Seamus and Dean are talking with some Hufflepuffs, and it seems like Neville and Ginny haven’t left the dance floor all night. They’re surprisingly well matched, both in dancing and in just the way they keep laughing and talking together, which Harry hadn’t expected. Either Neville has an iron center he keeps tucked away for special occasions, or Ginny’s less terrifying than they all think she is.

He’s putting his money on the first option.

Harry sees Cedric walking over, Cho trailing a step behind him and yawning every other minute. She looks tired enough that he’s surprised she hasn’t climbed on her boyfriend’s back like she did at the shrieking shack party. The full skirt of hanbok probably has more to do with it than anything else.

“I was worried I’d miss you!” Cedric says, putting his hand on Harry’s back and leaning in close. “Look, there’s something I want to tell you. The prefect bathroom? Is a really good place to a bath.”

What the ever loving fuck. “Okay?”

Cho elbows her way between them, mid yawn, and puts her arm over Harry’s shoulders, leaning about half her weight against him. “Cedric, love, why are you torturing him?” She turns to him and says, “We were in the prefect bath, and if you stick the golden egg underwater and listen to it then it sings a pretty song. Anyway, it’s merpeople. They’re going to take something, and you have to get it back. Probably in the great lake, unless they do something extra impressive to the quidditch pitch.” She raises her hand to rub at her eyes, remembers she’s wearing makeup, and lowers it again. “The password for the prefect bathroom is pine something. Feel free to check it out yourself.”

“Pine fresh,” Cedric says, exasperated. “I was trying to be subtle!”

“The second task is in a week, who has time for that?” she asks. “Good luck Harry, try not to drown.”

“Thanks,” he says. “Care to tell me what you were doing in the prefect bathroom, Miss Chang?”

“Shagging,” she answers promptly.

“Eun-hae!” Cedric yelps, his voice going up several octaves in mortification.

Harry would make fun of him for it, but he’s too busy laughing so hard he develops a stitch in his side.

~

Draco, acting the part of the proper gentleman, escorts Susan back to her common room. He’s under no illusion that she’ll stay there, considering the very pretty Durmstrang girls he saw her surrounded by earlier. He’s not going back to his own dorms either, so he can hardly call her on it. He does give her a propriety kiss on the cheek and says, “Being your date was less awful than anticipated.”

“You’re an okay person, Draco,” she says, the absolute worst thing she’s ever said to him. He makes a face at that, but she just winks and disappears into her common room. Rude.

Pretty much everyone is sneaking into dorms that don’t belong to them, or convenient and too clean
broom closets, so everyone’s far too busy hoping no one pays any attention to them to notice Draco sneaking through the corridors.

He slips into their classroom, and locks the door behind him. Harry’s whole face lights up when he sees him, and he’d be lying if he said that didn’t make him feel just a little warmer. He’s still wearing that gorgeous glittering green robe and dark blue suit. “Draco! Cedric told me—”

He doesn’t give a shit what Cedric said. He yanks Harry so he stumbles and knocks into him, and Draco’s kissing him in the next moment. “Can it wait?” he asks, minutes later when Harry pulls away just so the both of them can breathe.

Harry cocks his head to the side, apparently giving the thought serious consideration, and Draco worries for a moment that it’s actually something important. But then he says, “Yep,” and goes back to kissing him.

Draco at least has the presence of mind to magic Harry’s robe off of him, although he’s thrown for a moment when it comes away in one large square of fabric. Harry’s tugging at his own robe, and Draco shrugs it off, so he’s just in his trousers, and this is new, and different. He tugs on Harry’s jacket, impatient, and he gives him a single shy glance before undoing the row of buttons down his front and tossing the jacket on top of Draco’s robe, then pulling off his undershirt as well.

There’s a lot more skin than he’s used to having access to. This time when they go back to kissing, it’s skin against skin. Harry is warm and Draco loves dragging his fingertips down Harry’s sides just because he likes the way he shivers when he does it.

When Draco eventually stumbles back to his dorm a couple hours later, it’s with a series of mouth shaped bruises down his chest. An excellent development, as far as he’s concerned.

Blaise is going to mock him ruthlessly. He doesn’t care in the slightest.

~

Sometime in the middle of snogging, Harry had told him what Cho and Cedric had said about the second task, which is why Draco is up this early the day after the Yule Ball. He’s almost certain there’s a book of spells designed specifically for underwater in the library, and he’d rather there not be anyone there to see him check it out. Millie is curled up on the couch in the common room, and he waves at her as he leaves. He still has no idea when that girl gets any sleep.

He’s right, and manages to check out the book without incident. He’s almost to the great hall when he turns a corner and nearly stumbles into Hermione. “Granger?” he asks, remembering not to use her first name at the last second, but not sounding nearly derisive enough. “What are you doing?” He realizes it’s a stupid question once he gets a proper look at her, and he can’t help but grin. Her hair is loose around her, and she’s still wearing her dress from the Yule Ball, although her face has been cleaned of any makeup. “So, how’s that Durmstrang ship look on the inside?”

“Shut up,” she hisses. “Why are you awake this early? This is exactly what I was trying to avoid!”

“Tell me the truth,” he says, “is it the size of the boat or the motion of the ocean?” It’s deserted except for the two of them, so he’s not too worried about maintaining their farce of bitter enemies. Making fun of her is clearly more important.

Most of her anger leaves her as she lets out an undignified snort, “What?”

“Tell me you didn’t kick everyone out of their dorm to get some alone time?” He hopes that’s exactly what she did.
“Viktor has a private room,” she sniffs, apparently moving on from denial.

“Did you have a good time?” he asks, and it’s a serious question.

She flushes, and nods, rubbing at the bridge of her nose to hide it.

He holds his hand up for a high five. She looks appalled, but she can either give in or listen to him stand there and ask embarrassing questions. She sighs, as if her life is very tiresome, and slaps her hand against Draco’s before continuing on her way to her common room.

He has no way to prove it, but he bets George is either making or made the same sort of escape from Cassius’s room. He should try interrogating Cassius again later. He thinks he’s wearing him down.

Draco looks down at the book in his hands, considering. He could go back to sleep. Or he could go to their classroom now, start reading, and have Winky bring him breakfast.

Just because it’s the holidays doesn’t mean that’s an excuse for laziness. Draco sighs, then goes in the opposite direction of his common room.

He hopes Harry appreciates all the sleep he doesn’t get for his sake.

~

The second task is getting steadily closer. Everyone’s been studying, and trying to figure out a way he can spend an hour underwater without dying. Draco had immediately tried to teach him the bubble head charm, but he kept on putting too much power into it, and it always shattered around him about a minute in. They keep practicing it, but a day into it Draco had said it was a waste of time – even if Harry did get the hang of it in time, it wouldn’t be stable enough for him to use. There would be just as much of a chance of it shattering thirty minutes in as not, and they didn’t want to risk it. They’d have to figure something else out.

It’s the day before the second task, and Harry’s resigned himself to having to use his crappy bubblehead charm and hoping for the best. Their best guess at what the merpeople are going to take is Harry’s invisibility cloak, but it’s still safely locked away in his trunk, so they’re not sure what’s happening there. Ron has just suggested they’re going to hold everyone’s breakfast hostage when the door slams open and Blaise strides inside, as pleased as Harry’s ever seen him.

“I’m a moron,” he says cheerfully, and holds slimy ball of what look like rat tails out to Harry, “This is the solution to all your problems!”

“It looks disgusting,” Ron says, standing up to poke at it warily.

“It is disgusting,” he says, “but that’s beside the point. It’s gillyweed. It’ll let you breathe underwater, and make it easier for you to swim. The effects last for a little more than an hour.”

“How did you get that?” Hermione demands.

Pansy scowls, “This is a horrible idea! It’s dangerous. Very, very dangerous.”

“I nicked it from Sprout’s private stores – she only puts up locking charms but no sensors because she thinks curious children should have access to restricted ingredients. If you’re smart enough to get past her wards, then she figures you’re smart enough to not seriously harm yourself,” Blaise says. “Longbottom nearly caught me while I was leaving, but he takes stuff from there nearly often as I do, so I’m sure it’s fine.”
Harry knows he should be more concerned with Pansy’s concern filled anger, but he’s a bit stuck on what Blaise said at the moment. “Neville? Our Neville? Just breaks into a teacher’s private stores and steals things?”

“She knows we take stuff, it’s not stealing,” he says. “The school board hardly approves anything for herbology, so this is her work around. It all comes out of her research budget, so it’s really nice of her, actually.”

“Wait, pause, back up,” Ron says, “Why is gillyweed dangerous? It sounds perfect!”

Pansy glares, and Blaise grimaces. She says, “It’s transfiguration magic, but it’s not guided transfiguration, it’s magic without a will. So, yes, pretty much everyone can breathe under water after consuming gillyweed. But it’s not neat or logical. Most of the time the person just gets gills, but sometimes they get tentacles for arms, and sometimes they turn into a fish. It’s too random, and too big of a risk to take.”

“Will it kill me?” Harry asks.

“No,” Blaise says, firm.

Pansy glares, but shakes her head. “We should at least sneak out to the great lake and test it. It’s at least consistently wonky, as long as the water and the person are the same.”

“We can’t, I only grabbed one,” Blaise says, “It would have looked weird if I took two. It looks weird that I took a full one to begin with – in herbology we basically just dissect them for the tendrils.”

Harry plucks the gillyweed out of Blaise’s hands. “Look, I’m taking it, since if I try and get in the great lake without it, I’ll probably end up drowning. Being a fish for an hour is better than death.”

“Unless you get eaten by a bigger fish,” Ron says, “Then it will be both.”

“Thank you, Ron,” he says, “That’s such a cheery thought.”

Ron claps him on the shoulder, “Here for you mate, whatever you need.”

~

Harry is woken just before dawn, and considering how hard it was for him to settle down and sleep, he wakes up with the immediate urge to commit murder. “Neville?” he croaks, recognizing the anxious face hovering over him. “What do you want?”

“I don’t know what you’re planning for later, maybe you’ve come up with something better, I’m sure you have, but – just in case.” He pushes something slimy and round into his hands, and Harry blinks in confusion at the gillyweed in his hands. “It’s a little risky, but it should help you in the lake. Dip it in the lake water before you eat it – you’ll have a better chance of it doing something useful if it had something to react to before it has to react to you.”

“Thanks,” he says, because that’s new information, but also it’s very early in the morning and he’s so confused. “How did you even—”

“I have to go, I have to water my herbology project before sunrise if I don’t want it to bite me,” and that doesn’t sound quite right to Harry, but he’s been bitten by a plant or two before, so maybe he’s wrong. Do they even have a herbology project right now? He’s pretty sure they don’t. “Good luck! We believe in you!” He smiles, pats Harry on the chest, and goes running out of their dormitory.
“Neville!” he calls out, struggling to get out of bed, but he’s already gone. Also, Ron is missing from his bed for some reason. Maybe they really do have a herbology project. Whatever, he can still grab another hour or two of sleep if he tries hard enough.

He sticks the gillyweed with the one Blaise had given him, in the pocket of the swimtrunks Pansy had altered for him, adding zippered pockets and a place to put his wand so he wouldn’t have to hold it the whole time. It’s not like having an extra can hurt.

Draco is in the stands seated in between Blaise and Pansy, and wondering who the hell thought this would make a good spectator event, since basically they’re just going to wait around for an hour seeing who gets back first. He brought today’s edition of the Daily Prophet to read while he waits. Luna’s article is on the front page, accompanied by a picture of Cedric smiling and waving. She’d written it under the pseudonym Mizuki Tanaka, using a loose translation of her first name in addition to her mother’s maiden name.

He can’t help but keep looking to where the Gryffindors are seated. Hermione is sitting between Neville and Lavender, and Ron is nowhere to be seen, which doesn’t make any sense. He wouldn’t miss this, so where in Merlin’s name is he?

Dumbledore rises from his place at the judge’s table, placed in front of the stands so it’s closer to the edge of the lake. He casts a sonorous charm to say, “Welcome everyone, welcome everyone! How nice to see you all on this fine day. As hopefully all the champions have discovered, we have taken something they will sorely miss and handed them over to the merpeople. You have an hour to fight your way through the great lake, retrieve what’s been taken, and return to the shore.”

He sits as Madame Maxime stands, her voice booming and loud enough to be heard without the aid of magic. “From Fleur Delacour, we have taken her younger sister, Gabrielle Delacour.”

A gasp ripples through the crowd. “They wouldn’t,” Pansy says softly, even though they very obviously would.

“They’ve lost their minds,” Millie says, sitting right behind Draco. “People aren’t things! They shouldn’t be taken and used in tournaments!”

Karkaroff announces, “From Viktor Krum, we have taken his mother, Elena Krum.”

Draco considers what he would do if someone threatened his mother, and hopes Karkaroff doesn’t value any of his limbs.

Dumbledore stands again. “From Cedric Diggory, we have taken his girlfriend, Cho Chang.”

“They have a death wish,” Blaise says, “it’s the only explanation.” No one disagrees.

“From Harry Potter, we have taken his friend, Ronald Weasley,” he finishes. “When the fireworks go off, you may begin. To all the champions – good luck!”

If looks could kill, the three school heads would be dead before they hit the ground.

The other champions look as pissed as he feels, so there’s that comfort at least. The fireworks shoot and explode over the lake, and they all go running. Fleur and Cedric perform the bubble head charm. Viktor transfigures himself partially into a shark, and if his best friend hadn’t been captured as part of
a tournament he didn’t want to take part in in the first place, he would totally tell him how awesome that is. He promises to do it anyway assuming neither of them die.

He takes out one of the gillyweed balls, dunks it in the lake water, and shoves it in his mouth. It is, hands down, one of the grossest things he’s ever eaten. He has to clap his hand over his mouth to keep from spitting it out. Just because he has a spare doesn’t mean he wants to have to use it this early.

If he’d known his best friend’s safety was going to be at stake, he might have been a little less cavalier at the possibility of turning into a fish.

Suddenly he can’t breathe, and he falls into the water, then he can. He reaches for the side of his neck, where gills are fluttering against his skin. Except his hand feels different, and actually so do his feet. Oh, merlin. He has webbed hands and – he doesn’t even know what for feet. Maybe he is turning into a fish.

Except he waits a couple moments, and nothing else happens. He can see everyone else swimming ahead of him, and he doesn’t care about his time, but he does care about Ron. So he starts swimming forward, and he knows how to swim, but he’s not a great at it. He’d done some laps in the prefects bath these past few days just to make sure he remembered how to do it, but he’s nothing close to actually good at it.

So he’s understandably startled when he goes zooming past everyone else.

Moving through the water is easy, and he’s fast, faster than it makes any sort of sense for him to be. He loves magic.

The merpeople live on the bottom center of the lake, so assuming they’re keeping everyone there, he at least knows where to go. There are boulders being flung through the water at him, but he’s fast enough that they’re almost easy to ignore. All that time dodging bludgers is finally paying off, even if he’s not on a broom. The longer he swims, the more it occurs to him that the great lake has to be charmed in some way – it’s fresh water near the shore, but he’s in salt water now, and it’s much wider and deeper once he’s in it than it looks from the outside.

Angry grindylows with their sharp teeth swarm him from all sides, and he reaches into his pocket for his wand. “Filpendio!” A bunch of them go flying, but one manages to dart forward and sink its teeth into Harry’s forearm. He curses, and switches his wand to the other hand to cast the stunning charm, and carefully pries the stunned creature off of him so its teeth don’t do any more damage. There’s another wave of the things coming toward him, and he slashes his wand across the incoming grindylows at an angle. “Petrificus totalus maximus!”

They all freeze, softly floating through the water with the current. He doesn’t know how long it will hold them, so he hurries on his way. His arm is bleeding something awful, and he doesn’t want to stop, but he also doesn’t want to bleed out in the middle of the lake. He skims along the sandy floor until he finds a long, thick piece of seaweed, and he wraps it around his wound and keeps it all in place with a sticking charm. He’s not sure how sanitary it is, but he figures as long as his arm doesn’t fall off Pomfrey will manage to fix any damage he does.

Not long after that he sees the rise of the merpeople’s city, spiral towers and thick columns, and there’s no way all that fits in a lake. All four of the champions’ hostages are tied to large poles staked in front of the city’s gates.

First on one end is Viktor’s mum, a woman with pale skin and dark hair, then Cho, then a young girl with pale blond hair who must be Gabrielle, and finally Ron.
He heads for Ron, but as soon as he gets about twenty feet in about two dozen merpeople with spears form lines in front of them. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

They raise their spears a little higher.

He takes out his wand, and they aren’t grindylows, he doesn’t want to actually hurt them. But he’s not about to let them get in his way either. He twists his wrist just like Draco taught him and shouts, “Gravitas penna!” He’s not fantastic at the featherlight charm, but he doesn’t have to be. His magic falls over the merpeople, and before they have a chance to adjust he casts, “Reducto!” It’s slightly less forceful then filpndio, but thanks to his semi-effective featherlight charm the force of it scatters them all across the sea floor. He swims over to Ron, and tugs uselessly at the ropes for a bit before giving up.

The merpeople shake off the effects of his spells, and he raises his wand, ready to fight them off again. But they only get back in line in front of the hostages, not sparing him a second glance. Huh. Cool.

“Relashio!” The ropes binding Ron fall away, and Harry grabs him around the waist to keep him from floating to the ground. He casts a featherlight charm on Ron too, because holding him up is pretty easy while they’re underwater, but his arm is on fire where the grindylow bit him, and he doesn’t want to make it worse if he can help it. He has Ron, and he should go.

But.

Leaving the others here, unconscious in the middle of the lake seems … wrong. Besides, everyone keeps telling him that people die during this tournament. What if the merpeople’s song was literal, and they really will keep whoever isn’t rescued?

He props Ron against the pole, and ties him upright with the ropes he’d just gotten him out of. He doesn’t want him floating away when he isn’t looking. A merman swims up to him, but he’s not holding any weapons. He has dark skin and eyes, but long green hair the same color of seaweed. He opens his mouth, and it’s the same melodic voice from the golden egg, “Child, you are making a mistake. You have completed the trial – this boy is yours to take.”

“I can’t leave them,” he says, pointing to the others. “I’m going to wait until the other champions come to get them. Then I’ll go.”

The merman frowns. “First to arrive and last to leave? These are not your people to retrieve.”

“I’ll stay,” he says firmly, and raises his wand. “Would you like to try and stop me?”

He raises his hands in surrender, mouth tilting up at the corners. “It is your decision, and your choice is clear. I will step aside and not interfere.”

True to his word, he swims away, although he doesn’t join the ranks of merpeople standing guard in front of the hostages. Instead he settles himself on the top of the city gates, watching the proceedings with a keen eye. Harry doesn’t have time to think on it anymore, since Cedric is swimming up to them. It doesn’t look like he got bitten, but he’s covered in scratches, including a particularly deep one on his leg that makes Harry wince when he sees it.

Cedric is wild eyed as he faces off against the merpeople. “Ventus!” he shouts. A huge gust of wind appears in the water, creating a mini typhoon that pushes all the merpeople aside. It’s about a thousand times cooler than what Harry did.

He swims to Cho, gently touching her face. Some of the manic energy leaves him. He turns and
asks, “Harry, what are you still doing here?”

“He hanging out?” he offers. Cedric rolls his eyes. “I’m not trying to win this thing, remember? Get your girlfriend and get out of here. You’re in the lead right now, and if you hurry you can keep it that way.”

He ruffles Harry’s hair before undoing Cho’s ropes. He catches her as she falls, holding her in his arms and against his chest as he swims back to shore.

A few minutes after him, Viktor shows up, looking relatively unharmed, but from the opposite direction Harry and Cedric had come from. He must have gotten lost. He summons a metal shield and props himself straight through the merpeople, like a bowling ball, and Harry’s laughing when Viktor makes it over. He transfigures a stone into a knife, and works on cutting down his mother.

“Are you all right, Harry?” he asks. He pulls his mother over his back, but hesitates before leaving. “Do you need help?”

“I’m good,” he grins. “Get your mum to the surface. I’ll catch up later.”

Viktor shrugs, and heads in the same direction as Cedric. He’s faster, but Cedric did get a head start, so Harry’s not sure which one of them will actually end up being the winner.

Then he waits.

And waits.

His whole arm below is grindelow bite is tingling, which can’t be a good sign, and his gills are starting to itch, which he’s pretty sure means he has to get to the surface soon if he doesn’t want to drown down here.

The same merman from before swims over and says, “I believe you ought to know. An hour has passed, so it is time to go.”

Harry scans the water, but he doesn’t see anything. Whatever happened to Fleur, she’s not here, and he has to leave. “I’m taking the girl with me,” he tells the merman. He has to get Ron out of here, but he’s not leaving anyone behind.

The merpeople with spears growl and edge forward, and Harry grips his wand, ready. The merman in front of him raises a hand, and they all fall silent. “We will not get in your way. But hurry, you must return without delay.”

That is … unexpectedly generous. Harry doesn’t have the time to question it. He magics them both free, casts a mediocre featherlight charm, then grabs them both by the back of their shirts and swims to the surface. He’s almost there when the effects of the gillyweed finally dissipate, and he barely remembers to hold his breath.

He breaks the surface gasping, and a second later Ron and Gabrielle join him, coughing as their stasis charm is broken. Gabrielle’s eyes fill with tears, and she starts flailing, yelling something in French. Harry tries to grab for her, but if she fights him, they’ll probably both go down. Without the gillyweed, he doesn’t think he’s a good enough swimmer to keep them both afloat.

“Hey!” Ron says, pushing Harry aside and pulling Gabrielle closer by her wrists to steady her. “Calm down. You’re okay.” He’s speaking in a low, soothing tone, but he doesn’t let go of her, keeping her steady so she can’t pull away and drown.

“Where is my sister?” she cries, her accent coming out much thicker than Fleur’s. “They said she
would come get me!”

“I’m Ron, and this is Harry,” he says calmly, “We’re friends with Fleur, and we’re going to take you to the shore. She’s probably waiting for you there. But I need you to relax, okay?”

Remarkably, that seems to work. She sniffs and nods. “I do not like the water,” she whispers.

Ron smiles and tucks her hair behind her ear. “That’s okay, we’ll protect you. Here, why don’t you ride on my back? That way I know you’re safe, and you don’t have to worry about getting lost in the water. Okay?”

She nods again, and Ron shifts his grip so he can drag her close enough that she can cling to him. He instructs her to wrap her legs around his waist, and to wrap her arms around his neck, but not too tightly, so that he can still breath.

By the time she’s finished doing as he says, she’s almost entirely calmed down. Harry is impressed. “Where did you learn to do that?”

He shrugs, and then jerks his head towards land. “Come on, it looks far, but we can get there in a couple minutes if we hurry.”

If that’s true, then it has more to do with the magical properties of the lake than anything to do with their swimming abilities, because Harry feels like he’s moving his limbs through molasses, and Ron isn’t moving much faster.

“Um, Harry, can I ask you something?” Ron asks.

Harry hopes his tired glare conveys how dumb of a question that is.

It must, because Ron grins and says, “When McGonagall took me, she said the Goblet said I was the one you would most sorely miss. And I was expecting it to be,” he hesitates and his eyes flicker to the little girl on back, “someone else.”

Harry is so surprised that he stops moving for a moment, and then has to force his tired limbs to move even faster to catch up. “You’re my best friend,” he says, with more force than he intended. Ron’s eyes widen. “He – he’s what he is,” he says, “but you’re my best friend and my first friend, and I wouldn’t have anyone or anything if I didn’t have you. I don’t remember my parents, so you, and your family, are – you were the first – I felt so alone, before I met you. You’re the person who made me not feel lonely anymore.”

That was an incredibly embarrassing speech, and maybe he should just stop swimming and let the lake take him and put him out of his misery. Ron grins from ear to ear, and hugs him right then, the both of them freezing and soaked and with Ron carrying Gabrielle on his back. “Okay,” he says, pulling back and urging them both forward again. “I – okay.”

They make it to shore, and Gabrielle doesn’t let go of Ron, so he keeps carrying her on his back.

Cedric and Cho are sitting in the sand next to Viktor and his mum. There’s a fresh white bandage on Cedric’s leg, but he hasn’t been seen to by a healer yet. The judges’ faces are dark. “What’s wrong?” Harry asks immediately.

“Fleur hasn’t made it back yet,” Cedric says grimly, “We were hoping she was with you.”

“It’s been almost an hour and a half,” Viktor adds.
“We have to go get her!” Harry says, “Why hasn’t anyone gone after her?”

Madame Maxime stands, her face ashen. “We are waiting for a report from the merpeople. Only then are we permitted to enter the water and search for her. That was the deal we struck in exchange for their help.”

Harry stares, appalled. “She could be hurt! She could be dying!” He almost adds that she could be dead, but Gabrielle’s already started crying again. Ron’s twisted her so she’s settled on his hip, and she’s still holding onto his neck with her face buried in his chest.

“We are not permitted to enter the great lake,” Karkaroff says. “Whatever aid the girl may or may not require will have to wait until we are given permission to enter by the merpeople. You may be eager to start a war, Mr. Potter, but I am not.”

Harry’s never wanted to punch someone so strongly before in his life, including Rita Skeeter. “Fine. Champions are allowed to go in the lake, aren’t they? I’ll go get her myself.”

“I’ll help!” Cedric says. He attempts to stand, but his wounded leg nearly buckles. Cho throws his arm over her shoulder, trying to push him upright.

Viktor moves to get up, but his mother grabs his wrist and yanks him back down, her face thunderous. He tries to pull away, but she doesn’t let him, grabbing onto his arm with two hands.

“You could get hurt,” Dumbledore says, looking even older than he usually does, looking tired.

“What else is new?” Harry asks. He shakes his head at Viktor, and puts his hand on Cedric’s shoulder. “It’s okay, I’ll go by myself.”

“You’re hurt too,” Cedric retorts, glancing pointedly at his arm.

“I can at least stand,” he says, “I’ll find her, and I’ll bring her back. We don’t need you getting more hurt than you already are.”

“Harry!” Cedric calls out, but he’s already walking back into the lake. He pulls out the other gillyweed out his pocket, pops it in his mouth, and heads into the water.

The changes are the same, but he’s not sure where to go. The great lake is big – far, far bigger than it looks from the outside, and if he just starts swimming in a random direction he’ll never find her. Hermione mentioned a spell once – but it seemed to silly, like the spell the twins gave Ron to turn his rat yellow in first year.

Well, it’s not like he has anything to lose.

He takes out his wand and places it flat on his hand. It’s a simple spell, mostly dependent on the power of the caster and how close the other person or object is. This should be easy. Hopefully. “Point me Fleur Delacour.”

His wand twists in his hands, pointing to the left. Well, it’s better than swimming blindly. He follows the direction of the spell, pausing every few minutes to recast it and ensure he’s still going the right way. Eventually, he hears the sounds of yelling in the distance, and he just follows that instead.

Far from the merpeople city, the same couple dozen merpeople with spears are fighting alongside the giant squid, trying to keep Fleur at bay. The merman who had spoken to him is there too, but hanging back from the fighting, watching it with a critical eye. He looks uninterested, but his hands are clenched into fists. A mermaid jabs forward, nearly gutting Fleur, and the merman calls out,
“Cause her no harm! Only try and disarm!”

Fleur fights like she’s possessed.

Her face has sharpened in her fury, and she flings out high level offensive spell one after the other, trying to strike anything and anyone. The giant squid is covered in oozing, bleeding wounds, apparently having taken the brunt of her spells on himself. “WHERE’S MY SISTER?” she screams, “WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO HER?” Some of the merpeople try and speak, but they don’t have the time to get the words out in between her constant barrage of spells.

What he does next is cowardly, but it’s also necessary.

She hasn’t noticed him yet, so Harry raises his wand against her unprotected back and casts, “Stupefy!”

He hadn’t wanted to put too much power into it, wary of hurting her, so for a moment she fights it, and he’s got another on his lips when she falls, stunned. He hurries forward to catch her before she hits the ground.

The warriors instantly ignore him, instead turning to the flailing, bleeding giant squid. The merman from before swims over to them. “I’m sorry,” Harry says instantly, “She didn’t mean – or well, she thought – she was worried over her sister.”

“When we agreed to this game, we knew the risks with which it came,” he says, although his face is pained. “Between us there is no score. Tell your people that we do not bring war.”

“Can I help?” he asks, looking at the squid, “Do you need help? Is there something I can do?”

The merman tilts his head to the side, considering. “You have no debt to fulfill. But it would help if he could be kept still.”

“I’ll help,” he says firmly, “I’ll pay her debt. Can someone take her to shore, and I’ll stay behind? I can’t go back until the gillyweed wears off anyway. I might as well be useful.”

The merman snaps his fingers, and two of the warriors peel off from helping the squid and come over. Harry repeats his request, holding Fleur’s unconscious body out to them. They look to the merman, who nods, and then they take Fleur, swimming her in the direction of the shore.

The merman gestures to the writhing, bleeding giant squid, and Harry takes a deep breath. He’s absolutely crap at healing charms, he can barely manage to heal a papercut, never mind anything more complicated than that. But keeping it still – that he can do. He’s never cast this spell on something this large before, something this powerful before, but he can do this. Draco is always yelling at him about how his spellcasting is all power without any finesse, and here is a situation where this will finally come in handy.

“Immobulus!” he casts, putting everything has behind it.

Which, in hindsight, was probably a little too much.

His magic leaves him in a rush of blinding light, and when he blinks it away, the giant squid is completely still, unable to move any of its massive limbs. It’s pulled away with the current, and Harry hastily casts the levitation charm to keep it close. He grits his teeth as he holds onto the giant squid, because this thing is heavy, and he really wishes he was better at featherlight charms. With something this big, his weak charm would have just shattered. So instead he holds it steady with wingardium leviosa, and it should be easier because they’re in the water, but the magic doesn’t know
that, and Harry can already feel the strain of keeping the massive beast steady in his shoulders. If he hadn’t already been exhausted before this it wouldn’t be so bad, but he was and it is.

“This is too large a spell to maintain,” the merman says, “Soon it will cause you great pain.”

“Carry me back when I’m done if I can’t go myself,” Harry says, and he can’t feel sweat underwater, but his whole body feels too hot, like he’s boiling from the inside.

He doesn’t waste any more time arguing with Harry. He joins the others, who have abandoned their spears and now press their hands to the wounds Fleur had inflicted. At first Harry thinks they’re just trying to stop the bleeding, but then their hands glow a soft green, and when they remove them the skin they were touching is healed. The merman who Harry had been speaking to has hands that glow brighter than anyone around him.

Soon he doesn’t have the energy to pay attention to them. Instead, he just focuses on sustaining his spells and not passing out, because there’s an itching burn up along his spine, and he keeps on having to blink black spots away. He can’t feel his arm below the grindylow bite, which he figures is at least better than it being in excruciating pain. He really hopes Pomfrey doesn’t need to regrow his arm.

An ice cold hand touches the back of his neck, and he startles, looking beside him. The same merman is there, and everyone has backed off the giant squid. It’s not bleeding anymore. There are thick, angry scars where oozing wounds used to be. “Is it going to be okay?”

The merman nods.

Harry sighs in relief, and he can feel the tell tale itching at his gills, so he’s running out of time. He needs to get to the surface. “Finite incantatum!”

Breaking the spells is an instant relief. The squid moves its large tentacles slowly, like it’s getting used to them again, but it’s not flailing in pain anymore. It really is going to okay. He tries to swim up, but his limbs are too tired to move properly, and his bitten arm doesn’t want to move at all. He panics, struggling, but doesn’t get more than a dozen or so feet before the gillyweed’s effects disappear, and he’s still so deep in the water, he’ll never make it to the surface in time. His lungs are already burning, and he has to fight against the urge to open his mouth. He’s feeling lightheaded, but he has to keep moving, maybe it’s not as far away as it looks –

A cold arm grabs him around the waist, and the merman’s face fills his vision. A second later, freezing lips press against his own. Harry’s eyes widen, and the merman pulls back. His mouth falls open before he can stop it, but suddenly he can breathe again. It’s not the same as before, he doesn’t have gills or anything, he’s just – breathing, somehow, underwater.

“Your end is not in the sea. I hope of this trespass you forgive me,” he says. He pulls apart Harry’s crappy seaweed bandage, and his arm is purple below the angry, deep grindylow bite. The merman presses his hand against the bite and there’s that same steady green light. It feels like Harry’s plunged his entire arm in a bucket of ice. When the glow subsides, he’s healed, the only thing to show he was hurt in the first place is a row of white pinprick scars where the grindylow’s teeth had sunken into his skin.

Harry blinks, looking at his arm. Then everything catches up with him, and he yelps, “I have a boyfriend!”

The merman’s eyes crinkle at the corners. “Inform him it was not planned. Come, you must return to land.”
He holds Harry flush against his ice cold side, and Harry’s already shivering when he tentatively wraps his arm around the merman’s shoulders. Even tugging Harry along, he swims smoother and faster than Harry had with the gillyweed.

~

Draco guesses he’s just going to have to get used to Harry disappearing for no reason, since he takes longer than the allotted hour to return, and then is enough of an idiot to jump back into the lake. He wants to be angry about it, but he can’t. Harry is going after Fleur, when no one else can, and he can’t be upset about that. Worried, of course, but he’d do the same if he could.

About thirty minutes pass, and two merpeople bring an unconscious Fleur to the surface, but Harry is nowhere in sight. They twist their arms to direct the current to push her to the shore, then disappear back into the water. She doesn’t look hurt, but he’s too far away to tell for sure. Cho and Viktor hurry over to her, but before they make it over she gasps awake and pushes herself upright. Her bubble head charm shatters, and she pulls herself to her feet, swaying. Viktor and Cho stop in their tracks, and Draco doesn’t understand why until she turns to face them.

She’s sopping wet, her swimsuit torn even though she looks unhurt, and her face is twisted in an expression of such intense fury that Draco feels a chill go down his spine. He’s not alone, because both Pansy and Blaise scoot closer to him.

“Fleur!” Maxime says, overjoyed, because she’s an idiot.

“You,” she hisses, and the water is steaming off of her. Do none of these people remember that this girl is a quarter veela? “You took my sister! You took her from me!”

Dumbledore stands, “Miss Delacour, please calm down–”

Gabrielle is off to the side with Ron, but he’s holding her back, probably worried about letting her run forward when her sister is this angry. At least someone has some common sense.

“CALM DOWN?” she roars, and oh no, these people really are morons. They picked the most powerful students from each school and then took the person who mattered most to them. Did they expect them to accept defeat quietly? These are people who agreed to look death in the face, and the adults really think that this is just a game, that there wouldn’t be consequences. None of the judges are moving, none have their wands in their hands, because apparently they don’t understand just what they’ve done. “MY SISTER IS GONE BECAUSE OF YOU! MY – MY SISTER–”

Draco reacts before he can think better of it, because he doesn’t care if she does this, but he knows that she’ll regret it later. He stands, pulls out his wand, and shouts, “PROTEGO MAXIMUS!”

A blue shield of protective magic springs to life in front of the judges’ table just seconds before Fleur lets loose a whip of golden fire. It smashes into his shield, and it shudders, but holds. The judges seem shocked, as if it wasn’t glaringly obvious what she was about to do. Fleur’s more powerful than him, and she’s mad. His shield will break if she keeps this up, so he has to do something.

“Mihi virtutem tuam, mihi virtutem tuam, mihi virtutem tuam,” he mutters, locking his eyes on his shield and doing everything he can not to so much as blink. The incantation is old, but it works. The next spell Fleur hurls at the shield is absorbed into it, and the spot where the blast hit the shield is now an iridescent silver. As long as he keeps chanting and doesn’t blink, that will keep happening. The judges have finally figured out that Fleur isn’t fucking around, and they get out of their chairs and back away, wands in their hands.
Fleur realizes none of her spells are getting through, and flames dance along her shoulders. She looks towards him, towards the stands filled with students, and Draco knew this was coming. “Incendio!” she snaps, a veritable wall of fire heading towards them. He doesn’t take it personally. She thinks her sister is dead or worse, and in her grief she seeks to destroy anything that gets in her way.

He doesn’t have the power to cast another protego, but thanks to Fleur he has enough to expand the one he already has. His original shield is almost entirely silver, pulsating with the power Fleur attacked it with. He drags his wand sideways, not letting his grasp on the shield go, and casts, “Capitulum quintum!”

The shield explodes outwards, covering the stands and protecting everyone in them, fueled by Fleur’s magic that he’d managed to trap within it. Her wall of fire breaks harmlessly against the shield, and flames sprout around her hands in her rage.

Draco thinks his eyes have to be deceiving him, because it looks like Ron is running across the sand towards the furious witch, but that can’t be right, because that would be moronic.

“Fleur!” he calls out, “Your sister is here! Gabrielle is fine!”

She turns to him, but he’s gotten close enough to her that he just grabs onto her arms, carefully avoiding the flames. “Let me go!” she howls. Ron is strong, but so’s Fleur, and if he’s not careful she will take him down, no magic needed.

He shakes her and twists her around, to where Gabrielle is standing between Cedric and Cho. The flames covering her go out, and tears fill her eyes. “Gabrielle?”

Ron lets her go, and Cedric and Cho do the same to Gabrielle. She bolts, running towards her elder sister, arms outstretched. “It’s okay!” she says in French, “I’m okay, everything’s okay, Ron and Harry brought me back!”

They slam into each other, Fleur falling to her knees and wrapping her arms around Gabrielle, who buries her face in her sister’s chest.

Draco lets out a sigh of relief and lets the shield drop. He falls back into his seat, wiping sweat from his forehead, and tries to avoid the couple hundred pairs of eyes that are on him. Blaise summons him a glass of water, and Pansy shifts closer so he can lean against her without making it obvious that’s what he’s doing.

He’s barely gotten the chance to catch his breath when the lake starts bubbling and a stream of water pops out, raising vertically in the air. A dark skinned merman with green hair sits in the middle of it, holding Harry carefully against his side. Which is strange enough all on its own, up until he gets a closer look at his tail. It’s dirty bronze edged in gold, which means – what in merlin’s name happened down there?

Maxime is looking towards Fleur, twisting her hands, and Karkaroff would clearly rather cut off his own hands than get a single inch closer. So it’s Dumbledore who steps forward, bowing deeply. “Prince Akeakamai.”

“Prince!” Harry exclaims, “You didn’t tell me that!”

What the fuck. Was Harry just chit-chatting with the prince of the merpeople down there?

Fleur pulls herself to her feet, still clutching Gabrielle to her side. “I am so sorry,” she hiccups, face red and puffy from crying. “I thought you had – I am so sorry.”
Akeakamai raises a hand, and she falls silent. “To avenge your sister, you did what you must. There
is no quarrel between us.” Since he’s in the column of water, his words come out light and melodic,
and not as the screeches that merpeople’s voices sound like in the air.

“But I–”

He shakes his head, “You fought bravely, child, and for this you should be admired.’”

Fleur lets loose a fresh wave of tears, but doesn’t try and argue anymore.

He uses the water to gently deposit Harry onto the sand, and he stumbles but doesn’t fall. “Thanks
for your help!” he says, waving. He clearly has no idea how important or powerful the merman is,
even if he now knows that he’s a prince.

Akeakamai smiles and inclines his head to Harry, a courtesy he hadn’t even showed Dumbledore.
“May we meet again, my friend.” The column of water sinks back into the lake, taking the prince
with it.

Harry looks at all of them, at the crying Fleur and scattered judges, at Ron hovering uncertainly near
the Delacour sisters, at the way half the people are staring at him while the other half are staring at
Draco, and tilts his head to the side. “Did I miss something?”

Ron pinches the bridge of his nose.

“Somehow,” Cedric says dryly, “I feel like we should be the ones asking you that.”

Harry blinks, not understanding. Unbelievable.

Chapter End Notes

the lovely, fabulous, and talented PitViperOfDoom made a TV Tropes page for this fic!
please check it and her out! (if you like bnha and you haven't read yesterday upon the
stair yet, wyd??)

dovecandies had made some super cute fanart you can view here and here

megalania-prisca had done several gorgeous pieces for siat that you can view here

i hope you guys liked it!!

feel free to follow / harass me at: shanastoryteller.tumblr.com

i post writing updates in my progress report tag if that's something you're interested in
keeping track of!
Draco can feel people still looking at him, and he hates it.

The champions have finally been lined up to receive their scores. The hostages are standing behind them, except Gabrielle, who refuses to let go of her sister.

The judges are trying to regain their equilibrium. They’re doing their absolute best to pretend like Fleur hadn’t just attempted to murder them, and Harry wasn’t hand delivered back to shore by the merpeople prince. Some are doing better than others.

Viktor had made it back with his hostage first, and had sustained minimal injuries, so he’s awarded the most points, and Cedric receives a little below that, so now the two of them are tied for first place. Harry had come back with his hostage, even if it had been past the time limit, so his score is decent. Everyone hesitates before giving Fleur’s score, and Maxime gives her the same score as Harry, for her show of power, but she receives a low score from everyone else.

Except Dumbledore.

He awards Fleur a perfect score for unflinching loyalty, determination, and dedication to her loved ones.

It almost makes Draco hate him a little less.

Millie leans down and whispers in his ear, “You’re not going to pass out when you stand up, are you?”

He wishes he could be offended by that, but considering Millie has caught him as he passed out twice before, it’s almost a reasonable question. “No, don’t be ridiculous. I mostly used Fleur’s magic anyway.” He’s actually super tired and just wants to curl up on his bed and go to sleep, but that’s fine, that’s easy enough to push aside and ignore.

“Oh, except for the initial protego powerful enough to protect a panel of judges from a pissed off half veela,” Blaise says.

Draco turns to him, betrayed. “You’re supposed to be on my side!”

“I’m always on your side,” he sighs, “unfortunately.”

“We should go now, before you get swarmed by people asking questions you don’t want to answer,” Pansy says.

He considers this. “Will running away mean they won’t ask me?”

“No,” she says, “but it means you’ll be able to avoid them for a bit.”

“Sold,” he says, almost before she’s finished talking. “Let’s get out of here.”

The school heads are in the middle of giving a speech about unity and hard work, or whatever. All Draco cares about is that it means they manage to get away before everyone is released. He’s half expecting to have to shove people aside to get down from the stands, but it’s not necessary.
Everyone silently scoots aside, so he and his friends can easily walk down and away, heading back towards the school. “That was weird,” Pansy says.

Millie snorts. “He did just save their lives. The least they can do is get out of his way.”

“I did not save their lives,” he says dismissively as they step back into the castle. “Don’t be dramatic.”

Blaise and Pansy do a horrible job of covering their laughter, while Millie looks the most offended he’s ever seen her. “I’m dramatic? Me?”

“You should work on that, it’s so uncouth,” he says, and he’s lucky Millie likes him enough not to strangle him.

They’re almost to the Slytherin common room when a stern voice calls out, “Mr. Malfoy! A moment, if you please.”

They all freeze. They could keep going, but she’d just follow them, and he doesn’t want to extend this conversation any longer than necessary. He turns on his heel and places his hands behind his back, just in case she notices them shaking. It’s small enough that no one else has, but he wouldn’t put anything past McGonagall.

He wishes he was an adrenaline junkie like his soulmate, Harry got off on crap like this, while it almost always just left Draco feeling nauseous and tired.

“Yes, professor?” he says. “Is there something I can help you with?” He’s more comforted than he’d like to admit by his friends at his back.

She’s looking at him over her glasses, and just once Draco would like to know what she’s thinking. “That was a very brave thing you did back there, Mr. Malfoy.”

“Brave?” he spits, like it’s a curse word. “I’m not one of your damn lions!”

She doesn’t seem angry. Instead, she almost looks amused. “I would be a very foolish woman if I thought only my Gryfffindors could be brave. And a blind one on top of that. Mr. Malfoy, for your quick thinking, impressive spellwork, and courage, I award Slytherin one hundred house points.”

“I’d rather you didn’t,” he says before he can think better of it, and his whole face turns red. “I mean–”

“Good evening, Mr. Malfoy,” she says, almost kindly. She then nods to the people behind him, “Mr. Zabini, Miss Parkinson, Miss Bulstrode.”

“Professor,” they chorus, and then as soon as her back is turned, they yank Draco into the common room.

Harry is absolutely dying to find out what happened with Draco. By the way people are looking at him, it’s obvious that something did. He notices him ducking out of the stands with the others, and they can’t meet tonight, but he wants to, he wants to know what the hell is going on.

The second task concludes, and everyone is released back to the castle, except for the champions who are all required to report to the hospital wing. Fleur is still crying, and he’s sent Cedric and Viktor questioning looks, but they only shaken their heads. Thanks to Akeakamai, Harry is
unharmed, unlike everyone else, which means he gets to go back to his common room way earlier than the others.

He’s just stepped out of the hospital wing when he sees someone waiting for him. Neville is leaning against the wall, arms crossed and scowling. “Hey,” Harry greets, confused. “Is something wrong?”

Neville walks over and jabs him in the chest. It’s possibly the most aggressive thing Harry’s ever seen him do, and he’s too surprised to be upset by it. “What the hell is going on with you and Blaise Zabini?”


His eyes narrow. “You had two balls of gillyweed. I took one from Sprout’s stores, and I know Zabini took another. I thought it was for Fleur, but she had none, and you had two. Why is Zabini stealing ingredients for you?”

“Um,” he says, head spinning, struggling to come up with a believable reason that has nothing to do with them being friends. “Blackmail?”

Neville just stares at him for a long moment, unimpressed. “You’re not normally this bad of a liar. I may be a coward, but I’m not an idiot. Tell me the truth!”

“Neville!” Harry says, genuinely upset for the first time during this conversation. “Don’t say that, you’re not a coward!”

“That’s really not the point here,” he tries, but Harry’s not letting this go.

“You’re a Gryffindor! You tried to stop us in first year even though you didn’t want to, and you faced your boggart and defeated it last year, and you asked Ginny to the ball, which is the bravest thing I’ve seen anyone do, she’s so scary—”

Neville cuts him off by pushing his hand over Harry’s mouth. He doesn’t look angry anymore. He’s exasperated, but he’s smiling, so Harry figures that’s something. “Thanks. But I’m serious. What’s going on?”

Harry tugs his hand off his mouth and looks around the hall. It seems like it’s deserted, but Draco will murder him if he talks about this out in the open like this. “Look, I’ll tell you what’s going on. But tomorrow, okay? Not here.”

He thinks that will be the end of it, but Neville hesitates. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. I was just worried, because Zabini is a Slytherin, but well, they did throw that party, and Malfoy did just protect us all from Fleur.” Draco did what? “But if you tell me there’s nothing to worry about, then I won’t worry. You’ve always had your secrets, Harry, I didn’t mean to pry.”

“It’s okay,” he says warmly. Even if Neville were a coward, which he isn’t, he’s more than chivalrous to make up for it. “You’ve caught a loose thread, and you’ll unravel the rest of it eventually. Might as well tell you everything. Tomorrow, okay?” He claps Neville on the shoulder, not waiting for an answer before walking away.

He really needs to find Ron and Hermione, and find out what the hell he missed while he was underwater.

If he takes the main hallway, there’s no way he’ll ever make it back to his common room. He’ll be trampled to death by his fellow students eager to hear what happened in the lake. Hermione has the Chimera map, but that’s okay, the hallways aren’t like the staircases. They don’t tend to move.
There’s a narrow passageway that has to be knocked on in particular combination to gain access to. He’s pretty sure all the teachers know about it, but so far they’ve only caught heads of houses using it, and he figures they’re all be too busy dealing with their students so soon after the second task to be skulking about hallways.

He’s wrong. Of course.

He hears them before he sees them. If he runs, he’ll get caught, but if he stays where he is, then he’ll also get caught. He can hear footsteps. Whatever he’s going to do, he better do it quickly. He turns his wand on himself and casts, “Supernatet!” He gently floats up until he hits the top of the passageway. As long as neither of them look up, he should be fine.

Getting down is going to suck.

“-owe him an apology!” McGonagall says, finally coming in clearly. He still can’t see her. “You never should have allowed that ridiculous nonsense with the house elves to happen.”

“I didn’t think he would go through with it,” Dumbledore says, sounding almost irritated, and Harry starts in surprise. Is this what Dumbledore sounds like when he talks to other adults? He almost sounds human. “At this point, I believe young Mr. Malfoy would doubt me if I told him the sky was blue.”

“But you’re so transparent and forthcoming,” McGonagall says dryly, and they’re right under him now. He has to press his fist to his mouth to keep from laughing. Dumbledore sighs, and McGonagall’s hat flies from her head. She reaches out and catches it before it can get too far, then settles it firmly back on. “Really, Albus, act your age. Just because you’ve misjudged a student! It’s not the first time, nor will it be the last.”

“When I misjudge someone’s character, we end up with a new dark lord,” he says, somber.

They’re out of his sight again at this point, but Harry’s almost certain the soft thud he hears is McGonagall smacking Dumbledore upside the head. The quiet, offended “Minerva!” that follows basically confirms it.

This is the best day of his life.

“Stop being so melodramatic,” McGonagall says, voice faint as they continue walking away from him. “That’s what we have Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Potter for.”

Harry pops out of the passage on the same floor as his common room, but he hesitates to actually go there. There’s no way he’ll make it through to his dorm room without being captured and forced to rehash all the details of the second task. Which he doesn’t mind that much, really, except that he wants to be able to talk to Ron and Hermione alone before any of that.

“Psst!”

He blinks, and looks around. George is gesturing at him from behind a tapestry, everything but his head and one arm obscured. “What in merlin’s name are you doing?”

George sighs. “Will you please just come over here? Honestly.”

He disappears behind the tapestry, but there’s no lump or anything, no sign that a tall seventeen year old is hiding behind it. He walks over and tentatively raises the edge of the tapestry.
Two pairs of hands reach out, grab him, and drag him further inside. There’s the sensation of passing through something that feels oddly like jelly, then he pops out the other side.

He’s standing in a small room, maybe one fourth the size of a classroom. There’s a single desk set up like a potion’s lab, two overstuffed couches that don’t match in the slightest, and all the walls are covered in hand drawn plans, sketches, and ingredient lists.

“This place isn’t on the map!” he says.

Fred and George are on either side of him, while Ron and Hermione are sitting on one of the couches.

“It is, but it just shows up at a closet. We made it,” Fred says proudly. “No one knows about it but us! Well, and Lee, of course. And now you guys.”

“And Angelina,” George adds, nudging his brother in the side.

Fred scowls and elbows him so he falls onto the empty couch. George twists so he falls on his side, turning his body and resting his head on his hand so he’s posed like a pinup model. “So forceful!”

“Guys,” Ron sighs. “Can we focus? Please?”

“What happened with Fleur?” Harry asks, pushing at George until he lifts his legs so Harry can sit on the couch. He lowers them again so he’s half draped on Harry’s lap, but he doesn’t mind enough to try and move him. Fred takes the past of least resistance and sits next to Ron on the other couch.

“We’ll get to that,” Hermione says. “What went on down there? The prince nodded to you!”

He stares. “Yes? It was just a nod.”

Fred says, “Mate. That was Prince Akeakamai.”

When will people just accept the fact that he never has any idea what’s going on? “Okay. Is that … important?”

The twins groan. Hermione looks scandalized. It’s Ron who says, “There’s only one prince to the nine seas—”

“Seven,” Harry interrupts. “There are seven seas.”

“Seven muggle seas,” Hermione corrects. “There are two more undetectable to muggles. One of them is the one connected to the Great Lake.”


Ron rolls his eyes. “As I was saying. Prince Akeakamai is the only child of Queen Teuila and Queen Kalama. He’s a big deal. The muggles have really messed up a lot of their seven seas, so the queens have been away for the past fifty or so years trying to deal with that. In the meantime, Prince Akeakamai has been the regent of the two unplottable seas, and the diplomatic face of the merpeople for that time too. The queens don’t show up unless something is really wrong.”

“He’s the son of two queens?” Harry asks. The Weasleys just nod.

Luckily, Hermione knows what he’s asking. “Teuila carried him, but he’s the biological son of Kalama and an unknown royal merman from Teuila’s people.”
Trying to figure out the logistics of that just makes his head hurt. “Okay, so he’s a prince. Of the sea. All nine of them. I still don’t see what the big deal is?” He pauses, “Wait, fifty years? How old is he?” He’d looked young, maybe in his twenties, but not that much older than Harry.

“Prince Akeakamai is over three hundred years old,” Fred says. “Merpeople don’t age like us. The queens are both over a thousand years old.”

“The big deal is that he likes you. He doesn’t like people. Merpeople don’t like wizards or muggles,” George explains. “I’m still surprised that they agreed to help out with the tournament. Dumbledore must have given them something they wanted, but I have no idea what it could be.”

“Now tells us what happened,” Ron demands, cutting off his brother before he can get lost on a tangent. The twins are very good at getting distracted, especially George.

He sighs, “Okay. But then you fill me in on everything I missed, including Draco and Fleur.”

No one disagrees, so he starts talking.

~

The first thing Draco does is take a nap, because that was fairly tricky magic and he’s exhausted. When he wakes up, his whole body is too heavy. It feels like his bones are made of lead. “Winky,” he yawns, and then there’s that familiar crack. “How long have I been asleep?”

“Three hours and twelve minutes,” she answers promptly, “I wouldn’t recommend trying to sleep more before tonight. You don’t have enough time to complete another sleep cycle and meet with your friends before the party.”

“Party?” Draco repeats, forcing himself to roll over so he’s on his back instead of trying to smother himself with his pillow.

Winky snaps, and a fancy thick invitation hovers in the air in front of him. He squints, waiting for his vision to stop swimming.

In thick, blocky letters it reads: Durmstrang invites their fellow students to enjoy a night of quiet relaxation in celebration of the completion of the Second Task. Please arrive no earlier than midnight.

He laughs out loud. Well, at least they understand the concept of plausible deniability.

His skin feels tacky with dried sweat, and he feels too hot now. He vaguely remembers being cold when he slipped into bad, but that feeling is long past. “Is Fleur going?”

“I is not knowing,” Winky says, “I can go and ask Miss Delacour?”

“No, it’s okay, that was a silly question.” He gets up and starts pulling off his robes. They disappear as soon as they touch the ground, which he’s sure is Winky’s doing, even though he doesn’t see her move. He wants to take a shower, but he doesn’t want to waste more time, so he casts a scourgify on himself and goes riffling through his drawers. There’s a pair of jeans in here somewhere that are way too small, and his mum had wanted to throw them out, but Draco hadn’t let her. His ass looks fantastic in them. “I’ll go over and talk to her myself.”

“Your friends are wanting to speak to you!” she says.

He has to lie back down on the bed to zip his pants up, but it’s worth it. They look like they were
painted on. “I’ll see Pansy and Blaise later, and I can’t talk to any of the others tonight anyway.”

Where’s that damn tank top? Harry had blushed the last time he’d worn it. He wants to see if he’ll do it again. He finds it at the bottom of his closet and tugs it on over his head. He’s a Malfoy. He can wear any color he pleases, including hot pink. “It is important!” Winky insists.

He nods, sticking his wand in the pocket along hip that’s made just for that. Someone should probably tell Harry that wizards *also* make jeans so he stops sticking his wand in his back pocket. “Thanks. I’ll talk to them later. Really.”

Draco leaves his dorm, Winky following him at his heels. “Master Draco! I am saying–”

He nudges the door to the common room open. What looks like almost his entire house is there, and they all turn and stare at him as soon as he steps through. “Uh.”

“–that people are waiting,” she finishes, sighing. She pats him on the calf and then disappears with a pop.

Well. She did try and warn him.

“Hello everyone,” he says, raising an eyebrow. “Did I miss the announcement about a house meeting?”

“You’re the reason for the house meeting,” Cassius says dryly. “As usual.”

Draco blinks, wrinkling his nose. He hasn’t caused any other house meetings. Has he?

Blaise and Pansy snort, like they know what he’s thinking. He needs better friends.

“We’ve all been hiding out here until you give us the party line,” Millie says, curled up on the corner of the couch with one of her books. She’s glamoured the cover so it looks like a wizarding history book, but Draco knows it’s another one of her muggle ones.

“Party line,” he repeats, like that will make it make sense. “What?”

“What do we say when people ask about the shield?” Daphne asks, exasperated. “We all just sneered or threw curses on the walk back, but that’s not a long term plan.”

Flint grins. “Sure it is. I think that’s a great plan.”

Pansy twists to glare at him, and he holds up his hands in surrender. That’s incredible. Draco’s never seen Flint back down that quickly before.

He runs his hands through his hair. “Just say I was protecting Fleur, everyone knows that we’re friends. If she killed the judges – or the students – she’d be in a lot of trouble. It was for Fleur.”

It’s the truth. All those judges should have known better, and been able to protect themselves. He just wanted to make sure his friend didn’t get in trouble.

Why does it still feel like he’s lying?

Blaise claps his hands. “Did everyone hear that? Draco casts the shields to protect Fleur, not the judges, and not us. If anyone prods further, sneer and hex them.”

“That’s horrible advice,” Millie says tiredly, but they’re all laughing.
People are starting to break away, either leaving the common room or heading back to their dorms. He’s still kind of shocked they bothered to get the “official” story from him.

“I’m going to go see Fleur,” he says, tugging on Millie’s hair as he passes and blowing Pansy and Blaise a kiss.

“I’m going to take a nap,” Blaise says, yawning. “See you tonight.”

He waves at them before leaving the common room.

When he steps out of the castle onto the castle grounds, he’s hit with a blast of freezing cold air. He summons a thick, tailored coat from his closet that doesn’t match his outfit at all. He’ll banish it when he gets back inside.

He walks to the Beauxbatons’ carriage, and he could break in, but that seems rude. And probably rather unnecessary, so he just knocks instead.

For several long moments, nothing happens. He’s just getting ready to try again when the door swings open to reveal a short, scowling girl with light brown skin and a scarf pinned close to her head. “What do you want?” she snaps in French, biting off the end of each word like it’s a swear. Draco’s almost impressed.

“I want to see Fleur.”

She goes to slam the door on him, and he hurries to stick his foot in the middle to stop her. She’s clearly calculating if it’s worth the trouble to just curse him.

“Please. I just want to make sure she’s all right,” he promises.

She continues staring at him, then says something in a language that isn’t French. He thinks it’s Arabic, but he doesn’t speak Arabic.

Where’s a Patil when you need one? He knows both Padma and Parvarti can speak it. Or at least read it.

“Fine,” she says, speaking French once more. “But if you upset her I’ll summon your appendix out of you and feed it to my cat.”

It’s non-lethal and specific enough that he believes her, and such a discomfiting image that he feels queasy even though it wouldn’t actually hurt him that much. It’s the best threat he’s ever received. “I don’t think my appendix is halal.”

“I won’t be the one eating it, so I don’t care.” She opens the door fully and steps aside to let him in. “I’m Saida. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

She obviously doesn’t think it’s a pleasure to meet him. He decides that she’s his new favorite person.

The inside of the carriage is much bigger than it looks like on the outside. It contains over one hundred rooms for the students, a kitchen, and a common room. Saida leads him down twisting hallways, and he waves at the people he recognizes – which is most of them, actually. Just his luck that Saida was the one to answer the door.

They arrive at a door near the end of one of the hallways. She looks him up and down, leans in close, and says, “Don’t be an asshole,” in accented English, then walks away.
Good advice. He’s definitely not going to take it.

The locking spell on Fleur’s door is too difficult for alohamora, but charms are his specialty. It takes about thirty seconds for him to undo her locking spell. He banishes his coat back to his closet because it’s really ruining his aesthetic, sticks his wand back in his jeans, then kicks Fleur’s door open.

He walks in to a wand pointed at his face. He only raises an eyebrow. “Darling, how could you?”

Gabrielle is sitting on her sister’s bed, swimming in a longsleeve shirt that has to be Fleur’s. She smiles and waves at him.

Fleur slumps and throws her wand onto her dresser. Unlike Hogwarts and Durmstrang, all the Beauxbatons students have their own room. Hers is covered in clothes, and has a disaster of a makeup counter and a bookshelf bulging with thick tomes. Except for the books, it reminds him of Pansy’s room. “What are you doing here?”

“You should see her room back home,” Gabrielle says, “It’s a disaster.”

How is this not a disaster? How can her room at home be worse? What a horrifying thought.

“I think I have embarrassed myself enough for one day,” she says tiredly. “How did you get in here?”

“Saida let me in. What’s her problem anyway?” He bounces down on her bed next to Gabrielle. Fleur flushes and takes a beat too long to answer him. “Merlin. You dated her?”

“No!” she says.

Gabrielle frowns, “You did too.”

Draco’s so thankful he doesn’t have siblings to tattle on him. He’s glad other people do, though.

“It does not count,” Fleur insists, “We were thirteen. It was barely dating.”

Now Gabrielle just looks confused. “You learned Arabic for her.”

“Mama wanted me to learn another language, and Saida offered to help me study! That’s all,” she insists.

Draco doesn’t believe her for a second. “So why’d you break up?”

Fleur scowls and crosses her arms, eyes narrowed. Then she sighs and lifts her hair up, twisting to show him a black ring on the back of her neck. “I have a soul mark. She does not. I did not care – I still do not – because who knows when I will meet my soulmate? Or even if I will meet them. I do not want to live my life based around a what if. But she did not want to take the risk.” She shakes her head. “It does not matter. We were kids, and we are still friends. Now, Draco, what do you want?”

“I want you to the come to the party tonight, and not hide away just because you tried to murder everyone,” he says. “It doesn’t matter. They took your sister, so they got what they deserved. Besides, I stopped you from doing anything interesting, so all you did was show why you were chosen for this tournament in the first place. Big deal.”
Fleur rubs at her eyes. If she starts crying, Draco is running away. He doesn’t know for sure that Saida was serious about feeding his appendix to her cat, but he doesn’t want to find out. “Thank you for that. I would have felt awful if I’d hurt anyone.” Or killed them.

“All in a day’s work,” he says, dismissive. “If you want to really thank me, you won’t force me to endure a whole night all by my lonesome at a party. How pathetic would that be? Me, drinking alone in the corner with no one to talk too.”

“Yes, you are so quiet and you so easily fade into the background, I can see how that would be a problem for you,” she says. “Gabrielle is going back home in the morning, I shouldn’t leave her.”

Gabrielle wrinkles her nose. “I’m going to spend the night exploring the carriage. Go to your stupid party, I don’t care. I’m coming back in a few months for the third task anyway.”

Draco grins. “You’re all out of excuses, Delacour. Looks like you’re just going to have to get over yourself and have some fun.”

“You’re a brat,” she informs him, but she’s smiling, which was his goal all along.

“Tell me something I don’t know.” He looks around her tornado of a room. “Do you have anything to wear in here? How do you find anything? I do have a house elf, you know, I’m sure she’d be happy to help you out.”

“I know where everything is!” Fleur insists. Draco doesn’t believe her at all.

They still have a couple hours until the party, which is about how long he expects it will take them to find an outfit in all this mess.

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Harry is almost relieved to head over to the Durmstrang ship, if only because it means he’ll be able to take a break from answering questions about the second task. He feels like he’s told the story a dozen times already to the Gryfffindors alone.

They sneak out according to their year, so all the fourth years leave at once. Neville is doing a great job of pretending that nothing has changed. They take the greenhouse exit and walk around the back of Hagrid’s hut to the lake. When they get near the edge, Harry pauses. The ship is in the middle of the lake, and the boats the first years use are all over on the other side. “How are we getting across?”

Hermione rolls her eyes and takes out her wand. “Glacius!”

A path of ice extends from the shore across the lake, then rises into a set of stairs to get onto the ship. “Watch your step, it’s slippery. And it won’t last for long.”

“It’s good you have so much experience getting to the ship,” Parvati says, and Lavender does a poor job of turning a cough into a snort.

Harry glances at Ron, but he just shrugs and rolls his eyes. They should probably get around to having an actual conversation about this, but he doubts they will.

The ship appears to be deserted during their walks across the lake onto it. Harry steps off of Hermione’s ice stair onto the boat, and everything around him shimmers like a heat wave. When it clears, the wave of sound nearly barrels him over. There’s some sort of pulsating music and singing in a language he doesn’t recognize.
The boat is crammed with students, people laughing and drinking. They’re all still outside, but as soon as he’s on the boat he’s as warm as if he were in the common room. A Durmstrang student is there with a tray of smoking drinks. “Hello,” she says, pushing a smoking mug into each of their hands. “Don’t fall in the lake, we won’t save you. If you want to complain about the music, please consider that we don’t care. Welcome aboard.” She looks to Hermione and winks, “Or welcome back in your case, Miss Granger.”

“Iva,” Hermione greets pleasantly, “I will throw you from this ship myself.”

Neville snorts as he sips at his glass, walking away from them. Dean and Seamus are long gone, already in search of more alcohol. Harry looks for the girls, and finds them clustered around a group of Beauxbatons boys.

Iva grins and grabs one of the mugs for herself, raising it to Hermione. “I knew I liked you for a reason.”

Viktor steps out from the crowd and walks over. He lifts his arm and drapes it across Hermione’s shoulders, leaning against her. He nods at Harry, but his attention is on Ron. “I am ready for a rematch if you are,” he says, skipping the pleasantries.

Ron grins, clapping Viktor on the shoulder as Hermione sighs. “Absolutely.”

“Harry!” He turns, and Fleur’s running towards them. She’s in a dangerously short blue dress with intricate beading and a high neck and long sleeves. She looks really pretty with it and all her blonde hair flying around her. She throws her arms around him, and he catches her with a grunt of effort. Fleur looks slight, but pretty much every inch of her is muscle. “Thank you, for what you did. For saving my sister and fixing my mistakes. I am in your debt.”

He blushes a bright red. “No problem, anytime.” He can’t be mad at Fleur for what she did. It was to protect Gabrielle. A very small, almost ignorable part of him hopes his friends love him as much as Fleur loves her sister.

“You are very kind,” she says, and lets him go. She grabs Ron by his shoulders, pulling him down so she can kiss him on each cheek. “You are my sister’s hero. She thinks you are very brave.”

“I am very brave,” he informs archly. “She’s a sweet kid.”

Fleur turns to Hermione, but before she can say anything Cedric and Cho pop up behind them. “The gang’s all here,” Cedric grins, clapping a hand each on Fleur and Harry’s shoulder.

“Is your leg okay now?” Harry asks.

Cedric waves it aside, but Cho’s with him, so he’s fine. She’d sooner strap him to a bed in the hospital wing than let him injure himself further just to be at a party. “I’m okay. Are you okay? I noticed your arm was healed when you came back.”

They’re all looking at him in interest, and he bites back a groan. “I promise I’ll tell you all what happened. But can it wait until later?”

“Yes,” Cho says. “Are we doing another drinking contest? I feel like I can make it further this time.”

“I’m going to end up carrying you back to your room, aren’t I?” Cedric sighs, already resigned to his fate.

Cho absently pats him on the chest. “Of course not, love. You’ll end up carrying me back to your
room. We’d hardly want to cause a scene in the Ravenclaw common room. Again.”

Cedric looks like he wants to die. Harry decides to put him out of his misery. “Drinking contest?”

He gets pulled into it, and he doesn’t like the bite of alcohol, or the light and confusing feeling of being drunk, but he does like playing drinking games with his friends. He catches sight of Draco halfway through, with his tight pants and ridiculous tank top, and all Harry wants to do is drag him into a dark corner and pull his stupid, ridiculous clothes off of him. But that would be dangerous and irresponsible, so he’ll have to wait. They’re meeting with Neville tomorrow, and they have a group Occlumency lesson the day after that, but maybe they can meet up during lunch? Harry likes eating, but he also likes making out with his boyfriend. And, well, other stuff, that they’re slowly poking their way around.

Draco had said there was no rush, that they had plenty of time. Harry had said he was in a death tournament, and it was irresponsible of them to let him die a virgin. Draco hadn’t bought that in the slightest, but they were edging past the just kissing stage of their relationship, which was nice.

Harry didn’t have any idea what he was doing, but Draco never had any problem telling him exactly what he wanted, so that helped. He liked having Draco’s hands on him, liked seeing his soulmate’s pale skin pressed up against his own, liked the way Draco’s platinum hair spread out like a halo when he was underneath him.

His boyfriend was beautiful, and if they were a normal couple Harry would ditch this drinking contest, climb into Draco’s lap, and kiss him breathless, like a bunch of other couples were already doing. But they’re not. So he’ll have to wait.

This is the absolute worst.

Harry stops drinking towards the end of the night, or, well, early morning. Ron and Viktor are still going strong, and he ends up tipped against Hermione, watching them.

Cho had gotten down to the last ten, but then she’d started pulling at Cedric’s clothes and saying something in Korean. Harry didn’t know what she was saying exactly, but going by Cedric’s blush, he could take a wild guess.

The sun has just begun to edge over the horizon when Viktor, fist pressed over his mouth, concedes defeat.

They shake on it, Viktor goes to throw up over the side of the boat, and Ron finishes off the bottle just to prove that he can.

All in all, it’s a really good night.

Harry wakes up bright and early the same day, which is unacceptable. Everyone else is still asleep, and he and Ron had gotten back later than all of them. But try as he might to fall back asleep, it doesn’t work.

He sighs and gets up. The first thing he does is write a long, detailed letter to Remus and Sirius, telling them everything that happened. He considers leaving out the part about Akeakamai, because it almost seems like bragging. But he hadn’t known he was a prince until the very end, and none it really makes sense without Akeakamai being there, so he just tries to explain it as plainly as possible.

He gets dressed, and goes to make a run to the owlery to send Hedwig out with letter. He’s just
about to leave the common room when the portrait swings inward and George walks through, barreling into him. George tries to catch him, and instead they just end up sprawled on the ground together.

“Are you still wearing yesterday’s clothes?” he asks, even though it’s a silly question. George had been wearing a pair of pants and a button down shirt so perfectly fitted that it had to be Pansy’s handiwork, and he was still wearing the same thing now. “Where were you?”

George pushes himself off Harry, and surprise flashes across his face. “Draco didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?” he asks.

He blushes and shakes his head, “Er, nothing. I was just – I was with Lee.”

“Lee,” he repeats dubiously.

“Lee,” George agrees, shoulders tensing. “We were working on a prank.”

“Without Fred?” he asks, and he wouldn’t normally care to pry, but George is so obviously lying to him, and Harry’s almost offended. He knows George is a way better liar than this.

George takes a half second too long to answer. “He spent the night Angelina.”

Harry doesn’t know if that’s true or not, but he does know that George definitely didn’t spend the night with Lee. “Okay.”

“Oh?” George repeats, frowning. Then it occurs to him he shouldn’t argue with Harry agreeing with him and nods. “Yes, right. Okay.”

This is almost pathetic. “I’m going to the owlery. Don’t forget that we’re all meeting up tonight.” He considers giving him a heads up about Neville, but figures it’s easier to tell everyone all at once.

He ends up spending most of the day laying out on the couch and reading a potions book he doesn’t care for in the slightest. But Draco is always getting on his case about his potions grade, and it’s not like he can piggy back off of Hermione forever.

It inches towards night, and he sees the twins slip out of the common room, heading to their classroom. Ron spent the day hanging out with Fleur, so it’s only Hermione who pokes at his thighs and says, “Get up, let’s go.”

“We’re waiting for one more,” he says.

Her eyebrows draw together. At that moment, the portrait swings open and Neville rushes inside, soil clinging to his hands and smudged across his robes. “Sorry I’m late!”

“Harry,” Hermione says, glaring. “What’s going on?”

He closes his book and tosses it on the closes table. “Trust me.”

She sighs, but doesn’t press any further. The three of them silently walk down to their classroom, and Harry takes a deep breath before stepping inside. “Hey, so, don’t freak out.”

Conversation cuts off entirely. Cushions are laid out on the ground for when someone inevitable falls over. George is sitting next to Blaise, and Fred is in the middle of French braiding Pansy’s hair, while Ron and Draco are sitting on desks facing each other, more easy and casual with each other than they would ever be in public.
He feels a little bad about this, but it’s not like this was that private of a meeting, what with the twins here. They didn’t mention anything about soulmates or dating around Fred and George. Not because they didn’t trust them, but because the easiest way to keep a secret was to tell as few people as possible.

Hermione shoves Neville fully into the classroom and then shuts the door behind them. “Harry, what’s going on?”

“She figured out that Blaise gave me gillyweed. Everything else was a matter of time, so I figured it was better to just rip off the bandage,” he says.

“I could obliviate him?” Draco offers, and Ron smacks him upside the head.

Neville flinches, like he’d be expecting an explosion of anger or for someone to throw a curse. All Draco does is smooth his hair back down with a mildly offended look. “It was just a suggestion.”

“You suggestions suck,” Ron says, “No obliviating our friends.”

“But you have so many friends,” Pansy complains, “It’s just so hard to keep track.”

Blaise rubs at his temples, “This is my fault. I didn’t mean for Longbottom to see me. I’m sorry.”

Draco wrinkles his nose. “Whatever, it’s fine. It’s for the best the two of you had the same idea, because if Harry hadn’t had a second gillyweed then the second task could have ended in disaster. Or death.”

“Or both,” Ron says.

“You can keep a secret, can’t you?” Pansy asks Neville, who’s pale and open mouthed. “You’re such a nice boy. It would be awful if we had to kill you.”

“Pansy!” Harry and Hermione cry, while everyone else cracks up. “I can keep a secret,” he says, and he looks less frightened and more contemplative. “So, you – you’re all friends? Really?”

“Really,” Harry says warmly. “But you can never tell anyone. Do you understand, Neville? This is very important.”

Neville’s face hardens, and he looks so different when he’s serious. He looks older. More grown up. “I won’t tell anyone. I promise.”

Fred finished Pansy’s hair and bounces to his feet. “Well, luckily for you we can help you keep your promise. How’s your occlumency?”

He says it as a joke, but Neville brightens. “Great! My cousin Monty can’t even get past my shields. Gran was really proud.”

“Your cousin Montgomery Longbottom? The Legilimens that the department of justice keeps on retainer for approved cases?” Draco asks. Even Pansy and Blaise look impressed.

Neville shrugs, embarrassed. “I’m not good at a lot of things. But I’m good at this.”

Harry wants to argue against that, but Hermione claps her hands together and says briskly, “Well, brilliant, we could use the help. You can assist Blaise, he’s been leading these lessons.”
Blaise and Neville spend a long moment staring at each other and saying nothing at all. It’s Neville who breaks the silence by saying, “You’re just like a marigold, aren’t you? All thorns and spitting poison, but inside you’re just gooey and sweet.”

What the fuck kind of marigolds are they talking about? Harry really needs to start paying more attention in herbology.

Blaise cracks a grin, and that’s all Harry needs to know that this going to work out. “Careful, you sound just like mourning grass.”

“Rude, and unnecessary,” Neville says, but he’s smiling.

Harry has no idea what they’re talking about. It’s like they’re speaking a different language.

“You know,” Pansy says, “if we’re going to expand the group, we should just cave and include Ginny.”

Both the Weasleys and Draco make a face at that. “If we have to,” Ron says.

“If I have to deal with your sister, then we’re inviting Luna too,” Draco insists. “That way we can throw her at Ginny and run.”

“Sacrificing your cousin like that?” George says, “Heartless.”

Draco rolls his eyes. Blaise says, “We should bring in Millicent too.” They all look at him, and he shrugs. “We’re getting outnumbered. Spending so much time with this many Gryffindors is bad for the digestion. Besides, Millicent hangs out with us a lot, and she’s not stupid. I’m sure she’s noticed we go missing for several hours at a time multiple times a week.”

“Neville and Ginny and Luna and Millicent,” Harry says, satisfied. That seems like a good combination, somehow. He’d just been thinking about how secrets shouldn’t spread too far, lest they become impossible to control or contain, but this doesn’t feel like that. It feels right. It feels good.

~

Draco has to admit that Neville is a surprisingly good teacher, and he and Blaise make an excellent team. When he’s not having a mental breakdown in potions class, he’s almost normal.

They elect Draco to be the one to tell Millie, since she’s more his friend than she is the others’, which he thinks is rather unfair, even if they’re right.

She’s not surprised in the slightest. He’s a little worried about what that means for their secret keeping abilities, but she just sighs and says, “Draco, I’ve been watching you come and go since second year. It’s obvious you were sneaking out to meet someone. I can’t say I’m surprised it’s Harry Potter.”

“Why?” he asks. He hopes they’re not that obvious. They’re trying really hard not to be that obvious.

“Well, he’s always involved in these types of things,” she says like that’s reasonable. The thing is she’s not wrong, but it’s also ridiculous.

Millie fits in the with the group seamlessly. There’s none of the awkwardness between them all like it was in the beginning, but then again Millie had never really gone out of her way to antagonize the Gryffindors to begin with. She didn’t go out of her way to antagonize anyone, really, she just refused to move or bend for other people.
Luna already knows, of course, and to no one’s surprise so does Ginny. Luckily, she’s more interested in mocking and poking her brothers than she is trying to psychoanalyze him, which is nice. He spends his free time with entirely too many Weasleys. Neville and Ginny aren’t dating, but she does keep ending up next to him when they all hang out together.

Now that there’s so many of them, they don’t all hang out together all the time, because that would be ridiculous. They do all get together for occlumency lessons, and the random meeting just to hang out, but mostly they try not to all disappear at once. Their original group of six still meets up all the time, and of course he and Harry try to scrap together something approaching private time, but they all hang in different combinations too, which is … nice.

Blaise and Neville spend hours talking about herbology stuff that he’ll never understand and doesn’t want to – he finally gets how his best friend feels whenever he goes on a charms rant. Millie and Hermione apparently both read the same muggle book series, and Pansy loves hanging out with Ginny, as he suspected and feared. The twins like them, but mostly use the Slytherins as resource for pranking, and Draco would be offended if it wasn’t so much fun. The first time Fred yanks him into a secluded hallway and demands he explain the boundaries of the color changing charm when mixed with a time sensitive transfiguration spell, he laughs out loud.

They all get along and mesh together in a way he honestly hadn’t expected.

Not all of their time is spent with each other – that would be weird, and super suspicious. Which they don’t want, considering they’re trying to keep this all a secret. Draco spends a good chunk of his time on the Beauxbatons carriage hanging out with Fleur, and Saida is nice when she’s not threatening to him. Clarence also seems to end up hanging out with them a lot, somehow. Draco spends three nights a week training with the other quidditch players, and whatever spare time he has left inexplicably seems to be eaten up by Susan Bones, which he never intends and doesn’t understand.

There’s schoolwork, of course, but he mostly ends up doing his homework in class. He has to, if he expects to still have time to make his thrice weekly trips to Flitwick’s office, where he grades papers, summarizes articles on the latest charms breakthroughs, and generally does all the things an aide would do without officially being his aide. Officially, Draco just uses a lot of Flitwick’s office hours.

After the second task, time seems to move quickly. There’s no puzzle about the next task for them to solve this time, instead the school heads would just announce it when the time was closer. Whatever it is, it means Hagrid spends pretty much all his spare time digging up the quidditch pitch.

Days run into months almost without him noticing. Soon the snow melts away, and spring tentatively blooms around them, and it’s about as close to peaceful as they’ve had in a long time.

Then Rita Skeeter publishes another article.

~

“A harlot!” Ron reads off hotly, pacing in their classroom. “She called you a harlot!”

“I did read the article, for a loose definition of the word,” Hermione says dryly.

Draco came prepared. He’d brought six copies of the paper, so none of them would have to share. Harry thinks maybe he should have brought more, since Ron’s is getting crumpled in his fist. He says, “I didn’t know we were sleeping together, Hermione. I wish you would have told me.”

Draco pinches him in the side, and Harry squirms, but doesn’t actually make any attempt to move
away from him. Draco is sitting on top of a desk, and Harry is standing in between his legs, his back pressed to Draco’s chest. “Don’t be a prat.” Draco looks to Hermione, “I’m more curious about how she knew you’d spent the night with Viktor after the Yule Ball.”

“It’s not like we snuck away onto the boat,” she points out, “He made an ice bridge. And then I made one to get back.”

“You think she has a source?” Blaise asks.

Draco makes a face. “The thing is, it’s a weirdly specific bit of correct information – she even mentions that your hair was down. But the rest of it is complete crap, so if she has a source, it’s not a very good one.”

Pansy flips through the article, “She really thinks you get around. According to this, you’re sleeping with Viktor and Harry, and are working on getting your claws into Cedric. The only champion safe from you is Fleur, apparently.”

“Why are you not mad about this?” Ron demands. “I’m mad about this!”

Hermione shrugs. “Well, firstly, if her hard hitting articles are about teenage trysts, that’s pathetic. I’m shocked they even published it.”

“It’s Witch Weekly, not the Prophet,” Pansy points out. Harry’s not so certain the Prophet wouldn’t publish it.

“Secondly, I’m not going to apologize or be ashamed about having sex with my boyfriend,” she says. “Which is the only true part of the article. The rest of it doesn’t matter.”

Harry, who’s had more experience than he ever wanted with newspapers, winces. “People are going to believe this crap, you know.”

“People believe all sorts of crap,” she says, “That’s not my problem.”

Harry doesn’t think it will be that easy, but he hopes it will be. He hasn’t received nearly as much blowback as he was expecting for being a Parseltongue, so maybe he’s wrong. He’d like to be wrong.

“Say there is a mole,” Blaise says, “How much a chance is there that they could be listening or spying on us?”

Harry goes cold, but is reassured with the quickness that both Hermione and Draco answer, “None.” Hermione continues, “We have so many privacy wards over this room, it’d be pretty much impossible, at least not without setting off about a dozen alarms.”

“We have privacy wards on here?” Harry asks, surprised.

Draco laughs and leans forward to kiss his cheek, “Yes dear, we have privacy wards. Hermione and I put them up last year.”

“They’re solid,” Pansy promises. “I designed them. A fly couldn’t get in here without setting them off.”

He must look a little too surprised, because she scowls and throws her paper at him. “It’s like sewing. You just have to get all the pieces in the right place.”
He’ll take her word on it. “Are we going to do anything about this, then?”

“Yes!” Ron says at the same time Hermione goes, “No.”

He turns and glares, but she doesn’t give an inch. “Acknowledging it just gives it believability. It doesn’t matter. The people I care about know the truth, and that’s what’s most important.”

Ron’s turning as red as his hair.

“Why don’t we see what, if any, reaction she gets, then decide what to do?” Harry says. Even if things get ugly, some distance between Ron and his temper couldn’t hurt.

Hermione and Ron agree, but they’re not happy about it. They move on to discussing their most recent potion, and how Snape really must be trying to kill them if he’s teaching them how to brew a poison before how to brew the antidote.

Harry wonders if it would be rude to tell all their friends to leave so he could get naked with his boyfriend.

It absolutely would be. He’s kind of tempted to do it anyway. He won’t, but he’ll think about it. Could Draco be uglier, and make this easier on him? He has to deal with so much, but most of all a beautiful boyfriend who he can’t make out with whenever he wants.

Fleur takes personal offense to the article about Hermione, which Draco thinks is hilarious. “Why aren’t I included in this? Where’s the story of Hermione sneaking away to my carriage or deflowering me beneath the night of a full moon?” Her outrage is even funnier in French. “Am I not pretty enough? Is that why?”

“I don’t think that’s an issue,” Draco says, laying across her bed with his head hanging off the side so he’s looking at her upsidedown. “You’re very pretty.”

She’s not mollified in the slightest. He catches Saida’s eye and she sighs, then shrugs. Apparently sometimes Fleur is just like this.

“Are you going to Hogsmeade with us?” Draco asks. Next year, they’ll be able to go the village whenever they like, and not just designated weekends. Since all the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students were seventeen or eighteen, they were also given free reign, and tended to avoid the weekends that the third and fourth year students descended upon the village. But Fleur had promised to go to Madame Puddifoot’s with him.

He actually loves their ridiculous decorations and too sweet cakes and foam filled lattes. But he has a reputation, and he can’t just go there on his own. That kind of stuff makes Pansy gag, and Blaise would risk certain death for him, but he won’t spend an afternoon drinking coffee and getting covered in glitter.

He’d asked Millie, but she was apparently going there on a date. He’s pretty sure Susan would go with him, assuming she wasn’t preoccupied with one of her many Durmstrang girls, but he’s not quite that desperate yet. There’s always Luna.

“Yes, yes, I did promise,” she says, but there’s a gleam to her eyes that he’s not entirely comfortable seeing there. Saida sits straighter in her chair, and wow, okay, he should definitely be concerned.

She changes the topic before he can question her further, and it’s not like she’d answer him even if
he did ask, so he lets it go. Clarence wanders in at some point, tugging in an upper year Hogwarts student who nods at Draco as the both of them sit cross legged on the ground. Draco recognizes the Ravenclaw instantly.

Quinn is the top potions student in the school, Snape’s official aide, and the only person his sour head of house seems capable of standing for more than five minutes at a time. Ze’s plump, with hair that falls just to the bottom of zir ears, and big brown eyes that always seem to be watching everything around zir.

Fleur and Saida have pulled Clarence into an argument of about a professor back at their school, and are in now the middle of conversation in rapid fire French that Draco can follow, but Quinn looks like ze’s about to fall asleep.

“Hey,” he says, stretching out his hand to poke zir in the thigh. He’s still lying upside down and half off the bed. He’d going to get a massive headache whenever he gets around to standing up. Quinn looks at him and raises an eyebrow. “When you’re alone together, does Snape ever, you know, smile?”

Quinn breaks out in a smile of zir own. “I’ve been meaning to ask. Can you cast adducere exspiravit?”

Draco’s mouth drops open. It’s a ghost summoning spell, extremely tricky, almost illegal, and messing it up could end with accidental necromancy and a spell backlash that almost certainly kills the caster.

He’s always had a particular knack for summoning spells.

“Probably,” he answers, “Given some time to work on it, maybe over the summer. Why?”

“I’m trying to brew a potion that will make a ghost temporarily corporeal. Severus says if I manage it, then he’ll send in an official recommendation that I be fast tracked through the Potions Master requirements. I’m pretty sure he only agreed to that because he thinks I can’t do it, but joke’s on him, because I totally am, and then I’m going to steal his job,” ze finishes.

By the sudden silence, they clearly have the others’ attention. “That’s horrifying,” Draco says, “Why do you want to cast the ghost summoning spell?”

“When done correctly, a ghost is solid – or at least semi-solid – for the first couple seconds after a summoning. If I can isolate that reaction, I might be able to replicate it.”

“Honey,” Clarence says, starring at Quinn, “When you asked me out, you didn’t mention that were fucking crazy.”

Ze shrugs. “You didn’t ask.”

“You could dump zir,” Saida suggests.

Quinn seems completely unperturbed at the suggestion.

“No,” Clarence says mournfully, “It’s too late. I like zir too much.” He collapses dramatically on his side, conveniently falling so his head is resting against Quinn’s thigh. “You come off all charming and quiet, with your pretty eyes and deep love of making things explode, and then you pull this out of your back pocket, but at this point I’m already too invested to run away screaming.”

“Deep love of making things explode?” Fleur repeats.
“Severus encourages potions experimentation as long as he’s not in the room and I clean up the mess myself,” ze says, running zir fingers through Clarence’s hair. “Sometimes that means things explode.” Ze pauses, then amends, “Often, that means things explode.”

“None of this is making me want to help you,” Draco says.

Quinn smirks. “Aren’t you curious to see if you could do it? Just as a little?”

Well, he is now that ze’s said that. “I’m talking to Flitwick about it. I don’t have a death wish. And we’ll need a volunteer. I’m not going to summon a ghost against their will just for an experiment.”

Saida covers her eyes and Fleur curses in French. They think it’s a bad idea, then. Which it is. But he goes through a lot of bad ideas.

“Nearly Headless Nick has volunteered,” ze says, grinning.

“Why would he – he’s doing it so he can become completely headless, isn’t he,” he says, and it’s not a question. “That’s moronic.”

“He’s of the opinion that he’s already dead, so what’s the worst that could happen?” Quinn shrugs. “I’m not going to fight him on it. I asked the Grey Lady, and she laughed in my face.”

“She was right to. This is a horrible idea,” Draco says. He doesn’t have time to waste with something this dangerous and unnecessary.

He’s going to do it anyway. He loves his lessons with Flitwick, but it’s been a while since he had a real challenge, something that was difficult to do because it was complicated and not just because it took a lot of power.

He’s tempted not to tell the others, but if they find out he’s keeping secrets, they’ll murder him. That’s going to be a fun conversation.

All five of them stay up talking, and the moon is high in the sky before Draco heads back to the castle. He should go back to his room and go to bed, or if he’s not tired then he could call Harry on the mirror and see if he wants to find a broom cupboard to fool around in. Instead, he goes into the Slytherin boy’s dormitories, but instead of heading down the fourth year hallway, he walks through the sixth.

He knocks on Cassius’s door. The older boy is learning, because Draco only has to knock for about thirty seconds before he yanks the door open and snarls, “What?”

The shirt he has on is two sizes too small. “Is George here? I could use his thoughts too.”

Cassius pales and there’s a crash from inside his room that’s definitely George breaking something.

“Oh, good,” he says cheerfully, forcing the door fully open with a swish of his wand. George is sitting in the middle of Cassius’s room, a water glass shattered on the ground and various piles of clothes around him. It takes Draco a moment to figure out what he’s seeing, because it’s hardly like he has any personal experience in the matter. “Is that – are you sorting his laundry?”

George winces, and Cassius whirls around. “George! I told you to stop cleaning my room! You’re not a house elf.”

“I wasn’t cleaning,” he says, “I was organizing.”
“Yeah, Cassius, he was organizing,” Draco says. He steps inside and the door swings shut. “So, what do you guys know about necromancy? Asking for a friend.”

Cassius pinches the bridge of his nose, and George’s mouth drops open. Draco thinks that’s a fairly appropriate question to ask after barging in on someone at one in the morning.

“What do you guys know about necromancy? Asking for a friend.”

Cassius sighs, as if he’s deeply pained. “You have no idea.”

“So, necromancers?” Draco repeats. “The sooner you answer me, the sooner I leave.”

He doesn’t know why they looks so upset. He’s having a great time.

Harry supports Hermione’s quest to help the house elves, of course, but he still kinda wishes she hadn’t dragged him and Ron with him to the kitchens with her. Unlike them, he has to get up early to leave for Hogsmeade, since he’s meeting Sirius and Remus again.

Dinner is starting in about an hour, so they’re running all over, magically carrying trays of food, and a few of them moving in that super fast way that Harry tries not to focus on. “Oh no,” Hermione says, “They’re busy. Should we come back later?”

Ron rolls his eyes. “They’re always busy. They’re house elves.” He snaps his fingers and calls out, “Winky! Got a minute?”

“Harry Potter!” yells a house elf that is not Winky, and in the next moment he has Dobby’s skinny arms wrapped around his knees. He has to grab onto Ron’s arm to keep from falling over. “What is you doing here? Are you be needing anything?”

“We had some questions, if you don’t mind,” Hermione says kindly.

Dobby nods, and pulls them aside so they’re standing in front of the fire. Within a few minutes, he’s summoned chairs for them to sit in and pushed a butterbeer into each of their hands.

There’s a loud crack, and Winky stands before them. Dobby steps away from her and clasps his hands behind his back, head lowered. “Winky is busy, but has time for you.” She’s in a simple green cotton skirt and a soft beige top with a wide neck, Draco’s crest stitched in the corner of the chest.

Harry vaguely recognizes the top as the same material as a sweater Draco wore last year, and he’s pretty sure the skirt is from the standard Slytherin sheet set that pretty much all of them refuse to use.

Actually, looking around, he sees a lot of the house elves are wearing what look like actual clothes, and not just pillow cases. He’s not the only one to notice. Hermione asks, “I thought you couldn’t wear your own clothes?”

“We cannot take premade clothes for our own,” Winky clarifies. “We must be making our own, without the aid of magic. Most elves is not good at sewing. I is making clothes for them.”

“We are most appreciative,” Mip says, appearing before them with a small plate of cookies. It floats in front of them, and Harry and Ron reach out for one. Hermione glares at them, and they freeze. Mip’s lips widen into a grin. “Please, I insist.”

“Thank you,” Hermione says pointedly, before taking one for herself. Ron rolls his eyes and takes three, probably just to be obnoxious. “I had some more questions, if you have the time?”
“Of course,” he says, and then turns to Winky and the still cringing Dobby. “I will handle this. Return to your duties.”

“I is not working for you,” Winky says hotly, but disappears in the next moment.

Dobby looks up, and waves. “It is nice to be seeing Harry Potter. I is hoping Harry Potter visits again.” Then he too disappears with a crack.

Mip shakes his head, and takes a seat across from them. “So young, and so impulsive. They exhaust me.”

“Young?” Hermione asks. Harry really can’t tell what house elves are older. Mip looks grey around the edges, but most house elves just … look like house elves to him.

Mip stares at them for a long moment. It’s strange – it almost feels like when Dumbledore stares at him, like he’s taking the measure of his character is a single penetrating glance. It’s not Legilimens, Harry’s shields are too good for that. It’s different, something more instinctual than just a spell, and it’s a little disconcerting to see his headmaster in a house elf. He guesses they both have long noses.

Finally, he sighs, and says. “Winky isn’t even three hundred. Dobby, the poor thing, is only a century old. He’s one of the youngest of us.”

Harry glances over, and Hermione looks as surprised as he feels, but Ron isn’t having much of a reaction, meaning house elf life spans aren’t news to him. Ron says, “That must be tough. Did he ever have a forest of his own?”

“He was born of a river,” Mip says, “Always changing, always rushing. The older elves of his area tried to leave it to him, to give him a chance, but – it got diverted, as rivers sometimes do these days, and the forest it was a part of doesn’t exist any longer. It’s no wonder Dobby’s a bit strange.”

“He never had a home,” Harry says. Ron stretches so his lower leg presses against Harry’s, which means he’s doing a horrible job of hiding the wave of sadness that crashes through him.

Mip softens. “No, Mr. Potter, he never did. Not really. But we make new homes. I and many others consider Hogwarts my home. I’m sure Winky considers the young Mister Malfoy to be her home. But I do not believe Dobby has found that place for himself.”

“Can you tell me more about the forests you used to live in?” Hermione asks. “How you interacted with the magic there, and how much you need?”

“Of course, Miss Granger,” he says.

Harry is only half listening to their conversation. He resolves to come and visit Dobby again, even if he is strange.

He’s never been homeless, not really, but he never knew what it was like to have a home until he sat across a gangly boy with a thousand freckles and bright orange hair.

~

They’re meeting in the same place as last time, and Harry’s barely stepped inside of Rosmerta’s back room before familiar arms have in him in a crushing grip. “Merpeople!” Sirius moans, “Are they trying to get you killed?”

Harry grins into Sirius’s shoulder. He really likes his godfather’s hugs. “It’s okay. Akeakamai is
“Nice isn’t the word most people use,” Remus says dryly, reaching out to ruffle Harry’s hair once Sirius lets go of him. “How are classes?”

“I’m pretty sure there’s some sort of herbology project I’ve been supposed to be doing, but at this point it’s too late if there is one, so I haven’t even bothered asking,” Harry says. “Moody is a pretty good teacher, but he’s got nothing on you, and I still want to hex his face off, so.”

“That’s okay,” his godfather says, “You can just drop out of school and become a professional quidditch player.”

Remus punches him in the upper arm. “Don’t tell him that! Harry, your education is important. There’s plenty of time to be a professional quidditch player after you graduate.”

“Dropping out sounds nice,” he says, “I bet they don’t make drop outs compete in death tournaments.”

“Of course they do,” Sirius says, “It’s called the job market.”

Remus stares. “How would you know? You lived off your trust fund.”

“I would have passed the auror exams!” Sirius protests. “I just didn’t have time. There was a war on, you know.”

“What’s new with you guys?” Harry asks, cutting off an argument before it can begin. It seems like Sirius and Remus love nothing more than to argue. “Anything interesting?”

Sirius hesitates, which immediately grabs Harry’s interest. He tends to be very forthcoming with Harry. “We’ve been staying at Moony’s cottage. It’s remote, and well protected, what with the full moons and everything. But we’re looking into fixing up my ancestral home.”

“That’s good?” he says, but Sirius doesn’t look like it’s good. Then something occurs to him, “Wait, Remus, who makes your wolfsbane potion now?” He feels like an absolute heel that he’s never thought about it before.

Remus grimaces, and Sirius sighs. “I have been. I’m not quite up to your mother’s standards, but I do all right. It works – mostly. And I’m with him during the full moon as Padfoot, so it’s fine.”

“Are you sure you’re okay? Hermione can brew pretty much anything.” Then, “Wait, my mother was good at potions?”

“One of the best,” Remus says. “Her and Snape were always competing for the top spot.” Sirius scowls, and Remus leans into his side. His irritation bleeds away almost instantly.

“That reminds me,” Sirius says, and he reaches into his pocket. There’s another moment when he seems to hesitate, then he opens his hand. Two shrunken books lie in the center of his palms, and with a quick incantation they’re back to full size. “Remus still had these. I’d – your dad and I were friends as kids, before Hogwarts, and I’d picked up Tamil from him. When we met Remus and P – Remus, he wanted to learn too. So we helped, and he learned using these. I thought – maybe, if you want, you could use them too. I wish I could teach you myself, but – well, I know Draco probably speaks more languages than he has fingers, if Narcissa is anything like I remember, he can probably help you pick it up. That Longbottom boy too.”

They’re books on learning Tamil. His father’s language. His language, if he wants it.
“Thank you,” he says, reverently taking the books from Sirius.

Sirius runs his hand through Harry’s hair, swiping his thumb across the pale lightning bolt scar that branches out over half his forehead. “You’re very welcome.”

He wishes so badly he didn’t have to spend the summer with the Dursleys. Being around Sirius and Remus makes him feel safe, makes him feel loved. When he’s with them, he feels at home.

~

Harry has plans to meet up with Ron and Hermione in the afternoon outside of Madame Puddifoot’s. Hermione had suggested the place, Harry assumes, because that’s where she’s going on a date with Viktor.

Except he passes by Honeydukes, and sees Viktor in the window. He pauses, considers that it’s none of his business, then walks in anyway.

Viktor’s talking to Cedric and Cho, both who have a large bag of sweets each. “Hey guys,” Harry says, and it’s nice how they light up with when they see him. “Viktor, I thought you were with Hermione?”

He rolls his eyes, “She cancelled on me, and told me to meet her. She is causing a scene with Fleur.”

“Causing a scene?” he repeats, eyebrows dipped together. That doesn’t sound good.

Viktor waves him off. Cho takes a sugar quill out from her bag and shoves it feather first into his mouth. It dissolves with a burst of sweetness onto his tongue. “Stop looking so gloomy. You worry too much.”

“Eun-hae,” Cedric says, breaking off the half of the sugar quill sticking out past Harry’s lips and popping it into his own mouth. He’s grateful, he doesn’t like that much sweet all at once. “Don’t just force candy on people.”

“Sorry,” Cho says, and rifles through her bag again. She takes out a chocolate frog, and slips it into Harry’s bag. “But I meant it. Cheer up.”

“Apology accepted,” he says, and reaches into her bag himself to steal another sugar quill. By the way a grin breaks out across her face, it was the right move. “Want to come with us figure out what Hermione is doing? If you’re busy on your date, that’s okay too.”

He wishes he could walk around Hogsmeade with his boyfriend. He’d even go to that ridiculous coffee shop with him, even though he didn’t much care for coffee or sweets, and he had no real opinion on glitter.

“We’ll come,” Cedric says after exchanging a quick glance with Cho. “Hermione scheming is bound to be interesting.”

When they show up, it’s to Fleur and Hermione kissing in front of Madame Pudifoot’s while a reporter from Witch Weekly snaps pictures. Ron has his face buried in his hands, and Draco is standing off to the side of Fleur, eyebrows raised.

“I told you,” Viktor says, amused. “She is causing a scene.”

Harry can’t help but think this is absolutely going to make the rumors about his supposed harem resurface again. He hopes Seamus and Dean are proud of themselves.
The articles about Hermione sinking her claws into the Triwizard Champions come hot and heavy after her little photoshoot with Fleur. She seems to take a personal sort of pride with the amount of hate mail she receives. The great hall has taken to applauding after she gets howlers, and apparently Fred has taken the physical letters and started wallpapering the Gryffindor common room with them. He’s been using a permanent sticking charm, and judging by the fact that he’s still alive, Draco can only assume McGonagall hasn’t figured that part out yet. After the past several weeks, he’s told they’ve managed to cover almost one entire wall with them.

Ginny’s working on making a decorative trim using the envelopes, and Ron constantly looks like he’s one mean letter away from snapping completely. Draco thinks it’s kind of sweet how concerned Ron is about Hermione’s reputation, even though she clearly couldn’t care less.

Currently, he’s in Flitwick’s office grading first year essays while laying back on a divan that’s much too long for Flitwick, and that Draco’s pretty sure wasn’t in his office those first few years. He can’t decide between being offended or touched that of all the furniture Flitwick could have possibly supplied him with, he chose a fainting couch. He’d entered his office and flung himself across his desk more than once, so maybe Flitwick just got sick of him messing up his papers.

“Done!” He announces, standing up and dropping the stack on Flitwick’s desk. “Want me to do the third years? They almost don’t make my eyes bleed to read them. Or you can give me some more advice on the ghost summoning spell.”

Flitwick sighs. “My advice of ‘Don’t’ still stands. Barring that, finish writing out the arithmancy of the spell makeup. If you can figure that out, I will consider teaching you the spell and supervising your casting. I would also advise not to aid Quinn in any of zir experiments, but I imagine it’s too late for that particular wisdom to do you any good.”

He hates writing out the equation for a spell. Hermione’s loads better at it than he is, but he doesn’t want to ask her. Partly because everyone had yelled at him when he told them what he was doing, and partly because he really has to get used to doing his own advanced equations without her help. It’s not like he’ll be able to keep Hermione in his back pocket while he’s pursuing his mastery. “I’m working on it. Third year essays? Doing my own year seems skeevy. I can do the fifth year ones, but you tend to want those to keep an eye on what they need to improve for their owls.”

“Take the sixth year quizzes,” Flitwick says, searching through his desk for a moment before handing Draco a thick folder. “There’s an interpretive answer question on the back for bonus points. I’ll review that one, but write down your thoughts on their answers in the margins.”

“Sure,” he says, flipping through them.

“Take a seat,” Flitwick says, “Before that, there’s something I want to talk to you about.”

Draco doesn’t like the sound of this at all. “Okay.”

Flitwick opens his bottom drawer, and shuffles around a bit before pulling out a letter and handing it to him. “I got this in the mail yesterday.”

Confused, Draco opens it.

Dear Master Flitwick,

We have reviewed the article on the innovative melding of magic and metal that you submitted on behalf of Draco Malfoy, and we are pleased to inform you that it has been accepted for publication
in the upcoming quarter.

We have included the contract for first publishing rights. It must be signed by Mr. Malfoy and one of his guardians, and returned for processing by the end of the current quarter in order to be published in the upcoming Charms Review Journal. Upon receipt of the contract, our finance department will make a deposit directly to Mr. Malfoy’s account.

It is our pleasure to inform you that Mr. Malfoy is the youngest person to be featured in our publication as the sole author of an article, usurping your previous position. We offer him our sincere congratulations, and our hope that this is the first of many great things we will see from him.

Sincerely,

The Review Board of The Charms Review Journal

Oh. Draco’s eyes are stinging, and that’s stupid, there’s no reason for that. This isn’t something to cry over.

“If you could do me a favor, and not mention to your mother that I’m allowing you to pursue the ghost summoning spell, I would appreciate it. I very much enjoy having my head attached to my neck, unlike Nick,” Flitwick says.

The tentative happiness working its way up his chest dies in his throat. “Oh, I – thank you, but I can’t. I – my parents and I aren’t really speaking right now.” They would sign, he knows that, they wouldn’t hold it over his head or hold it against him. But it would be giving up too much ground for him to lose, and he wants this so bad it hurts, but not enough to go back on what he said, what he meant.

Flitwick sets out a scroll, and unrolls it across his desk. At the bottom are two signatures: Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy.

“I had picked up on the tensions within your family,” Flitwick says quietly, “so I took the liberty of approaching your parents myself, which is why I did not inform you as soon as I received notice of your acceptance. I hope it is not news to you when I say that your parents are very proud of you, and that they love you very much.”

He shakes his head, wiping at his eyes with the heel of his hand. The iron ring he never takes off, the one his mother slipped off her own finger to give to him, feels warm. “I – no, it’s not. Thank you.”

Flitwick leans forward in his seat, as intent and serious as Draco has ever seen him. “You are brilliant. What you did with the badges, the way you twisted the protego charm to keep everyone safe after the second task – you are talented and innovative, and I believe you’re going to be the very best of us, Draco. I really do.”

If it were any other professor than Flitwick, Draco would be very embarrassed about how the lump in his throat prevents him from responding.

~

Harry is already waiting in their classroom when the door opens. “Finally!” he exclaims, but he’s cut off by Draco’s mouth on his. He’s warm and eager, and he’s pulling on Harry’s clothes. Draco likes getting his shirt off of him, but he usually uses magic to do it. Harry likes taking off Draco’s clothes himself, it’s like opening a present, but Draco isn’t usually that impatient.

“Everything okay?” he pulls back to ask, and Draco doesn’t even pause, biting his way down
Harry’s neck. He’s absolutely going to have to cast a glamour or borrow a scarf, and it’s way too warm for the latter to not seem suspicious anymore.

“Everything great,” he says, unknotting Harry’s tie in a single practiced motion. “I’m getting published in the Charms Review Journal.”

It takes him a moment, but then he connects the name with the slim books that his boyfriend is always reading. “That’s great!”

“Yup,” Draco says, undoing Harry’s pants and sliding them down as he drops to his knees. All of Harry’s thoughts screech to a halt, and he’s pretty sure his brain dribbles out of his ears.

“Are you sure?” he asks, because he’s absolutely all for this, but they’ve never done this before. Draco doesn’t answer him but he makes it very clear that yes, he is sure.

~

“You have to fight your way through a maze,” Neville says. All eleven of them are scattered about their classroom. The heads of schools have finally announced the third task, and no one looks happy about it.

“Crap like this is why people die,” Millie says bluntly. “Even with putting in professors to keep an eye on this, regulating it is going to be nearly impossible.”

Ginny looks like she agrees with Millie. Luna holds up her hands and makes a wishy washy motion. “Because of the goblet, you have to enter the maze. Do you have to fight? Can’t you just stay out of everything’s way until one of the other champions gets the trophy?”

“I wouldn’t push it,” Ron warns. “The Goblet demands participation, or death. I’m not sure how much we want to test where that boundary is with Harry’s life.”

George winces, but Fred says, “Luna’s right. You just need wait for someone else to get the trophy. Fight, but do the same thing you did the ocean. Don’t fight to win. If you get to the trophy first, just wait. If not, then all the better. Just don’t die.”

Draco gives him a hard look, and Harry sighs and holds up his hands. It probably says something about them that Draco can give him a whole lecture with just a glance. “Okay, okay, no heroics. I’ll go in, fight what I have to fight, and get out. That’s it.” Hermione and Pansy are both glaring at him, and Blaise raises a single eyebrow. “I mean it this time!”

Ginny marches over to him and pokes him in the chest hard enough to bruise. “You better. The world’s problems aren’t yours to solve, and if you don’t stop sticking your nose in every problem you come across, then you’re going to end up dead.”

“I don’t stick my nose in every problem I come across,” he protests, “Just the ones where I can help!”

“Merlin above,” Neville says, while Luna just heaves a large sigh.

What? What other answer could they be looking for? It’s not like any of them could see someone who needed their help and walk away either. He’s just put in more situations where those type of opportunities arise, is all.

This is very unfair, and he feels quite ganged up upon.
“Anyway,” he says, “Final exams start in two weeks, then we have the third task a week after that. Should we set up a study schedule or something?”

Hermione rolls her eyes and reaches into her bag. She unrolls a scroll across the desk with a satisfying thwack. They all edge forward warily, like it might attack them. “I did that weeks ago. Harry, you’re leading the group on defense against the dark arts. Blaise and Neville are taking herbology, Pansy is taking transfiguration, Draco is taking charms, and I’m taking potions. The rest we’ll figure out together, depending on our strengths.”

Harry scans the schedule. It’s just jam packed enough that he considers dropping out of Hogwarts and living with Remus and Sirius instead of getting any sort of gainful employment or education.

They’re all in full studying crisis mode. Harry finds out that yes, they do have a herbology project, but apparently his partner is Neville, who didn’t tell him anything about it on purpose. “You had other things to worry about,” he says when Harry confronts him about it, “Besides, no offense, but I didn’t want you messing it up. If I’d partnered with Hermione, she never would have just let me do whatever I wanted, and it would have been a nightmare. Just help me not fail defense and we’ll call it even.” And, well, it’s not like Harry wants to fail herbology, so he doesn’t argue.

Hermione becomes more or less a zombie that just studies and sleeps sometimes, which they should really be used to by now, but it’s just as terrifying every year. Draco is just as bad, holing himself up and his and Blaise’s room to study while pretending that’s not actually what he’s doing, and that he maintains the number two spot in their year without even trying.

The rest of them approach exams like normal people. Fred and George are sixth years, and ranked only a couple spots behind Cedric, who’s had the highest grades in their year from the beginning, but they still study with them. Sometimes they pull Draco or Hermione aside for help, or Harry if it’s for defense, but for the most part they keep to themselves.

The Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students, usually seen mingling around Hogwarts students and grounds, pretty much disappear for the next week. Most of them are set to take their Newts, so Harry’s not surprised.

The week of exams comes and goes. Thanks to Hermione and Draco, he’s pretty sure he did okay in potions, even with Snape glaring at him and breathing down his neck the entire time. He thinks he aced defense, and he’s sure he did fine in everything else. He tries not to worry about it, because, hey – maybe he’ll die in the maze and his exam results won’t matter at all.

As both end of the year exams and Newts come to an end, the third task seems to loom ever higher over him. His friends try to help him prepare, drilling him on spells, but since they have no idea what’s going to be in the maze, there’s only so much they can do. He tries not to let it bother him, but he knows the sense of helplessness grates on them, and on Ron in particular. He’s been irritable lately, and doing his best to hide it, but only partially succeeding.

The day before the third task, he sends a message to each of the other champions, asking them to meet him in the Shrieking Shack, where no one is likely to overhear them.

Harry’s the last to arrive, and he looks at all of them, and says, “I’m sure you’ve already guessed, but I want to give you an official heads up. I’m not in this competition to win it, but I have to participate. In the maze, I’m just going to be fighting anything that gets in my way, and I’m not particularly worried about figuring the maze out. But this whole thing is dangerous, way more dangerous than the other two tasks, so I wanted to say – I’ll be there to help, if you need it.”
“Harry?” Fleur asks, head tilted to the side.

“I have to fight. I might as well be useful. If you get stuck, or if we’re fighting the same thing, I’ll help you. I thought of just offering my aid to Cedric, but I figured he’d refuse. Something about winning fairly or not winning at all, or whatever,” he finishes, winking at him.

Cedric grins. “You were right. If you’re going to do this, I don’t want you doing this just for me. The professors, the headmasters, the other judges – all of them seem to have an angle, to want their favorite to win no matter the cost. I think that’s crap.”

“We win fairly, or not at all,” Krum says. “I like that.”

“I’m in,” Fleur says, nudging Harry in the side. “But it goes both ways, okay? You didn’t sign up for any of this, not like we did. If you need help, we’ll give it to you.” Krum nods his agreement, and Harry can’t help the pleased flush creeping up his face.

Cedric frowns, and rubs the back of his neck. “I – look, all three of us want to win, but this is dangerous. I don’t want to die for a trophy. So – what if we look out for each other? Just when something looks bad.”

“That is a risk,” Viktor points out, but he’s smiling. “We could betray each other or sabotage each other in our attempt to win the cup.”

“Fairly, or not at all,” Fleur says, firm. “I trust you. I trust all of you.”

“Okay,” Cedric claps his hand together. “Harry will help us whenever he can, and we’ll do the same for him. And if the rest of us get into some trouble too dangerous for us to handle, we should call for help, and one of the others will come. No professors or getting disqualified needed.”

“Deal,” the rest of them say together, and Harry likes this, likes them. This entire tournament has been a disaster, but if nothing else, it’s given him three new friends, and he can’t be upset about that.

~

Harry’s late. It’s the last night before the tournament, and he’s late. Draco’s going to murder him.

The door slams open. “Sorry!” Harry says, breathless. “I was meeting with the other champions. I was just telling them that I wasn’t going to try for the cup, and that they can ask me for help if they need it,” Merlin above, it’s not like Draco expected anything else, but that is exactly the type of crap Ginny was talking about, “and we ended up talking for longer than I thought we would. Sorry.”

Draco wants to be mad, but he can’t muster the energy for it. Mostly, he’s just worried, and tired of being worried. He grabs the front of Harry’s robe and pulls him forward, kissing him, because he doesn’t know how to articulate that without sounding ridiculous. Harry is the way he is, and Draco can’t change that. He wouldn’t want to, even if he could, because if he wasn’t stupidly brave and self sacrificing, then he wouldn’t be Harry.

They pause for breath, and Draco presses his forehead against Harry’s. If he concentrates, he can just feel the outline of his soulmate’s scar against his skin. “Draco?” Harry asks, quiet in the space between them. “Are you okay?”

“No,” he says, and the unexpected honesty of it makes him tense in Harry’s arms. He hadn’t meant to say that. Harry rubs his hands down Draco’s back, trying to soothe him. “But come out of that maze alive, and I will be.”
Harry kisses him instead of making an empty promise, and Draco melts into the touch, loves him just that much more for not trying to reassure him with platitudes.

Tomorrow, Harry will have to enter the maze, and Draco doesn’t know what will happen after that. But right now, he has his soulmate in his arms, and that’s enough.

Chapter End Notes

megalania-prisca had done several gorgeous pieces for siat that you can view here (she's added more since the last chapter!)

i hope you liked it!

feel free to follow / harass me at: shanastoryteller.tumblr.com

i post writing updates in my 'progress report' tag if that's something you're interested in keeping track of :)


Harry watches Viktor enter the maze, then Cedric. Harry and Fleur are technically supposed to enter at the same time, but while she goes running into the maze at a sprint, Harry does not. He yawns, stretches his arms above his head, and then stuffs his hands in his pockets before walking into the maze, literally dragging his feet.

There’s a ripple of laughter from the audience, and he smothers a grin. His friends are here, of course, but Mrs. Weasley and Bill came to see him too. He feels a little bad about that, since he’s not planning on doing anything particularly cool like with the dragons. Sirius and Remus had wanted to come, but Harry had refused, telling them it was too much of a risk, even if Sirius went as Padfoot. They’d tried saying that at least Remus could come alone, but Harry knew them. If Sirius was left to his own devices, he’d end up sneaking out too. Harry would rather have them safe than have them here.

Once he disappears behind the hedges, he drops the nonchalant act. He doesn’t want to win, but he doesn’t want to die either. He grips his wand out in front of him, walking cautiously forward.

Harry doesn’t have a plan. He’s just going to walk in random directions until they declare a winner. There’s just enough moonlight for him to see by, so he doesn’t cast lumos, wary of attracting the attention of a creature who otherwise wouldn’t have noticed him.

It’s a wasted effort. He turns the corner to a dementor right on top of him, rattling breath and creeping cold over his skin.

“Ricikkulous!” he casts, turning it into an image of Snape with a billowing cape, decked out in a cheesy Count Dracula costume. His burst of laughter has the boggart letting out a low whine, and disappearing into the bushes.

While he wouldn’t put it past them to put a dementor in this maze, if it was real he would have noticed way before he stumbled upon it. His sensitivity to dementors comes in handy sometimes.

Next he comes across a nest of blast ended skrewts, who manage to singe his robe before he freezes them, but not much else. He doesn’t want them attacking his friends, so he flips them on their backs before continuing forward, knowing it will take them a while to flip themselves back over once his spell wears off.

There’s a high pitched scream that has to be Fleur, and he turns, trying to find the source of it so he can try and get to her. But she doesn’t scream again, so he has no other direction to go on instead of in front of him. He hopes she’s okay.

He keeps walking, waiting for something to attack him, and nothing does. This is starting to seem strange. He’s been in the maze over twenty minutes now, and only encountered two obstacles, neither of them particularly difficult. That doesn’t make any sense. He should barely be able to catch his breath, not taking a leisurely stroll.

“Crucio,” someone says, and Harry whirls around, wand raised. But no one’s there. He doesn’t have more than split second of confusion before Cedric’s pained screams erupt from right next to him. He’s on the other side of the hedge.
Hagrid grew the bushes with Sprout to make them highly resistant to physical and magical harm in an attempt to prevent the champions from trying to take a shortcut. Unfortunately, a shortcut is exactly what Harry needs. Cedric’s in trouble.

He takes a deep breath, flings out his wand, and shouts, “FLIPENDO!”

He doesn’t like to think about it too much, but he knows he’s powerful. His control sucks, so it doesn’t help him out all that much in class, but it means when he wants to, his spells can pack quite a punch.

There’s a half moment of resistance from the bush, but then his spell blasts through, creating a neat hole for him to jump through. The force of his spell has knocked the attacker and Cedric to the ground, but he’s not screaming anymore.

Viktor looks up at him, eyes glassy, and Harry doesn’t let his shock make him hesitate. “Stupefy!”

With Viktor stunned, he goes to Cedric, dropping on his knees beside him. “Hey! Are you okay?”

Cedric grabs onto Harry’s arms, letting him pull him up so he’s sitting upright. He’s shaking, and Harry grips him that much tighter. “I – it wasn’t Viktor.”

“It was very much Viktor!” Harry argues. “He cast crucio on you!”

He shakes his head, “No, I mean, yes, he did, but it wasn’t him. He was acting differently, and his face was completely blank. It was him, but it wasn’t him.”

“Confundus?” Harry asks, but he’s dubious that a confusion charm could make someone cast an unforgivable.

Cedric shakes his head. “No – no, I think he was under imperio. I think someone put him under imperio, and told him to cast crucio on me. Look, he clearly ran into Fleur earlier, but I think she got away.”

Harry doesn’t understand, until he takes a closer look at the petrified Viktor. He’s got a deep burn across his chest, and scratches down his neck. “When she screamed earlier,” he says. He hopes she got away. “We need to end the competition. We have to get Fleur, and get out.”

“We can’t,” Cedric says, “The goblet. If the tournament isn’t completed, then who knows what it’ll do to us.”

Harry curses. “Fine. We find the stupid trophy, and we end this. Whoever did this to Krum is in this maze. Which either means they snuck in, or–”

“That they’re a professor,” Cedric says grimly. “Right. We’ll go on together, and hopefully find Fleur. What about Viktor?”

“We can’t take him with us,” Harry says, even though it pains him. “When he wakes up, he still might be under the control of the imperio. We don’t want to have to fight him, and everything in this maze, and whoever is after us.”

“I’ll send up red sparks, and someone will come for him,” Cedric decides. “You stunned him. That has to count as a loss, there’s no reason that the goblet should punish him for it.” Harry hopes he’s right. They don’t really have another choice. Cedric hesitates, then thrusts his wand into the air. A shower of red sparks fill the sky, then hover in the air above them.
Harry squints, because they don’t look quite random like they’re supposed to. They almost look purposeful.

“I tried to make it look a little like the Korean characters for danger,” Cedric says, pulling Harry away. “Whoever did that to Viktor is still here, and they can see it. I’m just hoping they don’t know Korean, and that Eun-hae figures it out. We need to get out of here before one of the professors gets here.”

They walk side by side through the maze, wands gripped in their fists. They set off a trap that sends a few dozen arrows their way, and Cedric takes care of that by summoning a powerful gust of wind. They happen upon another boggart, two more traps, and an angry swarm of poisonous butterflies before Harry thinks they’re getting somewhere.

Because at that point, they stumble upon a sphinx sitting in the middle of a new path.

Her lioness body is golden and heavy with muscle. Her human head has very dark skin, black coiled hair to her shoulders, and broad features paired with the most intelligent dark brown eyes he’s ever seen. “Hello,” he says politely, inclining his head because he doesn’t think she wants to shake his hand. “I’m Harry, and this is Cedric. It’s nice to meet you.”

She raises one arching eyebrow. Cedric is staring at him, but what else are they supposed to do? It’s not like she’ll be more helpful if they’re rude.

“I am Persenet,” she says, voice light with an accent he can’t quite place, and Cedric makes a sound like he’s choking beside him.

“We have to get passed you, I suppose?” Harry asks.

“Yes,” she says. “There is a riddle you must answer. If you choose not to answer the riddle, I will not move from this path. If you answer incorrectly, I will fight you, and you will surely die. If you answer correctly, I will move, and you can continue on the path to your prize.”

Oh! He’s got this, he knows exactly what to do. Cedric is frowning, eyebrows dipped together in concern, but Harry just strides forward, smiling wide. “Ventablis,” he casts, barely putting any power into it. It’s the same spell Fleur uses to push herself into the air so she can land on her broom for gliding. He uses it just to give himself an extra boost, somersaults over the sphinx, and lands on the other side. “Tada! I neither answered correctly nor incorrectly, so you can’t move.” The sphinx has twisted to stare at him, and Cedric looks horrified. His elation dims. “Was that not the right answer?” More silence. Not the right answer then. “Sorry, I’ll go back over. I wasn’t trying to trick you.”

Cedric raises his wand, like he’s preparing to fight, but Persenet throws back her head and laughs. Her laughter feels like sunshine. “You weren’t trying to trick me,” she says, and she’s smiling. “Not the riddle I meant to give, but a riddle none the less, and an answer all the same.” She pushes herself to her feet, and Harry doesn’t know how big lionesses usually are, but she seems large even for that, standing at over five feet tall and able to look him square in the face. “You and your companion are free to pass,” she says, and her face smooths into seriousness. “Though I am the most dangerous person in this maze, I am among the least malicious.” She circles him, rubbing her shoulder against his back. “Be careful, cub.”

“I will,” he promises. Cedric edges around Persenet, like he’s still not sure that she won’t take a bite out of him. “Thank you for your help.”

She smiles, tail flicking from side to side, then turns her back on them, waiting for the next person to cross her.
Harry thinks that maybe she was talking about whoever hurt Viktor.

But she was probably warning them about the giant spider that attacks them as soon as they lay eyes on the trophy. He’s so glad Ron isn’t here. Unfortunately for them, it seems nearly impervious to both stupefy and flipendo.

“Arania exumai!” Bright light erupts from his wand, and the spider goes sailing backwards. “Please tell me you have an idea.”

Cedric grimaces, “I have one.” Before Harry can question him on it, he casts, “VENTUS!” It’s the same spell he’d used in the second task, except this time above water. The mini cyclone captures the spider and holds it, causing it to swirl around the manufactured cyclone like it’s caught in a blender.

It’s desperate, high pitched squeaks of displeasure almost make Harry feel bad for it. “That’s going to show up in my nightmares.”

“Same,” Cedric says tiredly. He had to face a lot more challenges before being attacked by Viktor than Harry had, and he’s been crucio’d on top of it all. He looks like he could really use a nap.

Harry turns him around and pushes him towards the trophy. “Well, go get it. We need to end this.”

Cedric doesn’t move. “I couldn’t have done this alone, you know. I would have failed without you.”

“I’d be dead a hundred times over if it wasn’t for people helping me,” Harry says. “So what? Get the trophy, and end this stupid tournament. We have to make sure Fleur and Victor are all right.”

Cedric turns to face him again, a stubborn set to his mouth that makes Harry want to strangle him. “You should take it Harry. You should win.”

“Absolutely not! That would go against everything I’ve been trying so hard to do. I didn’t even want to participate in this mess, and I certainly don’t want to win it,” he says.

“We could take it together,” Cedric says. “Grab it at the same time. It’s still a win for Hogwarts.”

“Cedric!” Harry snaps, exasperated. “I don’t want to win! I shouldn’t even be here. Go get the trophy.”

Cedric hesitates again, and Harry’s about to just push him at the stupid trophy when he grins and ruffles Harry’s hair. “Okay, okay, I’m going.”

Finally! He can’t wait for this to be over.

Cedric is just about to pick up the trophy when a burst of red light hits him in the back. He stumbles and falls, cracking his head on the corner of the podium. “CEDRIC!” Harry screams, running forward.

Moody steps out from bushes. “You stupid boy,” he growls, “Why couldn’t you have just grabbed the trophy?”

Harry opens his mouth – to scream, to curse him, he doesn’t know. He doesn’t get a chance to say anything at all, because with a swish and flick of his wand, Moody sends the trophy hurtling straight at Harry.

He catches it on instinct, which he realizes is a mistake when there’s a tug behind his navel, and the maze disappears from sight.
When the red sparks erupt above the maze, the whole crowd falls silent. Once again grossly misunderstand the purpose of a spectator sport, after the champions enters the maze there’s not much for them to do but wait. Draco’s playing a game of exploding snap with Millie when the sky goes red, and his stomach turns to lead.

The professors had added in the ability to signal for help with red sparks as a safety measure. No one had expected any of the champions to use it.

Everyone is looking at the sky. It’s a coincidence that Draco sees movement out of the corner of his eye, and looks down to find Cho slipping from the stands. Her boyfriend is in that maze. Why would she be leaving?

He’s on his feet without even thinking about it. Blaise grabs his wrist and hisses, “What are you doing?”

“I’ll be right back,” he says, instead of answering. He can feel his friends’ eyes on him, but he doesn’t look back.

He catches up with Cho on the other side of the maze. “What are you doing?” he asks, and she jumps a nearly a foot in the air.

“Draco!” she snaps, putting a hand to her chest. “Don’t scare me like that!”

“What are you doing?” he repeats. “Why are you all the way over here?”

She’s clearly about to tell him to mind his own business when she pauses, then changes her mind. “Something’s wrong. Something bad is happening in there.”

“Just because of some red sparks?” He’s not thrilled about them either, they’re hardly a sign of something dire.

She shakes her head. “No. It must have been Cedric that sent those up, because he scattered them so they almost look like the Korean word for danger. It was a warning. But it also means that someone is watching them, watching us, otherwise he wouldn’t have hid it that way.”

“It could be a coincidence,” he says, but he doesn’t believe it even as he says it. “We should tell a professor.”

“They wouldn’t go after Fleur when she was missing for over an hour and a half in a lake,” she says. “They’re not going to do anything just because I say Cedric sent a coded message.”

Yeah, that’s fair.

“Okay,” he says, “What do you want to do?”

She freezes, opens her mouth, then closes it. “You don’t have to come with me.”

Cho is brilliant. But if she enters that maze alone, she’ll die. Besides, if the champions are in danger, that means Fleur and Harry are in danger. He’s not going to stay on the sidelines if his friend and soulmate need his help. He doesn’t say any of that. Instead, he says, “If you don’t take me with you, I’ll go and tell a professor, and they’ll stop you, so Cedric won’t get any help at all.”

“No need to be rude,” she says, but it’s obvious how relieved she is. “We go in, and we find Cedric.
And everyone else.”

What a vague plan. Well, he’s worked with worse. He takes out his wand and points it at hedges, “Seorsum.” They resist for a moment, then they part, leaving just enough space for them to slip through.

“Oh,” Cho says, following him though. “I was just going to try and push my way through.”

Draco rolls his eyes. “That wouldn’t have worked.”

She elbows him in the side, the lays her wand flat on the palm of her hand. “Point me Cedric Diggory.” Her wand spins and settles to the left. She moves it back, then casts, “Point me Harry Potter.” Her wand shifts to the exact same position. Draco hopes that means they’re together. Cho moves it back once more. “Point me Viktor Krum.” It spins, pointing in the direction of the stands. They must have gotten him from the maze, so he was the one Cedric sent the sparks up for. “Point me Fleur Delacour.” Her wand jerks to the right, then settles.

Draco’s heart drops. Harry and Fleur are in opposite directions.

Cho sticks her wand back in the pocket her robe. “I’ll go after Harry and Cedric, you go after Fleur.”

“You want us to split up?” he asks, incredulous. He doesn’t like doing this type of stuff, but he has. The most harrowing experience Cho has dealt with is playing as a seeker on the Ravenclaw quidditch team.

“They need our help,” she says firmly. Her hands are shaking. “Don’t worry, I won’t die. If I do, then who will help Cedric and Harry?”

If Draco doesn’t go to help Fleur, then who will?

He reaches into her robes, pulls out her wand, and places it in her shaking hand, wrapping his hands around her fist until she calms down. They’re not friends, not really, they barely know each other. But he doesn’t want her to die. “Cast first, ask questions never. If you can, run or hide rather than fight. Okay?”

“I’m older than you, you know,” she says, smiling. “Good luck.”

Then she’s on her way, trying to navigate through the maze with just the point me spell to guide her. Draco takes a deep breath, then does the same. He reaches a couple dead ends, a trap that blinds him until he can dispel it, and a small hoard of pixies that he has to fight off. He’s calm only because he’s too scared to panic. But the spell keeps working, and Fleur doesn’t change position. That worries him. She should be moving, and she isn’t. It can’t mean anything good.

When he finds her, he nearly walks right by her.

This section of the maze is crawling with carnivorous veins. Fleur is held against the hedge, the vines sliding across her and leaving sluggishly bleedings wounds in their wake as they slowly eat through her clothes and skin. “FLEUR!” he shouts. He tries to get to her, but whenever he steps too close, vines reach out for him, trying to capture him too. “Fleur, wake up!” She doesn’t stir. He curses and flings out, “Aguamenti!”

A stream of water hits her square in the face. For a moment, nothing happens. Then her eyelids twitch, and she slowly opens her eyes. “Draco?” she slurs.

“Yes!” he calls, “Fleur, you’re trapped, and I don’t how to get you out.” No spell he knows is
destructive enough to be effective while being controlled enough not to hurt her.

“Trapped?” she repeats, then looks down. All at once awareness seems slam into her, and she snarls. “I think not.” Flames appear across her arms and back, then race down her waist to envelope her legs. It’s not a spell, not really – she’s a quarter veela, and that gives her certain abilities. A talent for fire magic among them.

The vines shriek and pull away, until Fleur lands lightly on her feet. She walks through the pile of carnivorous vines, and they all shy away from her. Her clothes are burned and broken, hanging off of her, and she’s covered in wounds.

Including one that doesn’t look like it was from the vines. There’s a deep gash along her back. It looks like someone stabbed her, and pulled.

“Hey,” he steps in front of her, holding out his hands just in case, “What is that? What happened?” She goes to touch her shoulder, and winces as it pulls on her other injuries. “Viktor attacked me.”

“He what?” Draco demands.

She waves it aside, “I don’t think it was him, he wasn’t acting normal. Maybe a confundus gone wrong. I fought him off, but he blasted me into the vines. I must have passed out, or maybe he knocked me out.” She blinks, “Wait, what are you doing here? Is the tournament over?”

“No, Cedric sent up some red sparks for Viktor. They must have stopped him. But he hid a message in them, so Cho and I snuck in. She went after Cedric and Harry, we think they’re together,” he says.

“Well, then we better go find them,” she says. “Whatever’s going on, it’s more dire than this tournament.”

She goes to walk forward, and he grabs her shoulders, preventing her from moving. “Are you crazy? You can’t go like that!”

“I’ll worry about my modesty when this is over,” she says dryly.

“That’s not what I’m talking about!” he snaps. Honestly. Like he cares about her clothes. “Just stop for a second. Do you trust me?”

“Yes,” she answers, though she’s eyeing him warily.

He sighs, and gently turns her so her back is to him. He taps his wand against her skin and casts, “Episkey!”

Fleur gasps. The gash knits itself closed, although the skin around it is red and tender. “You can cast healing spells?”

“More or less. Don’t move,” he says grimly. He can’t risk layering them too much without them reacting against each other. He casts a general antiseptic spell, chews his bottom lip for a long moment, and says, “You lost too much blood.”

“I’m fine,” she says, but Draco ignores her.

He presses the tip of his wand against her heart, takes a deep breath, and concentrates. “Magis sanguis!” The blood replenishing potion is better than the spell, but he doesn’t have it on hand. Color returns to Fleur’s cheeks, and her eyes are a little brighter. Draco has to fight back a yawn. Healing
spells are exhausting, but letting her run around like she was would just end up in her being killed. “Reparo,” he casts casually, so her scraps of clothing return to their previously unharmed state. “There, now we can go running headlong into danger.”

“Thank you,” she says earnestly. “Now follow behind me, I don’t want you to get hurt. We have to find the others.”

“Point me Eun-hae Chang,” he says clearly. Fleur raises an eyebrow. “She was going after them, so hopefully they’re in the same place by now. Even if they’re not, Cedric and Potter can take care of themselves a lot better than Cho can. We should help her first.”

She doesn’t like it, but she doesn’t argue. Draco just wants to find everyone and get out of here. He has a bad feeling about all of this.

~

Harry has his wand taken from him, is tied to a gravestone, and is gagged by Peter Pettigrew of all people all before he gets his head to stop spinning. This day is just going from bad to worse. How does crap like this keep happening to him?

Assuming he lives through this, Draco is going to kill him. Although, he feels fairly confident in his assessment that this time it’s not his fault.

He tries yelling, but his voice is too muffled to be distinguishable. Pettigrew ignores him, taking a bundle of cloth and revealing what looks like a flat nosed, scaly baby. It looks like a demon.

Then, to Harry’s horror, Pettigrew drops the baby into the boiling cauldron.

That’s a baby! It’s going to drown in there! Unless it can breathe underwater, which Harry supposes it might, but – what if it can’t? What’s Pettigrew going to do with a dead boiled baby? Harry hopes he doesn’t plan to eat it. Or him. Of the many ways in which he doesn’t want to die, ritualistic cannibalism is at the top of the list. Or maybe just very high, he doesn’t have an actual list. Considering how his entire life has gone so far, maybe he should make one.

He tries wiggling around, but Pettigrew has tied him well. He looks around, seeing if there’s something he can use to free himself, but it’s just headstones as far as he can see. There’s a glint of gold that’s the trophy, and if he can get to the trophy he can get out of here. But he has no idea how to do that without his wand.

“Bone of the father,” Pettigrew intones, and summons what’s apparently bone from the grave Harry is tied to. He directs it into the cauldron.

“Flesh of the servant,” he continues, and then cuts his hand off into the cauldron.

Harry has no idea where this is going, but he knows he hates it.

Pettigrew wails and drags himself over to Harry, bleeding all over the ground. He raises a silver dagger, and Harry screams, twisting about in his ropes trying to get free, because he really doesn’t want to die.

He can’t get away, but Pettigrew doesn’t kill him. Instead he stabs him in the upper arm, no more than inch deep, and it hurts, obviously, but Harry has had worse from quidditch. “Blood of the enemy,” he whispers, and uses his wand to direct a thin stream of Harry’s blood into the cauldron.

It bubbles and boils over, turning a thick, angry red that makes it look like the whole thing is spilling
blood. The air grows thick and tense with magic, then there’s a bright flash of light that Harry squeezes his eyes against. When he opens them again, a tall, pale man with a flat nose and red eyes is standing in the cauldron.

Harry recognizes that face. The last time he saw it was on the back of Quirrell’s head.

Voldemort is back.

Harry knows he should be panicking, should be screaming, but he feels numb. Not shock, not exactly, but a sort of detachedness to the whole situation so he can take a step back and look at it logically. He’s seen Voldemort as a possessing spirit, as a part of a soul trapped in a diary, and neither of them truly inspired fear. Fear of what he might do, yes, but not fear of the man himself.

He’s not afraid of him this time either.

Harry knows himself. What he fears most is fear, and that’s not what Voldemort is. He’s not a dementor, not invincible, not a god or the next coming of Merlin. The most impressive thing about Voldemort is his refusal to just lay down and die, which from Harry’s point of view puts him on the same level as a cockroach.

Pettigrew is sobbing on the ground, clutching his bloody stump of an arm while Voldemort inspects his new body. After several long moments, he summons clothes, which makes all of this that much less horrifying. Voldemort starts talking at him, describing how he survived all these years and how he got where he is today.

Harry doesn’t care.

He’s shifting on the headstone, hoping that if he can rub the rope along the edges that maybe they’ll weaken and snap, which is a horrible plan, but is at least better than standing there and waiting for Voldemort to get around to killing him.

Voldemort reaches for Pettigrew’s arm, and presses a finger to the dark mark tattooed there. He keeps talking, and as he does, hooded and masked figures appear on bended knee around them. Great. That’s exactly what he needs, more people trying to kill him, because two just wasn’t enough. He calls his gathered Death Eaters traitors for not dying or going to jail for him, and one of them throws himself at Voldemort’s feet, crying for forgiveness. Instead, he gets the cruciatus curse. His screams of pain make it harder for Harry to concentrate on getting these ropes loose.

“Which brings us to Harry Potter,” Voldemort says, stepping in front of Harry, glaring down at him with his slitted red eyes. If he wasn’t gagged, Harry would be tempted to spit on him. He’s not Pettigrew. If he’s going to die, he’s not going to do it weeping. “Now that his blood runs in my veins, his mother’s blood magic won’t work anymore.” He trails a finger down the side of Harry’s cheek, which he knows is just to show everyone that touching Harry doesn’t burn him anymore, but is the single creepiest thing that’s ever happened to him. “Crucio!”

He doesn’t want to scream, doesn’t want to give Voldemort that satisfaction, but he can’t help it. Pain rips through him, like a sledgehammer being pounded against all his nerves, and there’s nothing he can do to stop it. The gag muffs his screams, but after a while he can’t even keep track if he’s screaming, can’t feel the ropes around him, can’t feel anything but pain.

It cuts off, and he hears the sound of laughter. The Death Eaters are laughing at him. He’d like to see how much they’ll be laughing when Voldemort inevitably casts this on them too.

“Untie him and give him back his wand,” he says, and for a moment Harry’s sure that he’s
hallucinating. “We’ll show everyone what Harry Potter really is.”

A Death Eater steps forward to untie him, and Harry finds himself looking into eyes he’s seen before, eyes he recognizes.

Lucius Malfoy is here. Draco’s father is here. It’s not like he’s surprised, but it somehow makes this whole situation even worse.

His gag is removed and his wand is shoved back into his hand. The ropes holding him to the gravestone slip to the ground, and he doesn’t realize his legs are asleep until he tries to step forward and falls to his knees.

“Come now,” Voldemort says, voice silky, “let’s settle this in duel like civilized men. Crucio!”

It’s been a few years since dueling club, but Harry’s pretty sure casting an unforgivable at an opponent on his knees isn’t standard operating procedure. He can’t stand, so he rolls out of the way of the curse, hiding behind another gravestone. Voldemort snarls in frustration, but Harry can’t focus on that, he needs a moment to think.

The truth of it is, he’s faced Voldemort before, and survived every time. But he was never alone. He always had friends to help him, which he doesn’t have now.

Voldemort blasts apart the headstone he’s hiding behind, and Harry scrambles for cover behind a different one.

So, he needs friends if he doesn’t want to die. How is he supposed to do that? He can’t summon people, and he could probably summon Payne, a wyvern would be great right about now. But he’d be summoning him into a battlefield, and that’s wrong. He’s pretty sure Payne would help, but it’s too big a favor to ask. Harry won’t have anyone die to save him.

Another exploded headstone, and another duck for cover.

So he can’t summon help. He has to work with what and who he has. But the only people here are Death Eaters and the dead.

Oh.

Hey.

That’s an idea.

It’s a really bad idea, and he’ll probably die, but if he doesn’t do it he’ll probably die anyway.

He pops out from behind a gravestone, wand raised. “Avada kedavra!” Voldemort snarls as soon as he sees him.

“Adducere exspiravit!” The ghost summoning spell rolls easily off his tongue, he’s heard Draco complaining about the arithmancy of it enough times. He puts every ounce of his strength and power behind it. The green light of the killing curse is right on top of him, and he closes his eyes against it, trying to duck but knowing he won’t make it in time.

Then it’s gone, and he’s still alive.

“Father,” Voldemort breathes.

He opens his eyes, and a silvery specter is in front of him, lightly glowing green with the killing
curse he’s holding in his hand.

It worked! Except – the spell isn’t done yet. Harry can feel it pulling at him, can feel the pressure of half used magic on the back of his neck. This might be the part when he dies. The list of ways this spell can go wrong has filled several books. Harry knows, because Draco has spent the past couple of months reading them.

A hand pushes itself out of the ground, and Harry screams. A decayed skeleton rises from Voldemort’s father’s grave, and the glaring ghost sinks into the bones.

That’s definitely not supposed to happen.

The spell finishes, and there’s groans and shouts as more corpses crawl out of the ground, heading for the Death Eaters. Tom Riddle Senior somehow speaks with his skeletal mouth, and says, “You’re even more of a bitch than your mother was.”

Voldemort screams, a primal sound of rage, and slashes his wand down, attacking his father. Harry takes that as his cue to run. None of the shambling corpses looks his way, all several dozen of them converging on the group of Death Eaters. Harry’s whole body is sore from but cruciatus curse, and performing the botched ghost summoning spell has left his body feeling heavy and tired. But if he can just get to the trophy, he’ll be able to get out of here.

“GET HIM!” Voldemort roars, “DON’T LET HIM ESCAPE! IF HE LIVES, YOU DON’T!”

Harry weaves through the corpses, doing his best not to gag, and several Death Eaters try to attack him, but the wave of bodies separating them makes it hard. A cutting jinx sears across his thigh, and he bites back a scream at the white hot pain arching over his skin. He stumbles and falls, so close to the trophy, but not close enough.

A Death Eater grabs him and flips him over, and Harry find a wand in his face. It’s Lucius.

Draco’s dad is going to kill him.

He holds his breath, waiting. They’re separated the others, the animated corpses forcing everyone else away. Lucius had been the only one who was able to get through.

They’re both panting for breath, chests heaving, and all it will take is two little words, a spell Harry is sure Lucius has cast before, and he’ll be dead. Voldemort’s most annoying enemy will be gone, and Harry’s sure that Lucius will be rewarded. Or at least not tortured and killed. But still, neither of them move. He doesn’t understand.

A corpse throws itself on Lucius’s back, it’s rotted fingers encircling his neck. Lucius grunts and tries to elbow it off of him, but can’t quite manage it, one hand scrabbling at his neck to free himself and the other twisting to point his wand at the attacking corpse.

Harry takes the moment of distraction. He ignores the pain in his leg and crawls forward, but risks a glance back. Lucius has thrown off the corpse, and more are almost on him, but not yet. He still doesn’t raise his wand to Harry.

He doesn’t have the time to care about this. He reaches out and his hand curls around the cool metal of the trophy.

There’s that same tug at his navel, and the portkey transports him back to the maze, back to Hogwarts.
He’s deposited behind the podium, and gives himself a moment to shove his glasses to the top of his head and dig the palms of his hands into his eyes, willing for the world to stop spinning.

If he’d expected a break, he’s sorely disappointed when he peaks around the corner to see Moody still here, although it looks like Cedric isn’t. But – Moody doesn’t look okay. His eyes are foggy, and he’s frowning. He’ll take few steps forward, shake his head, then try walking in the opposite direction. He hasn’t noticed Harry yet.

There’s a ripple of magic near the ground, and it hits Moody’s boots before shimmering up his body and sinking into him. His eyes cloud over. It’s a confusion charm, although a weak one. Harry waits, and watches. A minute later, it happens again. He follows it back, into the hedges, but nothing is there. Actually – wait. He squints, and it’s barely there, but he sees the outline of what he thinks is a person crouched end the edge of the path, right against the bushes. Or maybe two someones. It’s the disillusionment spell, then, and that plus the confusion charms means they go unnoticed by Moody.

But it’s not sustainable. Moody steps out of the way of the next confusion spell, and before whoever is hiding can recast it, Moody blinks, opens his mouth wide, and bites hard on his tongue. The pain is enough to break him from the hold of the confusion charm, and his face clears and sharpens.

“Enough,” he growls, turning and pointing his wand in the direction the confusions charms had come from. “Finite incantatem!”

The disillusionment charm cracks, then shatters, revealing Cho on her knees, tears rolling down her cheeks as she grips her wand. She’s holding an unconscious Cedric in her lap, his face covered in blood from the wound on his forehead. “Please,” she sobs, “please don’t hurt him!”

“Goodbye,” Moody says grimly, raising his wand.

“NO!” Cho shouts, twisting to cover Cedric’s body with her own.

Harry forces himself to his feet, throwing out his arm to aim. “FLIPENDO!”

It hits Moody square in the back, and he stumbles forward. Harry winces. He really must be weak if that’s all he managed to do. “Mr. Potter,” Moody turns to face him, “You’re not supposed to be here.”

“I get that a lot,” he says, trying to keep Moody’s focus on him and off Cho and Cedric. “Expelliarmus!”

The spell yanks Moody’s wand from his hand, but not quickly enough, because he grabs it once more. “I didn’t think I’d get the pleasure of killing you. This is an unexpected gift.”

He didn’t make it out of that graveyard just to be killed here. “Glacius,” he casts, turning the ground beneath Moody’s feet to ice. He slips, and Harry throws out a stunning spell while he gets back to his feet. It hits, but once again Moody manages to shake it off. He hates being this weak, this useless.

“Harry?”

They all turn, and Fleur is there, looking at them. His eyes widen, because it looks like he’s just fighting with a professor, but he doesn’t have time to explain. He hopes Fleur doesn’t attack him, because then he’ll be dead for sure.

Fleur’s eyes narrow, and she casts, “Secare!” She attacks Moody without hesitation of reservation. He loves her.
Moody casts a hasty protego, and her spell bounces off of it. She walks forward, her pace measured and even, and casts it again, and this time Moody’s shield shatters under the weight of it, and blood blooms across his chest.

“No more games,” he pants, turning his back on Fleur and aiming his wand at Harry. “Avada–”

Harry means to duck, to run. He doesn’t have to. Fleur calls out, voice clear and steady, “Iugulate!”

Moody tries to face her again, but it’s too late. A neat cut slashes across his throat, cutting off his voice, leaving him wide eyed and gurgling as he falls to his knees.

Blood splatters across Fleur’s cheek. Harry flinches. She doesn’t.

Moody falls face first into the dirt. He’s dead before he hits the ground.

~

Draco had promised to let Fleur go in first, to stay back, but he hears the sound of a fight and clenches his teeth together. Then he hears the beginnings of the killing curse, and goes running.

When he turns the corner into the center of the maze, it’s to see Harry, Fleur, and Cho kneeling next to Cedric, who looks to be passed out, and Moody dead on the ground. “What the hell?” he demands, rushing over. “What happened to you guys?”

Fleur and Cho look relatively okay, but Cedric’s head wound and the gash across Harry’s thigh worry him. They need to get Cedric to Pomfrey, he doesn’t want to risk messing up something that delicate, but he could at least help Harry. But he can’t help Harry, not without looking suspicious. Maybe Fleur will throw him a bone and tell him to do it, and he can pretend to help him for her sake.

Harry sees him and his eyes widen. He tries to push himself to his feet, but stumbles, and Draco grabs him without thinking, gripping his forearms to keep him upright. He’s considering letting him drop for appearances sake, but he really doesn’t want him putting more weight on that leg.

Harry grabs the back of his neck, and Draco’s glad he’s not dead, but they seriously can’t start making out right now. For so many reasons, but mostly because their relationship is supposed to be a secret. “They trophy is a portkey,” he says, “it took me to a graveyard, and I saw Voldemort be – reborn, I guess, he has a real body now.” Draco’s mouth drops open, and he hears Cho’s wet gasp. “A bunch of Death Eaters were there. Most of the ones that were left, that weren’t in jail or dead. Okay?”

His father. His father was there.

“Voldemort said if I lived, they wouldn’t. I don’t know how serious he was, I don’t think he’d kill the only supporters he has left as soon as he’d gotten them back, but – that’s what he said,” Harry finishes. His knees buckle, and he falls into Draco. He’s pretty sure it was faked when Harry uses that closeness to whisper into his ear, “He could have killed me, he had a chance, but he didn’t.”

He nods, carefully lowering Harry back to the ground. Voldemort is back – not as surprising as it probably should have been, considering he’d nearly come back in the chamber at the end of their second year. But his dad – he might be hurt.

He might be dead.

“I need to get out of here,” he says, trying to tamp down on the panic he can feel edging it’s way past his throat. “I need to go.” He has no idea how long it’s going to take him to fight his way through the
maze, and every second that passes feels like years.

Cho nods, “Cedric needs help. We can’t just carry him through the maze, who knows what could attack him, or us.”

“Fuck this,” Fleur says in French. “The tournament is over. The goblet does not control us any longer. We are done with all of this.” She raises her wand in the direction of the stands, directly at a hedge blocking their path. “INCENDIO!”

For a moment, nothing happens. Then the biggest fireball Draco has ever seen springs from her wand, six feet tall and just as wide. It burns through the hedge, and just keeps going, barely dragging against the ground as Fleur keeps her wand steady, forcing it to keep burning through the hedges until it hits unprotected air, then she cancels the spell. She’s panting when she’s done, her eyes burning as bright as the fire she’d summoned. “That was amazing,” Harry says earnestly. Draco can’t help but agree.

She spares them a smile, then jerks her head at the path she’d created. “Go. We have dead and injured to move, and we can’t hurry. But you have to go.”

He goes on his tiptoes to kiss her on the cheek, then he’s running. When he exits the maze, people are shouting and moving, some peering into the maze, but Draco doesn’t bear them any mind. He needs a fireplace connected to the floo network, and some floo powder. He keeps going, ignoring people as they shout his name and grab for him.

Someone hooks their elbow around his, jerking him to a stop. He turns and snarls, but it’s just Blaise. He can see Pansy and Millie running after them. “Draco, what’s wrong?” Blaise asks, “What are you running from?”

“He’s going somewhere, Mr. Malfoy?” Snape doesn’t have his wand out, but Draco does. He aims it right at Snape’s face. “Get out of my way.”

“Or what? You’ll obliviate me again?” Snape challenges.

“Get the fuck out of my way, or get ready to join Lockheart in St. Mungo’s,” he says, and he should probably be panicking that Snape knows he obliviated him last year, but at this current moment he just doesn’t care.
“What are you planning on doing?” he asks.

Draco steps forward, and Snape doesn’t try and stop him. “I have no idea.” He lights a fire, grabs a pinch of floo powder, and throws it into the flames. They instantly blaze green. He steps into the fireplace and shouts, “Malfoy Manor!”

In the next moment, he stumbles into his parlor, and the flames die out behind him. One of his family’s house elves, Tilly, cracks in place in front of him. She’s wringing her hands together, and her normally large eyes are even larger. “Young Master Draco! You cannot be being here—”

“Take me to my mother. Now,” he commands.

“That is not a good idea,” she says, cringing away from him.

He can’t just go running through the manor, it’s so big he’ll never find her. Lucius always has an anti-tracking charm on him, but his mum doesn’t usually bother. “Point me Narcissa Malfoy!” It turns west. “Library or study?” he asks Tilly.

She doesn’t say anything.

“TILLY!” He roars, and she presses her hand to her ears and cowers. He’ll feel bad about that later, but he needs information now. “Library or study?”

“Study,” she whispers, “But the young master should not be going.”

He ignores her, bolting for his father’s study before she’s even finished speaking. The door’s closed, and when he tries to pry it open it refuses to budge. He takes a step back, sends a silent apology to his ancestors, then rips the door off its hinges with a swish of his wand. There must have been a sound muffling charm on it, because as soon as it’s gone he can hear his mother crying. He tries to enter, but then his mother is in the doorway, face pale and her hands and the front of her dress soaked in blood.

“Draco!” she says, “You have to leave, you can’t be here.”

“Let me in,” he says, trying to push past her, but she doesn’t budge.

She’s shaking her head, eyes wild, “Honey, you have to go – you can’t,” her voice breaks, “I don’t want you to see this.”

Draco’s eyes narrow. “Mum, I’m really sorry about this.” He jerks his wand, using his magic to push her back into the study so he can run inside.

His father is laid out on the couch, covered in deep lacerations, the floor a puddle of blood around him. Draco would think he was dead if it weren’t for the weak rise and fall of his chest. Narcissa grabs his arms, tugging at him, pleading, “Honey, honey please, I’ll sit with him until he’s gone, he won’t die alone, but you shouldn’t, you – you don’t need to see him like this.”

Die? His father’s not going to die.

He turns to look at his mother, his beautiful, vicious mother, who couldn’t cast a healing charm to save her life. Or her husband’s.

He raises his wand, clearing his mind, because he has to get this right, he only has so many chances to do this right. Layering too many healing spells will just mean death for him and his father both, and then where will his mother be?
“No! It’s too dangerous!” Narcissa shouts, but she’s too late.

“Episkey!” He doesn’t know how deep the injuries go, better to do something generic, a spell where magic does most of the work for him. His magic leaves him in rush, and his vision swims in front of him. But when he can focus again, sparks of healing green magic are arching over his father, and slowly sealing the wounds shut. It’s not a pretty job, those are going to scar, but he’s not bleeding anymore. It’s only skin deep though, and does nothing for his internal injuries.

He’s wracking his brain, trying to decide on what to do next. His father obviously needs to replace the blood that he lost, but he doesn’t know if he wants to waste his limited spells on it. “Tilly,” he says, and she appears in front of him. “Do we have any blood replenishing potion in the stores?”

She doesn’t answer, instead disappearing and reappearing with a small vial in her hand.

“I didn’t know you could do that,” Narcissa says. She’s locked her hysteria away, even though her eyes are red from crying.

He shrugs, trying to keep his wildly beating heart under control. He wants to just lay next to his dad and cry, wants his mum to run her fingers through his hair, her long nails scratching against his scalp, and tell him that everything’s going to be okay. But that’s not something that he can have. Not yet, anyway. He stares down at his father, at his face twisted in pain even while he’s passed out.

“They’re charms. I’m good at charms.”

She stands behind Draco, settling her hands on his shoulders. She can’t help with this, healing is never something she’d been able to do, so she’d never learned. But she’s not trying to stop him anymore. He can manage one more spell, maybe, and he can’t use episkey again if he doesn’t want it to backlash. “Ementur lignum carnum,” he mutters, lightly tracing his wand over the wounds on his father’s chest and stomach, where most of the damage probably is. It’s a more advanced spell than he should probably be doing, but what’s he’s already done isn’t enough, he’s only slowed his father’s advance to death, not stopped it.

He won’t be able to receive professional treatment until tomorrow, at the earliest. If he’s brought to the hospital the same night that Harry Potter says he was attacked, then he’ll be under suspicion, then people will have questions, ones none of them can answer.

His magic gathers where he pressed his wand to Lucius’s skin, and then it sinks into him, repairing damage he can’t see and doesn’t understand. The effort of it leaves him exhausted, and for a moment he has to lean back into his mother’s hands. “Draco?”

“Any more is too dangerous,” he says. “For the both of us.”

He takes a step closer, stumbles, then falls to his knees. Good enough. He pulls himself so he’s right next to his father, and presses the back of his hand to his cheek. He’s cold. It’s the blood loss. He needs that potion. He reaches out his hand, and Tilly places the vial in his hand unasked. “Dad!” he shouts, pushing at his father’s side, “Dad, wake up!”

He doesn’t move.

Draco lowers his forehead onto his father’s shoulder, taking a deep, careful breath to keep from crying. The crisis hasn’t passed, so he can’t break down yet. But Voldemort is back, and his soulmate got hurt, and his dad was just a few moments from death’s door, and still isn’t in the clear yet, and he’s just so tired. They haven’t talked all year, and his dad’s a Death Eater, but it doesn’t matter, because Draco still loves him. He can’t lose him.
“Please,” he says, blindly reaching out until he can grip his dad’s hand with all the strength he has left. “Dad, Daddy, please. I need you to wake up.”

There’s a weak, barely there pressure on his hand, Lucius returning his desperate grip. He raises his head, and Lucius’s face is twisted in a grimace. His eyes open slowly, and a low moan leaves his mouth. “D’co?” he slurs, saying something that’s almost his name.

He uncorks the potion and presses it to his father’s lips. “Drink this.”

He doesn’t question him, drinks the unknown potion without batting an eye. He swallows, and color returns to his pale skin, he’s breathing easier, and his eyes brighten, become more aware. “Draco!” He has to pause to cough, and when’s done, he reaches out and grips Draco’s shoulder, “What are you doing here?”

“I heard what happened,” he says, reaching up to cover Lucius’s hand with his own. “Why – I heard you could have stopped Potter, but didn’t. Why not?”

Lucius closes his eyes again, but not like he’s tired. Like he can’t bear to look at him. “I don’t know. I – he’s your age, and I just.” He makes a frustrated sound in the back of his throat, then sighs. He says, almost too softly for Draco to hear, “I want you to be proud of me. I want you to be proud to be my son.”

“I am!” Draco cries. He grips either side of his father’s face, and Lucius slowly opens his eyes. “I am proud of you, I’m proud to be a Malfoy. I just – I don’t want,” he shakes his head. “I don’t want to be a Death Eater. I don’t support Voldemort, and I won’t help him,” he says, and his parents know that, they have to know that, it’s why they haven’t been talking all year, but he’s never said it outright like that before, that plainly. “But you’re so much more than a Death Eater. Serving Voldemort is the least of you. You’re my dad.”

A tear slips down Lucius’s cheek, then another. He hadn’t cried at the injuries that were going to kill him, but he’s crying now. “He’s back. You-Know-Who is back, and I can’t go against him. But you won’t serve him,” Lucius swears. “I need you to keep your head down, I need you to pretend, but – you won’t ever be a Death Eater. Not on my life. I’ll protect you, Draco, I promise. But I need you to pretend.”

“Oh, okay,” he whispers, and it’s not like it’s a surprise, this is what he knew would happen from the beginning, it’s why he’s insisted on secrecy these past few years. Because his relationship with Harry would be a death sentence to his parents. He always knew that he would have to pretend, to lie. “I’ll listen, I’ll say what I need to say and do what I need to do. But you have to do the same.”

Lucius frowns. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t give him a reason to kill you,” he says. The last thing he wants is for his father to hurt his soulmate, he can’t think of anything that would destroy him more than his dad harming Harry, but he can’t hesitate like that again, not for Draco’s approval. “Do what you have to do, okay? I can’t lose you.”

“Oh, okay,” he says, smoothing back Draco’s hair with such thoughtless tenderness that he nearly crumples again at the reminder of what he almost lost. “Okay.”

His mother tugs on his arm. “Darling, you have to go. They’re going to be looking for you, and they can’t know you were here. You have to go back to Hogwarts.”

He wants to argue, but he knows she’s right. He takes a deep breath, forcing himself to his feet. His
entire world sways for a moment, then he rights himself. This is going to suck. Narcissa moves to walk with him, but he shakes his head, placing his hand on her shoulder. “I’ll be fine. Stay with Dad.”

She pulls him into a hug tight enough that it steals all his breath, then kisses him on both cheeks. “I love you. Be safe.”

“You too,” he says, then casts one more lingering looks at his father, who seems to have succumbed to exhaustion and fallen asleep.

He walks back to the parlor and over to the fireplace. He reaches for the floo powder, but then there’s a loud crack beside him. “I am thinking that Young Master could be needing this.” Tilly is standing at his side, a silver tray in her hands and a small smoking potion in a crystal goblet. It’s a pepper-up potion.

“Thank you,” he says, surprised by her thoughtfulness. “Er, sorry about yelling earlier.”

She blinks, then a small smile appears around the corners of her mouth. “It is all right. Tilly was not listening, and the Young Master did a good thing. We is liking current Master, and we’re glad Young Master could save him.”

He downs the pepper-up potion, and he knows it won’t last, that when the potion wears off he’ll crash even harder than he would have otherwise. But it’s better than passing out as soon as he steps through the floo.

“Severus Snape’s office,” he says, and steps into the green fire.

They’re all whisked away to the hospital wing as soon as the judges lay sight on them, which makes sense, since everyone but Cho is injured, and they have Moody’s dead body with them. Dumbledore escorts them there, face carefully blank, while the other school heads stay behind, trying to calm the crowds. Fleur helps him walk while levitating Moody’s corpse, while Cho is carefully doing the same with Cedric. But as he’s being pulled away, Harry can see a small crowd of redheads trying to get to him, and one of Mrs. Weasley’s hugs sounds really nice right now, actually, but he doesn’t get a choice in the matter.

Fleur helps him sit down on one of the beds, and he expects her to move away after that, but instead she stays right beside him. It’s more comforting than he can say.

Cho gently lays Cedric on a bed opposite to them. “Is he going to be okay?”

Dumbledore stands, still saying nothing at all, just watching, waiting. Harry has no idea what he’s thinking.

Madame Pomfrey waves her wand over him, not even using an incantation to clean and heal the wound on his head. She gently presses her fingers to his forehead, frowning, and says, “A bit of brain swelling, but we’re catching it quite early. A quick little mend, and he’ll be as good as new.” She swirls her wand above his head, eyebrows dipped together in concentration, then lets out a long string of Latin that sounds more like an incantation than a spell. She does it easily, but it’s clear that it’s not an easy thing.

When she’s done, he can’t see any outward difference at all, but a moment later Cedric’s eyes flutter open. He lays there for a moment, blinking slowly, then he pushes himself upright. “HARRY!”
Cho turns away from him, her hand against her mouth.

“I’m right here,” he calls out, waving his arms, even as he glances worriedly at Cho.

Cedric frowns, pressing his hand to where he’d hit his head. “But – Professor Moody, he–”

“He is dead,” Fleur says, offhand. If she has any regrets about killing him, she’s not showing it. Dumbledore’s eyes narrow.

“I, but,” he sighs and rubs at his head. “Okay.” His eyes catch on Cho, and he reaches for her seemingly without thinking. “Love, are you okay?”

Cho doesn’t move immediately, but when she turns big fat tears are rolling down her cheeks. Cedric tries to stand, but Madame Pomfrey pushes him back into bed with a glare that Cedric probably wouldn’t try and argue with normally, but he pushes back against her. Pomfrey doesn’t budge. “You need to rest, Mr. Diggory.”

“I was so scared!” Cho cries, and she runs for him. Cedric catches her as she flings herself onto him, climbing onto his bed and into his lap so she can throw her arms around his neck and bury her face in his shoulder. Cedric wraps his arms around her, pressing quick kisses to her cheek and forehead. “You sent up the warning, and I was so worried, and then I found you but you weren’t moving and Moody was there, and, and I,” her voice cracks and she continues on in Korean, something Harry can’t follow at all, but Cedric is nodding along and answering her in kind, rubbing a soothing hand up and down her back.

Pomfrey softens, and must decide that letting Cedric hug his girlfriend does more good than harm, because she leaves them to it and steps over to them. “Miss Delacour, Mr. Potter. What have you gotten yourselves into?”

He’s covered in various scrapes and bruises, but his only major injury is his leg. He silently points at the cut across his upper thigh.

She casts a diagnostic spell, and actually looks pleased. “It didn’t hit anything major, and it doesn’t have any anti healing properties. You got lucky.”

He doesn’t feel lucky.

With a couple quick spells, the sharp, throbbing pain disappears and his skin knits itself back together. There’s some vague soreness, but he knows from experience that it will be gone by morning.

Fleur has various wounds scattered all across her body. “Miss Delacour, would you like to go somewhere more private?”

“I do not have the words to describe how much I do not care,” she says tiredly. She stands, patting Harry’s shoulder as she passes him, and strips in the middle of the hospital wing, leaving her in a sports bra and underwear that goes from just under bellybutton to the tops of her thighs. Her clothes were whole, but she has long thin wounds curled around her limbs and stomach.

“Carnivorous vines?” Pomfrey asks sympathetically. She casts the diagnostic spell, frowns, then casts it again. “Did you heal your wounds yourself?”

“No, Draco did,” she says. “I had a knife gash on my back from Viktor,” she touches a place on her back that looks red, but definitely doesn’t have a gash in it. “He healed that, and cleaned the wounds. Oh, and he cast a blood replenishing spell, which was really helpful.”
Dumbledore’s eyebrows are nearly to his hairline. Pomfrey’s mouth actually hangs open for a moment before she gains the presence of mind to close it. “All on his own?”

“He is more than just a pretty face, you know,” she says, disapproving.

“Apparently,” Pomfrey says, more to herself than anyone else. She quickly heals what’s left of Fleur’s wounds.

“Is Viktor okay?” she asks. “Why is he not awake?”

Pomfrey’s face tightens, then relaxes. “Mr. Krum will be fine come morning. He fought quite hard against the imperio curse, and caused a slight bleed in his brain. I’ve repaired most of the damage, and placed him in a healing sleep that will take care of the rest.”

Fleur puts her clothes back on, and sits back down next to Harry. She finally pulls her hair out of its bun, and half of it smacks him in the face. “Fleur!”

“Harry,” Dumbledore says, cutting off whatever response Fleur would have had, and Harry turns to see the headmaster’s electric blue eyes fastened onto him. “What happened in there?”

The door to the hospital wing opens. By the volume of voices, there’s quite a lot of people out there, but only a few slip through. Snape, who had probably opened the door in the first place, Cornelius Fudge, Percy, Tonks, Mr. Diggory, and Mrs. Zabini. It’s such a strange collection of people that he has to blink a few times to make sure his brain isn’t playing tricks on him.

For a split second, Dumbledore almost looks irritated, before he’s back to looking like nothing more than vaguely pleasant. The reminder that his headmaster is human makes Harry crack a grin, even given the circumstances.

“Dumbledore!” Fudge sputters. “I demand to know what’s going on!”

Snape doesn’t bother to hide his eyeroll.

“We are working on getting to the bottom of this, Cornelius,” he says. “Severus, do you know where the young Mr. Malfoy is? Since he apparently got caught up in all of this as well.”

“Get off him, you idiot, you’re suffocating him!” Mr. Diggory shouts, standing at the foot of his son’s bed. Everyone pauses to look at him.

Cho hurries to climb off of Cedric, but he doesn’t quite let her, keeping a firm arm around her waist. “Dad,” he greets, something hard in his face that Harry hasn’t seen there before, “Don’t talk to Eun-hae that way.”

Mr. Diggory nearly goes purple in rage. Cho squeezes Cedric’s hand, then finishes getting off the bed. She almost reaches out to touch Mr. Diggory’s shoulder, but doesn’t. “It’s okay,” she tells him earnestly. “I was really scared too. I understand.”

There’s a moment when Harry’s sure Mr. Diggory is going to yell again, but then his face crumples and he collapses in a chair next to his son’s bed. He doesn’t say anything, just leans over and cries into his folded arms. Cedric looks thunderstruck, and it takes Cho whispering something to him Korean to get him to move, to try and comfort his father.

“Mr. Malfoy is dealing with some house matters,” Snape says, smoothly pulling everyone’s attention back to him. “I doubt he’d be very much help, anyway.”
Cho has left father and son to sort themselves out, and come to stand by them. “He only came with me because he was worried about Fleur.”

“He helped me escape the carnivorous vines,” Fleur says.

Fudge stands over her, attempting to loom. He’s not very good at it. “Have you no remorse? You’re a murderer!”

“Uh,” Tonks says, at the same time that Zaira politely elbows Fudge out of the way. “That’s not really how the law works. I’m here to take statements, not arrest anyone. I don’t think.”

“Hello, dear,” Zaira says, picture perfect with her waterfall of braids elegantly piled on top of her head and a sparkling green dress. She looks like she came from a party. “I’m an attorney. I’d like to represent you, if that’s all right?”

“That would be lovely, thank you,” Fleur says politely.

Percy rubs at his forehead. Harry’s not sure how exactly he got past the door, but it’s possible that Tonks just dragged him through. He looks up, pales, then says, “I thought you said Moody was killed?”

“He was,” Fleur and Harry say at the same time.

“Then what’s my former boss’s corpse doing laid out?” he snaps.

Everyone turns. There’s a dead body there, wearing Moody’s clothes, but it’s not Moody. Dumbledore and Snape nearly bump into each other in their haste to get next to the corpse. “Polyjuice?” Snape mutters.

Percy steps closer, and his frown deepens. “Wait – that’s not my boss.”

“No,” Dumbledore says grimly, “It’s his son.”

Harry has never been more confused in his whole life, and that’s saying something. He’s confused a lot.

“This is so above my paygrade,” Tonks says, more to herself than anyone else. She summons a patronus, a fluttering little woodpecker, and sends it off with a message requesting backup.

Snape takes the flask from the corpse’s hip, smells it, and hands it Dumbledore, “Moody’s probably still alive. Polyjuice potion made from a living person’s body is much more stable, and he wasn’t good enough at potions to overcome that.”

“Oh,” Harry says, something that’s been at the back his mind all year sliding into place, “I think Crouch was keeping him in his office.” Everyone is staring at him, so he explains, “I have this map, and it says where people are. Whenever I looked at it, Moody was in his office, no matter the time of day. I thought maybe he just worked a lot. But maybe that’s where the real Moody is?”

“We need to see this map!” Fudge demands.

Dumbledore sighs, “If you please, Harry.”

He’s tired, but not too tired to summon the map from Hermione’s room. It materializes in his hands, and they have safeguards in place, no one but the six of them can summon it. No sooner has he completed the spell than Fudge snatches it from his hands. “It’s blank!”
“It’s magic,” he says. Percy coughs, and if Harry’s not mistaken, it’s to hide a laugh. He didn’t know Percy could laugh. Tonks is clearly good for him.

Fudge scowls and taps his wand against the map. “Revelio!”

If he’d stopped and listened for a second, Harry could have told him that wouldn’t work.

Ink bleeds across the page, forming an image of a roaring chimera. More ink slides across the front of the map, and everyone’s leaning forward, trying to get a good look.

*Arachne regrets to inform you that such a simple spell is insufficient.* Harry can nearly hear Hermione’s disapproval, and has to bite back a grin.

*Icarus suggests something that can’t be cast by a first year,* Draco’s part of the map follows, barely letting Hermione’s finish.

“What is the meaning of this?” Fudge demands.

Pansy’s personality writes next. *Medusa finds your idiocy tiresome.*

“Merlin,” whispers Tonks. She looks delighted.

A neater version of Ron’s spikey handwriting spills across the page. *Heracles would like to know which idiot has stumbled upon us?*

“I am the Minister of Magic!” Fudge says, “You will stop these games this instant!”

*If this is a game, Achilles thinks it’s one you are losing,* Harry’s bit of the map says next, and he has to bite his lip to keep from laughing.

Blaise’s showy cursive glides across the page. *Midas concurs with Medusa’s assessment, and reiterates Icarus’s suggestion that you try something else.*

Fudge is in the process of turning an interesting shade of red.

“As amusing as this is,” Snape says dryly, “it hardly seems the appropriate time. Minister, if you could return Mr. Potter’s map to him so that he may open it for us.”

Fudge shoves the map back at him. Harry sighs and takes out his wand, tapping it against the front. The map recognizes their magic, and they don’t need a password. They have one, but it’s only used if they lend the map to someone outside their group.

*Welcome, Mr. Potter,* his own slightly altered handwriting greets him. The chimera flies across the paper, revealing the actual map, complete with people and corridors and everything else that makes up Hogwarts. He goes to the defense office, and, sure enough, Moody is still listed as being in his office, while Crouch doesn’t show up at all. That might be just because he’s dead, but Harry has never seen Crouch on the map.

“Here,” he hands the map to Dumbledore.

He scrutinizes it for a long moment, before nodding and giving it back to Harry. “Severus, will you?”

He nods, “I’ll bring Filius.” He moves to leave, but in the next moment the doors to the hospital wing are blasted open. Everyone reaches for their wands, but when the door slams shut again, there’s just Bill and a tall, bald black man with a gold earring who says, “We could have knocked.”
“William Weasley!” Pomfrey scowls, “What are you thinking?”

“Oops?” he offers. “I’m a curse breaker, you know, a little door won’t stop me.”

“I think the point was that you should not have broken through the door,” Fleur says dryly.

Fudge rounds on Fleur. “You are not taking your actions seriously! See how much that attitude helps you in Azkaban!”

“If you could refrain from speaking to my client in that tone, I so would appreciate it,” Zaira says, with enough steel that Fudge shrinks back from her. She casts a long glance at the bald man that Harry blushes just to witness. “Auror Shackbolt, what an unexpected pleasure.”

“Zaira,” he sighs, something caught between fondness and exasperation on his face. He looks to Fudge. “Do we now send teenagers to Azkaban without a trial for allegedly defending themselves? I feel as if I would have heard about that law being pushed through the Wizengamot.”

“Self defense? She killed a man!” Fudge says.

“Well, he was trying to kill my friends,” Fleur says slowly, as if Fudge were a child.

Fudge steps right into her space, and Harry scoots away, because if Fleur decides that she wants to burn Fudge’s face off, he doesn’t want to get caught in the crossfire. “You – insolent!”

Fleur stands, so she’s nearly nose to nose with Fudge, “We can settle this like adults, Minister. How about we have a friendly little duel, and whoever is still alive in the end will not have to listen to the other speak?”

“Okay!” Bills says, stepping forward to push Fleur and Fudge apart, his arm against each of their stomachs, “All right, that’s quite enough of that!”

Fudge huffs and moves back. Fleur smiles prettily at Bill and says, “Get in my way again, and I will set you on fire.” He sighs, then mutters something in a language Harry doesn’t speak. She elbows him in the side, and says sharply, “That was quite rude!”

To Harry’s surprise, Bill actually blushes. “You speak Arabic?”

She responds in the same language Bill had spoken before, apparently Arabic.

“I’m going to see if I can find the real Moody,” Snape says, just in case they’d forgotten.

“I’ll come with you. An auror should be there,” Tonks says. Snape shakes his head, but doesn’t argue and slips out the door, Tonks on his heels. It’s the first time Harry’s been jealous of him. He would love to leave, but he’s pretty sure no one is going to let him.

“All right you four,” Percy says, looking over them with his arms crossed. Harry has a flashback to when he was as prefect. “What exactly happened in there?” Bill rolls his eyes. Apparently, Percy was just like this as a kid too.

Harry, Fleur, Cedric, and Cho look at each other, then glance at Dumbledore. He’s back to looking genuinely amused instead of faking it, and says, “We really do need to get the bottom of this, if you would please shed some light on the situation.”

Fleur goes first, explaining how Viktor had attacked her, but how it was clear he wasn’t himself, and how she’d gotten stuck in the vines, and how she’d found the rest of them. Then Cho tells her part,
about seeing Cedric send up a warning, being followed by Draco, the two of them splitting up, and her finding Cedric and sneaking up on him to drag him to the corner and cast confusion charms on Moody. Cedric seems like he wants to go over to her, but his dad is still sitting by his bedside, so he doesn’t move. Next is Cedric, who starts at Harry bursting through the bushes to help him with Viktor, all the way up to losing consciousness when Moody attacked them.

Then it’s Harry’s turn.

Bill places his broad palm against his back, warm even through his clothes. “It’s okay, you’re safe now.”

Harry looks at them, and realizes – the adults don’t know, of course they don’t know, and he has to be the one to tell them.

“Voldemort is back,” he says, and all the air seems to leave the room. “The war has started again.”

~

When Draco steps into the Slytherin common room and every eye instantly fastens onto him, he becomes acutely aware that he’s still covered in his father’s blood.

He can tell by the utter quiet, the tenseness in the air, that they already know. Somehow, some of them found out, and told the others.

“Is it true?” Flint asks.

Why are they asking him? Why would he know? He does, of course, but that’s hardly the point. “Yes.”

Everyone shrinks in on themselves. No one looks happy. No matter anyone’s personal beliefs, pretty much no one is dumb enough to think another war led by Voldemort is anything but a disaster. A couple of people have started crying. Cassius’s face is hard, and his friends are trying to be blank, to give nothing away. Blaise is doing all right, but Pansy and Millie have their hands tangled together in a death grip.

He hates this. But he won’t let Slytherin be lost to this war, not like last time.

“Hey,” he says, and they all look to him. He doesn’t know why. He’s just a mouthy fourth year, but for some reason they’re all looking at him. “He’s back. The war is back. That means some of us have choices to make. For some – for many – that choice has already been made for us. We’re all going to do what we have to do, to survive, to protect our families.” He swallows, “But not here.”

“Draco?” Theodore tilts his head to the side. It’s almost like the rest of the Slytherins are holding their breath.

“When we walk the halls, when we leave this school, we may be enemies,” he says, “but not here, understand? In this room, there is no war.”

He can’t do anything to save the rest of the world, to save his own soulmate. But maybe he can save Slytherin.

~

By the time Harry finishes speaking, Fudge is nearly frothing at the mouth. Shackbolt ends up escorting him out after quietly assuring Fleur that they wouldn’t be pressing charges, considering the
circumstances. Mr. Diggory had opened his mouth a few times during Harry’s story, his eyebrows drawn together, but Cedric had elbowed his father in the side each time he’d looked like he was ready to interrupt.

“The ghost summoning spell,” Dumbledore says slowly, a look in his eyes that Harry can’t quite place. “That was an…interesting choice.”

“It seemed like a good idea at the time,” he says.

“What were you thinking?” Percy snaps. “You could have been killed!”

Harry stares. “Well, I was surrounded by Death Eaters and Voldemort, so, you know, I kinda figured I was dead anyway.”

“Oh. Right,” Percy says, deflating. He ruffles Harry’s hair, the only way he seems to know to show affection. He does the same thing to the twins and Ron, so Harry’s actually rather touched by it.

“I said be careful, cub.” Everyone twists around. The window overlooking the grounds is open, and the sphinx from earlier is sitting on the windowsill.

Harry’s pretty sure climbing up the side of the castle is impossible even for a giant lioness, but he’s not sure how else she would have gotten up here. “Er, sorry. I tried?”

“Queen Persenet,” Dumbledore greets.

Persenet hops into the room, rolling her eyes. For some reason, Bill looks furious. “I haven’t been a queen in over four thousand years. Cut the crap, Albus.”

“What the bloody hell,” Bill says through clenched teeth, “is she doing here?”

“We requested a sphinx to guard part of the maze, and Persenet volunteered,” Dumbledore explains.

“And you let her?” Bill demands.

Dumbledore looks mystified at the idea that he had any say in the matter at all. “Could I have stopped her?”

“Yes! Just stick her in a booby trapped room. That sometimes keeps her from causing trouble for a couple weeks,” Bill mutters darkly.

Persenet laughs and twines her body around Bill like a housecat would do to someone’s ankles. “Not everyone is as stupid and brave as you, cub.”

“I see you two know each other,” Fleur says, a grin tugging at the corner of her mouth.

“I was guarding the first tomb he broke into,” Persenet explains, “All skin and bones and arrogance. He’s lucky I didn’t eat him.”

Bill rolls his eyes, but he seems entirely used to Persenet invading his personal space. “You wouldn’t eat me, what would you do for entertainment if I wasn’t here to torture?”

“Don’t get too comfortable,” she says, fond.

“Is there a reason you’re here?” Bill asks. “Besides annoying me.”

“Just checking on the cubs,” she says, “Oh, and someone might want to go and do something with
the angry and confused crowd of people out there. They’re about ready to riot, which I thought you might want to stop. Or if you don’t, that’s fine too, I suppose. Your minister is doing an excellent job of making things worse.”

Percy and Dumbledore look equal levels of tired. “I’ll go try and reign in the minister,” Percy says. Harry gets the impression that it’s something he has to do a lot.

Zaira pats Fleur’s hand and stands. “Albus, I’ll accompany you. Between the two of us, we should be able to calm a crowd.”

“Are you certain you would like to do that?” Dumbledore asks, frowning. “Considering the times we will soon find ourselves in.”

“If Voldemort would like to come for me or mine, he’s welcome to try,” she says. “I am a Zabini. If Voldemort wishes to make an enemy of the Severan Dynasty, far be it for me to stop him.”

Dumbledore doesn’t exactly look comforted by that. Either way, he, Zaira, and Percy leave the hospital wing to do damage control.

Persenet walks over and sits herself directly in front of Harry. “Why so glum? I thought you did quite well, all things considered.”

He startles. He hadn’t realized he’d seemed upset, even though, of course, he is. “I couldn’t stop him, and now Voldemort’s back. The war is back.”

Fleur and Bill’s faces contort into identical expressions of outrage.

“Mr. Potter!” Pomfrey says, aghast. “It’s hardly your job to best a wizard of You-Know-Who’s caliber.”

Maybe. But it certainly feels like it is, and it feels like he failed.

“Do you know why I am here?” Persenet asks, “Why the merpeople agreed to help, why the dragons did not simply burn everyone in the stands alive at the first hint of their eggs being in danger, despite their anger?”

Everyone has stilled and is staring at her. Harry shakes his head.

“Because we were curious,” she says. “We wanted to see what wizardkind had to offer, who the best of their children were.” She smiles, “We weren’t disappointed. Two boys who are steady, who are loyal in their own ways, who know the breadth of their power and how to control it. An unwavering girl who loves so fiercely that she would scorch the earth if it dared take what was hers. And you.”

Harry shoulders go up to his ears, bracing himself. He shouldn’t even be here, he was put here as a ploy by Voldemort, and he nearly got everyone killed.

She says, “You have kindness down to your bones, Harry Potter.”


“Kindness does not win battles,” she says, “It has never lost a war.”

He has no idea how to respond to that. Thankfully he doesn’t have to, because at that moment the doors burst open again, and a sea of redheads push through with Hermione leading them. “Harry!”

Mrs. Weasley manages to beat her and grabs Harry in a fierce hug. Persenet and Fleur back off, and
out of the corner of his eye Harry can see Gabrielle and two blond adults who must be their parents converging on Fleur. “Oh, Harry, we were so worried!”

Ron looks like he’s about to pull his mother off of him when she finally steps back so Ron can grab him in the same kind of desperate hug. Ron raises an arm, and Hermione joins them, each of his best friends with an arm around him and pulling him close. “You’ve taken years off my life!” Hermione says hotly. He’s pretty sure Ron is crying.

“Sorry,” he says, and he looks up and waves at the twins and Ginny, and they seem to relax a little at that.

He guesses he is lucky after all.

~

Everything comes tumbling out pretty quickly after that.

They find the real Mad Eye Moody locked in a trunk and under a stasis spell in his office. They also find a powerful anti-tracking charm in Barty Crouch Jr’s jacket, probably to prevent his father from finding him, but also preventing him from being shown on the map. Considering Barty Crouch Sr has been missing for over a month – apparently Percy has been covering for him and just doing all his work, and no one had noticed – and the running assumption is that his son killed him, or he ran to escape taking responsibility, but unless he turns up there’s no way to know for certain. There’s talks of just giving Crouch’s position to Percy, but apparently there’s also a push for Percy to take the position as the Minister’s assistant.

They run some tests on Crouch Jr’s wand, and confirm it was used to cast imperio on Viktor, and enchant the goblet, so they’re attributing it all to Crouch Jr, although since he’s dead there’s no way to get a concrete confession.

Winky is beside herself. Draco tells him over the mirror that she’d known Barty Crouch Jr had escaped Azkaban, and that he was the one that had stolen Harry’s wand. But she swears that she hadn’t known he was here, that she thought that he was at home with his father, and Draco believes her. Now that everyone knows, it’s no longer a secret, so Winky’s no longer bound to silence. She tells Dumbledore and Kingsley everything she knows, at length, with Draco just standing there the entire time, since he’d refused to let them question his elf without being there.

That does remind Harry to pop by the kitchens one day after lunch. There’s stacks of dirty dishes to the ceiling, and it has to be magic that keeps them all from towering down. He hasn’t been standing there more than half a minute when Dobby cracks into existence in front of him, hats layered on his head until they’re almost as tall as the dishes. “Harry Potter!” he greets excitedly. Harry spends the next hour chatting with Dobby, and after the first few minutes he stops vibrating and they manage to have a mostly normal conversation about Hogwarts. Dobby finally shoos him out with a basket of treacle tarts, saying, “Harry Potter is a growing boy who needs desserts and sleep!” He’s touched. He wishes people considered his desires more often, and spent less time trying to kill him.

There’s some confusion over who to name the champion, since Harry touched the trophy first but only because of Moody, and Cedric got there first, but not without help, and Fleur was attacked, and Viktor barely got a chance to compete at all. There’s talks of running another task, but none of the champions agree to it. Harry adds on that since the goblet has gone out again, he’s not obligated to do any of this crap anymore, so to count him out of all of it.

Fleur, Viktor, and Cedric are the ones to come up with a solution. They play rock paper scissors for the trophy, and agree to split the winnings. All the judges but Dumbledore are horrified, who seems
delighted by their solution. “It’s more fair than anything else in this tournament has been,” Viktor
reasons.

After forty five seconds of furious gameplay, Fleur is declared the Triwizard Champion. She splits
the one thousand galleons between them evenly, and flicks the one leftover over to Harry, who
catches it on instinct. For the final few days of the year, Beauxbatons colors fill the great hall.

It’s not until the last day before they leave that the six of them manage to get together again. Harry
ends up going down on his own. Hermione had spent the day with Viktor, and Ron was hanging out
with some Beauxbatons girls, so they told him they’ll just meet him there.

As soon as Harry’s through the door, Blaise and Pansy are on him, patting him down and calling him
ten kinds of idiot. He grins, and assures them he’s fine, and after a couple minutes of seeing for
themselves that it’s true, they actually step back.

He looks to Draco, who he hasn’t had a chance to really see since the Third Task. They spoke on the
mirror, but it’s not the same. He looks tired. “Hey.”

“How,” he says.

Harry walks over, his hand held out. Draco takes it, threading their fingers together, and squeezes.
“You okay?”

Draco shrugs, “I’ve been worse.”

He nudges him in the side, and they try not to be gross in front of their friends, but he leans forward
even to brush his lips against Draco’s, just barely. When he pulls back, he realizes they’re alone.
Blaise and Pansy have left. Draco twists around, looking for them, then rolls his eyes. “They didn’t
need to do that. I know they wanted to see you too.”

Harry figures this means Ron and Hermione aren’t showing up either. He hopes they’re all getting
together without them, at least. He cups Draco’s face in his hands, pressing another, firmer kiss to his
lips. “I want to see them too. But I’m glad I get to be alone with you.”

Draco throws his arms around Harry, and they hold each other, just breathing for long moments.
“Harry, my parents, my dad – I have to keep my head down, I have to play the role of an obedient
Death Eater’s son. I don’t want to, but if Voldemort hurts them because he’s suspicious of me–”

“It’s okay,” Harry says. He’s sad, not for himself, but for Draco. They’ll continue on like they have,
sneaking off into this classroom, and it sucks, but they’ll be okay. But Draco’s whole life is about to
be a performance, not just this one bit of it, and Harry still gets to be just Harry most of the time. “I
understand. You have to protect your family.”

“I have to protect you too!” Draco pulls back enough to glare at him. “You’re my boyfriend, and my
soulmate. I won’t choose between you. I can’t.”

Harry’s not planning to make him, but he’s not the only one who matters here. “Okay. I – okay.
Everything’s going to be fine,” he decides, even though the future seems more uncertain and
dangerous than ever.

Draco blinks. “What?”

“Everything’s going to be fine,” he repeats. “I have you, and you have me, and we have all our
friends. The war is coming, and I don’t think we can stop it. But it’s not coming just for you or me.
It’s coming for all of us. So we’ll face it together.”
His boyfriend smiles for the first time and says, “Okay. We’ll do this together, and everything will be fine.” Some of the tension drains out of his shoulders, and he tugs on Harry’s shirt, pulling him that much closer. “This is our last night before a whole summer apart. Do you want to go find our friends, or…?”

There’s a fizzle of fire. They jump apart, wands raised, but it’s just two pieces of creamy cardstock embossed in gold. They each reach for one, and Draco laughs out loud.

It reads: **To celebrate Beauxbatons beating those other lesser, sad schools, we’re throwing a party. Get caught and we’ve never heard of you. Ruin the fun and we’ll make sure no one else will ever hear of you either. If you show up before midnight, then you’re an embarrassment.**

“Well,” Harry says, “that still gives us about two hours.”

“To go find our friends?” Draco asks innocently.

Harry is considerate enough to cast a cushioning charm on the floor before pushing Draco down and climbing on top of him.

~

Draco wears the same too tight jeans and a Quiberon Quafflepunchers sleeveless jersey detailed in sequins. It’s official merchandise. His mother had gotten it for his birthday last year. He shows up a little early to track down Fleur and Saida. Instead, when he steps into the carriage he finds Bill Weasley unloading a dozen cases of Egyptian made Masri brand beer into a charmed cooler. They see each other and freeze. Draco raises an eyebrow.

“Ron said it was a bad idea to be on Fleur’s bad side and to make a peace offering,” he says. “So, uh, I had one of my coworkers in Cairo send this over.”

Draco holds out his hand. Bill looks conflicted, but sighs, and passes him a bottle. Draco uses his iron ring to pull the top off, a trick he’d seen his mother do before. It’s thick and sweet, almost tasting more like wine than beer. “Nice.”

“I will be the judge of that,” Fleur says as she enters the room. Her hair is slightly curled as it falls around her shoulders, and she’s wearing a short, open back golden dress. Draco doesn’t miss the way Bill’s eyes widen at the sight of her, and he can’t blame him. “Draco, darling, you’re early.”

She sits next to him, and obligingly turns so he can kiss her on the cheek. “I just wanted a piece of you before everyone else gets here.”

“Oh course you are terrible at sharing,” she says. She looks expectantly to Bill. “Well?”

He hands her a bottle, casually spelling the top off. He hadn’t done that for Draco. She takes one long sip, then smacks her lips together and says, “Okay, that is pretty good.”

“I’m glad,” Bill grins. “Does this mean we can be friends?”

Fleur taps her chin like she’s actually considering it, then beams and holds out her hand. “I suppose.”

She and Bill shake hands, then they both let go to smack their hands on the back of their necks. Draco’s mouth drops open. No way –

She twists around so her back is to Draco, lifts up her hair, and asks in French, “*Is it there?*”
On the back of her neck she used to have a black ring, like everyone else who has a soulmate they hadn’t met yet. Now it’s gone. “It’s a bluejay,” he says, absently tracing the edges of the delicate bird tattooed onto the back of her neck.

They both look to Bill, who is pale and wide eyed. He obligingly turns and lifts up his hair. In the same spot on the back of his neck is a falcon. He doesn’t know Bill well enough to know how much of him is like a bluejay, but a soulmark portraying Fleur as a bird of prey makes sense to him.

“Well, shit,” he says. “Uh, I’m going to go now.”

Bill shakes his head, and Fleur grabs onto his arm. “Don’t,” she says, then swallows and looks back to Bill. Her soulmate. “Um, do you – I mean, uh.”

“I’m not seeing anybody, and you’re really strong, and pretty,” he says, all in a rush. “We could, uh, get to know one another, maybe. If you want. Unless you’re seeing someone. We can be friends? I’m a good friend.” Bill looks mortified at himself. It occurs to Draco that it might have been a good thing that he and Harry hadn’t been able to talk as soon as they found out they were soulmates, because they didn’t have to do this.

She shakes her head, but doesn’t say anything. “He is tall,” Draco points out, because he knows that’s one of her things.

It must surprise her, because she laughs, and relaxes. “I could always use more friends,” she says, easing back into herself and releasing her death grip on Draco’s arm.

“Great!” Bill beams. Draco ends up just silently drinking next to them while they talk, and contributing the occasional dirty observation in French just to make Fleur look scandalized.

Soon enough, more people arrive, and the party begins in earnest.

Hermione and Viktor spend the whole party wrapped up in each other, and they both seem sad. They’d apparently decided to break up once the summer started, which doesn’t make much sense to Draco, since he knows Clarence and Quinn were staying together, and Susan has promised to keep writing at least half a dozen girls from each school.

Bill hadn’t originally been planning to stick around for a party with a bunch of teenagers, but Fleur invites him to stay, so he does. Draco has to cough to hide his laughter when Ron, Fred, George, and Ginny find out Bill and Fleur are soulmates, and absolutely lose their minds. Ron seems extra delighted, actually picking Fleur up and twirling her around as she laughs, saying now they don’t have to worry about losing touch, right? It’s painfully cute.

Midway through the party, and after all parties involved have drank too much for it to be exactly safe, Fleur, Clarence, and Harry get on their brooms and glide above them. Someone, probably Fleur, had charmed Harry’s broom so that it let out a trail of colors like a real gliding broom. They clearly don’t have a picture in mind, but the three of them artfully glide through the air, making a pretty mix of colors and patterns. Everyone cheers, and if they were trying to be even a little bit subtle about this party, that’s now effectively out the window.

He looks over at all of them. Pansy, Blaise, and Millie are clustered together around a group of Ravenclaws and Beauxbatons students hotly debating something none of them care about, so they’re heckling both sides. The Patil twins are stunning in pretty saris and each of them with an equally pretty Durmstrang boy on their arm. All four houses and all three schools mingling and laughing together. He can’t help the unsettling feeling that this is the beginning of the end.
He hopes they don’t lose this forever. He hopes that one day he gets to stand at another party, just like this one.

He hopes the war doesn’t break them all apart.

~

It’s the morning they all leave Hogwarts, and he gets to spend another delightful summer with the Dursleys. He wakes up hours before he has to, determined to take one last walk around the grounds before spending the next two months in Surrey. After that, Ron had promised to come and get him, no matter what, which was about the only thing that was going to make this summer tolerable.

He takes the herbology exit outside, since that deposits him closer to Hagrid’s hut. He knows Hagrid gets up early, and so he’s hoping he can spend some time saying goodbye, even if it means another round of too strong tea and barely edible rock cakes. What he’s not expecting is to walk straight into Viktor as soon as he turns the corner. Viktor grabs his upper arms to keep him from falling. “Harry! What are you doing up so early?”

He blinks, tilting his head up. “Walking. What about you?”

Viktor flushes and lets go of him. “I was walking Hermione back to the castle, since she spent last night with me on the ship.”

“Oh,” he says, and figures, hey, he has nothing left to lose. “Can I ask you question that’s none of my business?”

He snorts. “Harry, you helped stop me from killing Cedric. I think an honest answer is the least that I owe you.’

“That wasn’t your fault!” he protests. “That was all Moody. You nearly killed yourself resisting, you did what you could, and we’re all fine. No one blames you.”

Viktor shrugs, not agreeing but not discussing it further. “What’s your question?”

Harry sighs through his nose, but decides to let it go. “Why are you and Hermione breaking up? I mean, she really likes you, you know?”

“Oh,” he says, and his instant sadness makes Harry regret asking. “I know. I really like her too. But I don’t want to get in the way.” He stares, uncomprehending. Viktor smiles, and clarifies. “I imagine if Ronald were to, as you say, get his head out of his ass, I would be swiftly dumped.”

“She wouldn’t!” Harry says, “She really does like you. Besides, Ron would never put her in that position.” Ron’s jealous, he’s so obviously jealous, but he’s doing his best not to be a jerk about it. He’d never give Hermione the ultimatum of him or Viktor. “He’s her friend first.”

“I know,” he’s smiling, seemingly in spite of himself. “Ronald is a good man. But I will be in Bulgaria, and he will be here. With her.” He shrugs. “I like to think I’m a good man too. If she is single when I meet her next, then perhaps we can try again. But I will not be the reason she and Ronald do not find happiness with each other.”

Harry thinks Ron and Hermione will end up together, at some point, probably. But he doesn’t like the idea that it comes at the expense of Viktor’s happiness, and he knows they wouldn’t either.

Viktor smiles and claps him on the shoulder. “Want to see the worst kept secret in Bulgaria?”
“Sure?” he says, not sure where this is going.

Viktor turns around and pulls the back of his shirt up. In the small of his back is a fern, the edges of the leaves reaching out to curl around his hips. “It is Iva,” he drops his shirt and turns around. Harry remembers the cheery girl who had handed them drinks as they’d stepped on the Durmstrang ship. “We found out we were soulmates when we were seven. I love her. But it would be like dating my sister. She says being my friend is exhausting enough, and that being my girlfriend would be intolerable. So, what I am saying is, life is weird. I found my soulmate, and I found Hermione, and I am not even twenty yet. I am sure there’s someone else out there, so do not worry after me.”

Harry grins, and says, “Want to come with me to Hagrid’s? He makes terrible tea and cakes, but he’s really nice and has a great big slobbery dog that will lay his head in your lap.”

“Sold,” Viktor says, laughing.

Hagrid is indeed awake, and is delighted to let them in and feed them. The rock cakes are fresh out of the oven, meaning they’re soft enough to eat without breaking any teeth. They’re actually pretty good right out of the oven, which is a nice surprise.

All in all, it’s a pretty good last morning at Hogwarts.

As soon as the train pulls away from Hogwarts, Draco gets to his feet. He avoids Millie, Blaise, and Pansy’s questioning glances, and just says, “Don’t wait for me, I’ll meet up with you,” and leaves the compartment.

He walks down the train until he finds who he’s looking for. As soon as he leans in the doorway, they all go quiet. Cassius, Flora, and Flint are all in one compartment, looking over quidditch plays. He’d been hoping to find him alone, but isn’t surprised that that didn’t work out. “I need to talk to Cassius.”

He’s expecting some sort of argument. Instead, Flora and Flint gather their things and leave without a word. Which is. Weird, to say the least. Draco closes the door behind them, then casts a sound muffling charm. Cassius raises both eyebrows. “Well, that’s ominous.”

“I know you told me to shove off before, but I’m asking you again. What’s your deal with George? Why are you so concerned with keeping it a secret?”

Cassius opens his mouth, then closes it. “You’re asking me that now? You-Know-Who is back!”

“Your parents stayed out of the last war, they can do the same during this one,” he says. “What are you so afraid of?”

He flinches like Draco has struck him. “I – it’s none of your business, just so we’re absolutely clear on that, but it’s just not going to work. We both have soulmates we haven’t met, my family and his would never get along, and we’re just different people. I don’t – Merlin, I don’t even know what we have in common, really. We just keep ending up together. That’s not a relationship. It’s just a fling.”

“So you think if you keep it a secret, if you don’t hold his hand in Hogsmeade or write him over the summer, then it doesn’t count? That you’ll somehow be less devastated when he gets sick of your crap and dumps you?” he asks. “Don’t be an idiot. Do you love him?”

Cassius’s eyes look like they’re about to pop out of his head. “I – do I – that’s none of your business! Why do you care?”
“Because I don’t get a choice in this war,” he makes sure to hold his gaze. “My parents chose my path for me before I was born, and I can’t break from it without risking them. I don’t get to choose. You do. Choose him.”

“You can choose too,” Cassius says quietly.

Draco doesn’t dignify that with a response. “Think about it,” he says, before opening the compartment door and stepping outside. He has to take several deep breathes before going to find his friends.

He finds them in the back of the train, and knocks on the compartment to be let in. The door opens, and he’s yanked inside before it’s shut again. He blinks a couple of times to make sure he’s not seeing things, then looks to Hermione. “Expansion charm?”

The compartment has more than doubled in size. There’s their six, plus Millie, as he expected. But the twins, Neville, Ginny, and Luna have also all squeezed themselves inside. “Expansion charm,” Fred agrees. “Don’t just stand there, take a seat.”

Even with the charm, there’s nowhere to go, unless he wants to sit on the floor, which he’s not going to do.

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake,” Ginny gets up and plops herself down on Neville’s lap. Draco didn’t know it was physically possible for a human being to turn that shade of red. It can’t be healthy. “There, happy now?”

“Ecstatic,” Draco says dryly, before taking Ginny’s former spot next to his cousin. Luna leans against him, and he settles his arm around her shoulders.

“Depressing talks of the upcoming war, or exploding snap?” Millie asks.

“Exploding snap,” they all say.

Millie is nearly unbeatable at exploding snap. She thoroughly approves of their decision.

~

Once they reach the platform, Harry gets swept up in all the rest of the Weasleys. Molly and Arthur are there to pick them up, and Arthur reaches for him before any of his children, giving him a quick hug and ruffling his hair. “You all right there, Harry?”

“Great,” he says, beaming. Just two months with the Dursleys. He lived there for ten years, he can handle two months, and then he’ll be able to go back to the Weasleys.

Molly is busy kissing all her kids all over their faces, and she does the same when she gets to Harry. “You really are too skinny, dear,” she says, “You let me know if you want me to send you anything over the summer, okay? Anything at all.”

Oh, Merlin, he’d nearly forgotten about Dudley’s ridiculous diet. “Will do, Mrs. Weasley.”

“George! George, over here!” Everyone turns. Cassius, the unofficial Slytherin quidditch captain, is running towards them.

“What’s he doing?” George whispers. Fred shrugs.

Cassius makes it over, but he doesn’t stop running. Instead he slams into George, grabs him around
the waist, and kisses him.

Harry’s mouth drops open.

George pushes him away, eyes wide. “Are you out of your mind? Everyone can see us! Your parents are here, they’re going to kill you, you can’t just—”

“I love you,” he says, the words bursting forth like he can’t stop them from marching past his lips. George freezes. “I love you. I don’t care who knows it. I’ll tell the whole world. “

Fred and Ron are literally clutching at each other. Ginny has her hand over her mouth, and their parents are smiling.

“But,” George says, blinking quickly to hold back his tears. “Your parents, and Voldemort is back, and, just, everything.”

“Some things are worth the risk. Like you. You’re worth it,” he says, and pulls George forward to kiss him again. George crosses his wrists behind Cassius’s neck, and kisses him back, tears spilling down his cheeks. Cassius’s twists to dip him, and then they have to stop because George is laughing.

“CASSIUS CARTER WARRINGTON!” There’s an absolutely furious woman screaming across the platform.

George frowns, but Cassius just shrugs, still grinning. “Whoops. Gotta go. I’ll write you over the summer, yeah?”

“Yeah,” he agrees. Cassius cups his face to wipe away his tears with his thumbs, then seems to get distracted from his original goal and kisses him again.

“CASSIUS! CARTER! GET OVER HERE THIS INSTANT!”

Cassius steps back, rolling his eyes. “If I don’t write you in three days, assume I’ve been locked in the basement to starve to death. Wear my handkerchief and remember me fondly.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he says, “I’ll come rescue you.”

“That’s a much better plan,” Cassius concedes, before giving him one more quick kiss and heading over to his mother with an undeniable skip in his step. “Love you!”

“Love you too!” he calls back.

Fred tackles him in a hug. Ginny and Ron summon flowers to fall over him, and Harry remembers the conversation he had with George months ago when he caught him sneaking back into the common room, and he goes, “Oh! You’ve been seeing Cassius!”

George rolls his eyes and reaches out to ruffle Harry’s hair. “Yes, I’ve been seeing Cassius.” He faces his parents and says, “I, uh, have a boyfriend?”

“We can see that,” Arthur says dryly.

“He seems like a very nice young man,” Molly adds, positively beaming. “Very handsome.”

Ginny makes a so-so motion with her hand, clearly just to be a brat, and George threatens so lock her in the shed for the summer.

Two months, Harry reminds himself as they walk towards the exit where the Dursleys are waiting
for him, just two months.

~

Draco hears Mrs. Worthington screaming, and can’t help a burst of pride in Cassius. He doesn’t let himself look back, but he’s sorely tempted. His mother is waiting for him, of course, and she tucks his hair behind his ear and says, “Come along, darling.”

He enters the carriage, and his father is there, not a hair out of place, like nothing had happened. As soon as his mother closes the door behind her, Draco launches himself at him. Lucius doesn’t hesitate, closing his arms around Draco. “You’re okay?” he asks, voice high, “You – I know I didn’t fix enough, I don’t know enough, but you’re okay?”

“You did wonderfully,” Lucius praises. “I’m fine. We called a private healer the next day, when it wouldn’t raise too much suspicion.” He runs a hand through Draco’s hair. “I didn’t notice before, but it’s gotten longer.”

His hair just barely brushes his shoulders. He’d only let Pansy trim it throughout the year. “There were other things going on,” he says, and finally lets go of his dad. He kisses his mum on both cheeks, then sits down on the opposite side of the carriage.

They haven’t solved anything, not really. They’re still on opposite sides of this war, and they all know it. But this is more important. Their family is more important.

~

It’s his first night back with the Dursleys, and he’s properly miserable. They’d given him the standard lecture about how generous they were to let him live in the same house as them for the summer, a list of chores that he was to complete, and then locked him in his room for the rest of the night. They hadn’t given him dinner, and Harry’s hoping that it’s because they forgot about him, and not because they’re planning on starving him all summer.

There’s a tapping on his window. He blinks. He hadn’t though anyone would bother to send him a letter on the first night, or even if they did, that it’d be able to get here so fast.

It’s not an owl outside.

He shoves his window open, a grin splitting across his face. “Sirius!”

Harry steps back so his godfather can step in through the window. The first thing he does is open his arms, and Harry doesn’t hesitate to bury his face his in Sirius’s chest. “I just about had a heart attack when I heard what happened,” he says, “I was so glad this blasted tournament was over, and then this happens!”

“It’s okay,” he says, stepping back so he can see Sirius’s face. He looks worried, but still better than Harry’s ever seen him. There’s no trace left of the escaped convict. Instead, he just looks like Sirius, like the man in his parents’ wedding photo. “I’m fine, and so’s everyone else. Well, besides Barty Crouch Jr.”

“He’s lucky he’s dead,” Sirius growls, “otherwise I would have killed him.”

It’s probably messed up that threats of violence make him feel warm inside. Oh well. “Fleur beat you to it. I hope you get to meet her, she’s great.”

“She sounds like my type of girl,” he agrees. “You haven’t unpacked anything, right? Grab your
trunk, and let’s go. Hedwig can follow.”

Harry blinks. “What? But I thought I had to stay with the Dursleys.”

“That’s what Dumbledore wants. But it was barely worth forcing you to stay in this hellhole when it provided a modicum of protection against Voldemort. That’s gone now. Your blood is a part of him, so what remains of Lily’s blood magic isn’t going to work. Not that he needs to touch you to kill you, so I’d never thought it was really worth it. But definitely not now,” he finishes.

“We’re really leaving?” Harry asks, something that feels dangerously like hope blossoming in his chest. “Where are we going?”

“Remember when I said Remus and I were restoring my family house? That’s where. It’s still a work in progress, but it has enough protections and wards that Voldemort and his whole army could be standing outside, and they still wouldn’t be able to get in.” He grimaces, “The place really is still a disaster. If you want, we can try and see if we can ward the Weasley’s place up enough, I know they’d love to have you—”

“No,” he says, cutting him off. “I don’t want that. I love them. I can’t wait to see them again. But I want to spend the summer with you and Remus.” He can’t believe he doesn’t have to stay here, that instead he gets to live with his godfather and Remus, that he gets to live with his father’s best friends rather than his mother’s horrid sister.

Sirius grins. “Good. Because we want you to spend the summer with us too.”

They want him. He’s not a burden, not a responsibility. He’s wanted.

“How are we getting there?” he asks.

Sirius points out the window. Harry pokes his head out, and hovering just below his window is a sleek black motorbike. “Remus and I just finished modifying it.”

“How are we getting there?” he asks.

Sirius laughs, ruffling Harry’s hair. “Sure. Remus hates it, he doesn’t even like getting on it as a passenger.”

They secure his trunk to the back of the bike, and let Hedwig go with instructions to fly behind them. Sirius climbs out of the window onto the bike, and Harry means to sit behind him, but instead Sirius pushes himself back and gestures for Harry to sit in the front. He pauses. “Um?”

“You said you wanted to learn. No time like the present,” Sirius says.

“I have no idea what I’m doing,” Harry says. “Like, literally none.”

“The bright side of learning how to drive on a flying motorbike is that there’s a lot less to hit when you’re a thousand feet in the air,” he points out. “It’s not like it can be harder than flying a dragon or dueling Voldemort.”

Well. When he puts it like that. Harry steps onto the motor bike, closes his window with a satisfying thwack, and sits in front of his godfather. Sirius shifts Harry’s hands, quickly explaining what everything does. “Lean back, and hit the gas,” he says, wrapping an arm around Harry’s waist so he doesn’t go flying off the bike. “Don’t worry, if it looks like you’re going to do something really stupid, I’ll be here to fix it.”
Harry does as instructed, and they go shooting into the air. Sirius’s whoops of excitement probably wake up half the neighborhood, and Harry’s laughing as they go flying around a cloud, nothing but the stars above and the dots of the homes of Surrey far below.

This is going to be a great summer.

Chapter End Notes

i hope you liked it!!

to everyone who thought i was going to kill cedric: guys. c'mon. remember: bad things happen, but this fic isn't out to hurt you

i have a couple of projects i'm going to work on before starting fifth year, so don't get worried if this doesn't get a fast update. :)

megalania-prisca had done several gorgeous pieces for siat that you can view here (she's added more since the last chapter!)

as always, feel free to follow / harass me at: shanastoryteller.tumblr.com

i post writing updates in my 'progress report' tag if that's something you're interested in knowing :)
Harry loves Sirius’s house.

He knows that Sirius doesn’t because he doesn’t have a lot of good memories here, that to him there’s something awful lurking around every corner. But Harry can’t help it. It’s huge and filled with magic, from the curious portraits to all the cupboards that are so much bigger in the inside, to the grumpy house elf who is no help at all, all the way to the stars charmed to twinkle on the ceiling of his bedroom.

Which is another thing. His room!

They’ve only managed to clean and repair about half of the house, and even that has taken them months of near constant work. So most of the house is locked off, although Remus had said that the locks where there more so Harry would know where not to go than to truly keep him out. They hadn’t felt the need to waste magic casting a locking spell strong enough that he couldn’t undo it. Which is really nice for two reasons, one, because they trust him, and two, because he can do magic! His wand and his books and everything are right there with him, and since they said Harry was way past the point where year round use would strain his magic, he can do it whenever he wants. Which is fantastic.

Sirius and Remus are in Sirius’s old room, and they’d told Harry to go through and take his pick, since most of the bedrooms had been successfully restored, at least. There’s one that’s completely pink with everything in different shades, one that has to have at least a thousand owls carved into every surface, and then another where everything in it is a circle, the bed and the dresser and the desk, all of it.

But Harry hadn’t cared for any of those. He’d walked into a room on the third floor, and instantly known that it was the one he wanted.

It’s on the smaller side, with pale blue walls and an intricate silver pattern inlaid on top of it. The furniture is all pale finished wood, from the desk pushed up against the large windows to the elaborate armoire nestled in the corner. All of it has flowers and vines carved into them, and they look so real that he’s almost surprised that they’re nothing more than carvings whenever he touches them. The bed in the center of the room is huge, with a heavy silver comforter and more pillows than anyone could possible need.

But the best part is absolutely the ceiling.

It’s an eternal replica of the night sky. The stars and comets on his ceiling are the same ones he’ll see if he steps outside, and they look real, nothing like the cartoonish glow and the dark stars Dudley got Vernon to stick on his ceiling when they were kids. Harry had been jealous, had wanted nothing more than those cheap plastic stars to stick in his cupboard so that he could always just have a little bit of light. But this is so much better.
It can be altered, too. He can tell it to show him the night sky anywhere in the world, in Hong Kong or New York or Sydney. He has it set to Tamil Nadu, India, though. It’s where his father’s family is from.

“I thought you’d like this one,” Sirius had said, leaning against the door frame and smiling.

“I love it,” he’d answered, looking up at the shimmering Northern Lights.

“Then it’s yours,” Sirius said, and, just like that, it was.

Harry loves his room. He loves the house, his new freedom, and he loves Sirius and Remus.

What he doesn’t love is his inability to manage even basic communication.

They’re all seated in the kitchen, eating lunch – or breakfast, in Harry’s case – and Remus says, “Tenir katakka.”

“What?” Harry says, then before either of them can say anything, he corrects himself, “Mintum.”

Remus says it again, this time slower. Harry’s pretty sure the word tea is in there, so he picks up the teapot and passes it to him, head tilted to the side. Remus smiles, takes the teapot, and says, “Nandri.”

In an effort to help Harry pick up Tamil more quickly, Sirius made it a rule that there would be no English during mealtimes. That rule had quickly gotten changed to Tamil only at meal times, since the first time Harry had gotten frustrated and couldn’t figure out how to say something, he’d just said it in Parseltongue instead.

He’d meant to study more back at Hogwarts, but it had ended up taking a backseat to not dying in the Triwizard Tournament. So now he spends a couple hours a day studying with Remus or Sirius, and Tamil only mealtimes. Which is for the best, really, because he’s falling behind compared to his friends, which just makes him feel embarrassed and prickly, since it’s supposed to be his language they’re learning.

He hadn’t asked, and they hadn’t offered. He hadn’t needed to. Harry had told Ron, Hermione, Pansy, Blaise, and Draco that he was starting to learn Tamil, and so now they all are too. Pansy is picking it up faster than the rest of them, although all the purebloods are memorizing the new vocabulary and phrases at a speed that makes Harry’s head spin.

“What?!” Harry asks, then, “Inru parakka?”

He can’t say most things in a complete sentence, or even the right tense, but he’s getting better at it. He likes saying the English first because it gives him time to think.

“Paik allatu viḷakkumāṟu?” Sirius asks. Bike or broom?

“Tulaippam mikunta āppattāṭatu,” Remus says, carefully pouring tea first for himself, then Harry,
then Sirius. He’s aying that something is dangerous. Probably the broom. Remus doesn’t mind the 
motorbike so much, but is of the opinion that riding a broom is too big of a risk around the muggle 
neighborhoods, since the latter doesn’t come with an invisibility charm. For that, they need to floo 
somewhere more remote.

There’s a stack of pancakes, a bowl of scrambled eggs, and steaming sausages in the middle of the 
table. He loves that whenever he woke up was breakfast time, even if Sirius and Remus have already 
eaten that morning. “Nāma aṭṭiyai muṭikka veṭṭum. Piṭṭar Harry aṅku paṭṭakka muṭiyum,” Sirius 
answers, which gets his attention, because there was definitely his name in there. Something about 
fooking, and the attic? Sirius was saying he could fly in the attic? Harry hasn’t been up there, it’s 
behind one of the locked doors, but it has to be a pretty big attic for him to be able to do any decent 

Attic, okay. Then green, then home. The attic in their home is green? They have a green home? No, 
wait, house. Attic, green, house. Greenhouse! “The attic is a greenhouse!” he says excitedly, then 
repeats it in Tamil as best he can.

paṭṭakka muṭiyum.”

House again, and fooking. He can fly in the house? No, that’s the same thing Sirius was saying earlier.

“Mintum,” he says, and Remus repeats himself. Something about it being big. Big, house, fooking. 
The house is big so he can fly in it? No, that doesn’t make any sense. The attic is a greenhouse, and 
Sirius was talking about him flying in there, so it’s the attic that’s big. The attic is big, and it’s in the 
house. That’s stupid, Remus wouldn’t say that, he knows that Harry knows that the attic is in the 
house. The attic is big like the house, maybe? And that’s why he can fly in it. The attic is a 
greenhouse, and it’s as big as the rest of the house, so he can fly in it. That sounds right. Right? He 
tries to say that in Tamil, and it takes him three times longer than it would for him to say it English, 
and almost all of his grammar is wrong.

Sirius reaches over to ruffle his hair. “Nalle velei.” Then he points at himself and Remus and says, 
“Cuttamāṅa. Cari.”

Clean. Fix. Remus and Sirius will clean and fix the attic. “I want to help!” he says, then, “Nan 
utavi!” which is grammatically completely wrong, but at least gets his point across.

The exasperated look that the two of them share doesn’t need a translation. They’re still working on 
repairing and updating the home, and in spite of Harry offering a dozen times to help, they won’t let 
him. They told him to read, to play, to talk to his friends. That summer is for relaxing, not working, 
and he already spends hours every day studying Tamil. Which had been great for the first week, but 
now they’re creeping into the second and Harry’s bored. He isn’t used to having this much free time, 
and he has no idea what to do with it.

“Kōṭai kālattil uṅkaḷ naṅparakal eṅga ceykirakal?” Remus asks instead of answering him. Harry 
sighs. It’s a question, and there’s the word friends, and summer. Talking to his friends during the 
summer? Being with them during the summer? No, he’s pretty sure the word what was in there too. 
What friends summer? Oh! What did his friends do over the summer?

“Eṅakkul teriyātu,” he answers, and he’s confident in that phrase at least. He says ‘I don’t know’ an 
awful lot. Hermione usually goes on trips with her parents, but he has no idea about anyone else.

He shoves his hand in his pocket, takes out his mirror, and flicks it open. “Draco Malfoy,” he says 
clearly.
That’s another thing he loves about being here. He doesn’t have to hide that he’s friends with Draco. The boyfriend and soulmate thing is still under wraps, but it’s great to be able to just walk around the house chatting to Draco and not have to worry about anyone overhearing.

The glass shimmers, and then his boyfriend’s face fills the mirror. “Hey Harry, what’s up?”

“That’s another thing he loves about being here. He doesn’t have to hide that he’s friends with Draco. The boyfriend and soulmate thing is still under wraps, but it’s great to be able to just walk around the house chatting to Draco and not have to worry about anyone overhearing.

“Tamil mattum!” Remus calls out.

“Vaṭakkam. Eppāṭi irukkiṭrka?” Draco corrects, although what he says this time is the more formal, Hello, how are you?

Harry tries to think of how to ask him what he does during the summer in Tamil, but all he can think of is What summer? which will get him absolutely nowhere. Instead, he turns the mirror towards Remus and says, “Nīṭkaḷ kēṭka,” telling him to ask Draco for him.

Remus rolls his eyes, but complies. Draco is silent for a long moment while he untangles what he’s being asked, but then he says, “Nāṉ paṭṭu paṭṭantu celkiṟṇ.” He’s picking up on this whole grammar thing a lot quicker than Harry is, but Harry can still understand him.

He studies and goes flying. Which is clearly not the answer they were looking for, because both Sirius and Remus’s faces drop. “Nāṉkaḷ kōṭai kālettil paṭṭu viṭṭrkaḷā?” Sirius asks.

Summer, and studying, and a question, and Harry’s pretty sure he said we. Did we study over the summer? maybe.

“Illai,” Remus says, “Nāṉkaḷ mikavum pisiyāka iruntōm.”

No, which is easy enough, then busy, then trouble. No, we were busy causing trouble.

“Am’nā eṉ peyarai colkiṟāḷ,” Draco interrupts, which Harry’s pretty sure is the grammatically incorrect way to say that his mum is calling for him. “Piragu parkkalaam.”

“Piragu parkkalaam,” Harry says, which doesn’t mean goodbye, really. It means see you later. There isn’t really a word for goodbye in Tamil, and Harry likes that. No goodbyes. Only promises of future meetings.

Sirius and Remus echo him, then the mirror shimmers once more and Draco disappears.

“Nīṭkaḷ cāppiṭṭu muṭṭita piṟaku iṉṟum atikamāka pēcuvōm,” Remus says, pointing at his plate of food.

Harry blinks slowly, not comprehending. More and then something about eating. He needs to eat more?


Oh, thank merlin. The Tamil only mealtimes are definitely helping him pick it up faster, but they also give him a headache. He’s not totally off the hook, though. Sirius quizzes him as he eats, asking the days of the week, and when his birthday is, and everything else they’ve covered in their lessons so far, which is so much easier than trying to untangle full sentences of words he doesn’t know.

He finishes his plate, then waits impatiently for Remus to be done with his tea. “Can we talk in English now?”

Remus gives him a disapproving look over the rim of his teacup.
“Āṅkilam pēcu?” he tries, which is just English now?

“Nām vēṇṭum eṉṟāl,” he answers, which means nothing to Harry, but must be agreement, because he follows it up with, “Are you truly incapable of spending a single summer lazing about?”

“Yes!” he says. “Let me help with the attic. Is it really big enough for me to fly in?”

“It’s big enough for several people to fly in if they’re careful,” Sirius says. “But it’s a bit of disaster, overgrown to the point where it’s less a greenhouse than it is a small wild area in the house.”

“Great! Sounds fun. Can Neville come over and help? He loves that sort of stuff.” That would accomplish a whole bunch of things: helping them around the house, giving him something to do, getting Neville away from his gran for a bit, and giving Neville a chance to do something he actually likes.

Remus raises an eyebrow. “I thought you didn’t like herbology.”

“I don’t.” He’s decent at it, thanks to years in Petunia’s gardens, but for the same reason he just doesn’t enjoy it very much. “But I like Neville.”

Sirius and Remus look at each other for a long moment. As far as Harry can tell, they don’t move or make a sound, but then Sirius says, “All right, you can work in the attic. But only if you want to, and you can stop at any time. Of course Neville can come over. Remus will have to go get him if we want him to survive coming through the wards.”

Harry beams, “Awesome! Thanks! And it would be preferable if you didn’t kill my friend.”

“There is something else we have to talk about,” Remus says, and Harry doesn’t like the sound of that at all. Sirius sighs and leans back in his chair. “What with Voldemort back, Dumbledore has reinstated the Order of the Phoenix, which is the group that fought against Voldemort in the last war. They need a secret, secure place to hold meetings. They want to hold them here.”

“I thought Dumbledore was mad at us,” Harry says.

“Mad at us, meaning me and Moony, not you,” Sirius corrects. “And yes, he was rather furious. Kinda scary, if I’m honest. It seems to have taken two weeks to drive the point home, but he’s finally accepted that you’ll go back to the Dursleys over my dead body.”

“If by accepted, you mean his ears are still ringing from when you ripped him a new one after threatening to set his office on fire with him still inside it and stomping out, then yes, that’s how I’d describe it,” Remus says mildly.

Harry stares at him. Sirius shrugs, unrepentant. “I didn’t set his office on fire, so I really don’t think he has anything to complain about. Anyway, he wants to use the house for meetings, which means there will be people coming in and out fairly often. I told him I’d think about it.”

“Well, it’s a good idea, isn’t it?” Harry says. “Isn’t the whole reason we’re staying here and not at Remus’s cottage because it’s supposedly impenetrable? So if there are secret meetings to fight back against Voldemort going on, then here seems like a good place to have them.” He swallows, “Will I have to stay in my room while they’re happening?” It reminds him of the Dursley’s dinner parties, where he’d have to hide upstairs until everyone was gone. It makes him feel a little sick that he feels that way, because he knows it’s not the same, that Remus and Sirius are nothing like the Dursleys. But he can’t help it.

Sirius slaps his hand down on the table, “Absolutely not! This is your house, you’re not going to be
hiding in it.”

Remus places a hand on Sirius’s back and says to Harry, “Actually, if it’s what you want, we were planning to let you attend them.”

Harry stares. “Really?”

“You won’t be in the Order,” Sirius says quickly, “You’re not even fifteen for another month. But Voldemort is after you. I hope you never have to face him again, that you never have to fight against Death Eaters or monsters or anything like that. But your track record speaks for itself. We’re not going to hold meetings in your house, talking about you, and then not let you attend them. It wouldn’t be right.”

Harry pushes himself out of his chair and then throws his arms around Sirius’s neck. Not ignored, not hidden, not even babied and kept away like so many adults want to do. Included. Respected.

How did Harry get so lucky?

“Oh okay,” he says, stepping back, and the smile on Sirius’s face is almost as big as his own. “That’s fine with me. But can we go flying today?”

“Yes,” Sirius answers. “But on the motorbike. Go send Neville an owl about coming over, and I’ll send one to Augusta. She’s already been updated on my not so criminal status, so there’s that at least.” Oh yeah, Harry kept on forgetting that Sirius is technically on the run. He didn’t seem to do a lot of running or hiding for a supposed criminal.

“I’ll go and clear out some of the more dangerous things from the attic,” Remus says. “Try not to fall off the motorbike.”

“No promises,” Harry and Sirius say at the same time. Remus looks very put upon.

~

Draco, personally, is getting real tired of the Dark Lord’s shit.

His parents don’t mention anything to do with Voldemort, and he doesn’t ask. It’s almost like nothing has changed. He still spends a good chunk of time studying charms, he floos over to Blaise or Pany’s a few times a week, and he’s constantly sending and receiving mail. He flies over the grounds, and spends hours talking to Harry, which is so much easier to do this summer than it ever has been. Abigail had a growth spurt while he was gone. She’s now nearly six feet, and his parents have given up trying to keep her in her tank.

He sleeps more, at least partially because Winky depends a lot more on his magic here than she does when they’re at Hogwarts, but he must have gotten stronger, because the drain is nothing like it was last summer. A little more tired a little faster, but if he didn’t know the cause he might not even notice it. She helps out in kitchen here and takes care of anything that has to do with him, but there’s just not that much for her to do at the manor.

She is getting pretty good at being his potions assistant. They’re both getting a lot of practice.

Almost a normal summer.

Most of the time when his dad comes back from meetings he doesn’t talk about, he’s bleeding or bruised or limping. Draco thinks this can’t be normal, that if Voldemort had been like this the entire time then no one would have followed him. But it’s not like he can ask. Because they’re not talking
What he can do is keep their potions cupboard fully stocked with advanced healing potions. He’s probably going a little overboard, but he can’t get the image of his father bloody and nearly dead out of his mind. Hopefully, if he leaves them with enough healing potions, then it won’t be a problem, and they won’t have to worry about rumors circulating if they bought the healing potions themselves rather than if Draco brewed them.

He pretends it’s a normal summer, and spends too much time brewing healing potions, and does his best not to think too hard on why, precisely, he’s doing it.

He’s laying on his bed holding one of the charms books Flitwick had told him to read above his head and Abigail is curled up on his stomach, soaking up the warmth from his skin. Winky appears right next to him with a crack. “Master Draco, Miss Pansy is here to see you.”

Draco blinks, surprised. He thought Pansy was planning to visit Flint today. He pushes himself up, ignoring Abigail’s irritated hissing as she slides off his torso onto his bed. He can’t think of a single good reason Pany would have cut her visit with Flint short to come see him. “Sitting room?” he asks, and Winky nods.

When he goes through, Pansy is sitting daintily on the edge of the couch with a teacup in her hand, and his mother sitting next to her. If he didn’t know her so well, he wouldn’t notice the tense way she’s holding herself or the way her smile is a little too wide to be real.

“Thanks, Mum,” he says, holding out his hand to pull Pansy to her feet. “We’ll be in my room.” “Nice to see you dear!” Narcissa calls out, and Pansy shoots her a brilliant grin over her shoulder as they turn the corner.

As soon as they’re out of his mother’s sight, her whole façade drops, and he grips her hand even tighter when he feels her shaking. They barely make it behind his closed door before she’s crying, big teardrops rolling down her face. Draco can count on one hand the number of times he’s seen her cry. “What’s wrong? What happened? Did Flint do something?”

If Flint made Pansy cry, he’d going over there and strangling him with his bare hands. Who needs magic when he has rage on his side?

“What?” she sniffs, rubbing at her eyes like that will stop them from leaking. “No, it wasn’t Marcus, I didn’t go over, I came here instead, I - I would have been here earlier, but I wanted to make sure he was gone before I left my room.”

“Who was gone?” he asks, leading her over to his bed and pressing on her shoulders until she gets the hint and sits down. He sits cross legged on the floor in front of her.

She’s still rubbing at her eyes, and still crying, so clearly it’s not working. He reaches up to grab her wrists and gently pulls them away from her face, which is now red and puffy. “Voldemort came to my house last night,” she whispers, and he tenses, his fingers digging into her skin before he forces himself to relax. “My dad told me to stay in my room, but I didn’t listen - why did he think I would listen, I never listen! But I wanted to see who was there, and it was him, and I think Pettigrew was there too with that awful silver hand, and - and Draco, I was so scared! And I think he’s coming back, and I don’t know what to do.”

He stares at her for a long, silent moment, then says, “You’re staying here.”

“What?”
“You’re staying here,” he repeats, thinking. “Or we’re going to Blaise’s. Actually, maybe it’s time for all of us to take a trip to Italy.”

If Voldemort is showing up at supporters’ houses, is the manor safe? He knows his parents don’t want Voldemort in their home, but he doesn’t know how much of a say they’ll get in the matter. He’s surprised he hasn’t show up already. If he was a newly reborn dark lord looking for a place to rebuild his power from, he’d want to be at the Malfoy Manor. Oh. Interesting. “Hold on, stay here.”

“Where would I go?” she asks, sarcastic even through her tears, but he’s already out the door.

When he makes his way downstairs in search of his mother, he doesn’t have to go very far. Pansy’s dad is speaking in hushed tones with Narcissa, but they cut themselves off as he steps into the room. “Is she alright?” he asks urgently.

“She’s fine,” Draco answers, frowning. “Did you know he was going to show up?”

Mr. Parkinson doesn’t pretend to misunderstand him, which is nice. “Of course not! I wouldn’t – not with my daughter in the house!”

“Hm,” he says, frowning, trying to make it look like this is occurring to him right now and isn’t half the reason he came downstairs. “Well, if You-Know-Who is going to be making unannounced visits to your home, then your daughter shouldn’t be in the house.”

Mr. Parkinson raises an eyebrow, some of his panic fading under amusement. “Is that so?”

“Her Italian could use some work, and Blaise hasn’t been to visit his adoring fans in a while,” he says.

Narcissa and Mr. Parkinson share a look, then she says, “I must admit, I would feel better with the kids a couple countries away while all of this is happening.”

That’s what Draco wanted, all of them safe and away from Voldemort, but another idea comes to him while he’s standing there. A horrible, terrible idea. He’s definitely spending too much time around dunderheaded Gryffindors. “I’m staying.”

“Excuse me?” his mother says, and even Mr. Parkinson takes a step away at the ice in her voice.

This is too important for his mum to scare him off. ‘I’m staying here. But Pansy isn’t, and actually we should see if Millie’s dad will let her go too. Blaise doesn’t need to leave, really, but Zaira’s stirring the waters, so I don’t think she’ll have a problem with it, and there’s no better place for them to be than in Italy with the youngest son of the Severan Dynasty. You-Know-Who couldn’t get to them if he tried.’ He addresses Mr. Parkinson, “She’s upset, so she can stay here tonight. I’ll talk to Zaira and Blaise. Or you can if you want. I might floo to Millie’s, since I don’t think I want this in a letter,” he finishes, already half planning to smuggle Millie out of her house if he has to.

The look in Mr. Parkinson’s eyes is dark, but his smile seems real. “Does he get the bossiness from you or Lucius?” he asks Narcissa.

“Me, obviously,” she answers. “Get out of here, you have a whole household to wrangle into not falling apart. We’ll take care of Pansy. You know she’s always welcome here.”

He sighs, claps Draco on the shoulder, kisses the back of his mother’s hand, and then disappears into a wall of green fire.

Narcissa puts her hands on her hips, never a good sign, and asks, “Draco, darling, what on earth are
you planning?”

“Dad’s going to invite Voldemort to stay here,” he says, and his mother turns a previously unknown shade of white.

“He would never,” she says, the viciousness in her voice promising that if he did, it would be the last thing he’d ever do.

“Yes, he is,” he says, “because we’re going to tell him to.”

She presses the back of her hand to his forehead, like she’s checking for a fever. He pushes her hand away, barely keeping himself from rolling his eyes. “Mum, listen to me. Voldemort wants to be here, and sooner or later, he’s going to get what he wants, no matter what any of us have to say about it. Dad let Potter get away, and Voldemort is still angry about it, right? Dad betrayed him by not dying or going to jail for him, and he let Potter get away, which means he’s one wrong move from nearly getting cursed to death. Again. He needs to do something to get on Voldemort’s good side. This will do it.” She’s staring at him, eyes wide, and he has to swallow before continuing. “I don’t like it. You know I don’t like it. As far as I’m concerned, Voldemort is a half breed who’s gone mad and needs to be put down. Like a rabid dog. He doesn’t belong in the manor, he’s not a Malfoy, compared to our family he’s nothing. But staying on his good side is what keeps Dad safe, and Voldemort will end up here anyway, he’ll force his way in if we don’t invite him. So we should invite him.”

She’s rubbing her hand against her arm, right where he knows her soulmark is, an absent minded gesture that he doesn’t think he’s ever seen her do before. After several long moments, she says, “You’re right. But why don’t you want to go with your friends? You hate all of this. I’d have thought you’d jump at the chance to get away from it.”

“If you think I’m going to leave you alone before I have to, then you’ve been pulling a few too many bottles from the wine cellar,” he says evenly. “I know you’re worried about me. But I’m worried about you too, and I’m staying. You can try and send me away, but short of altering the wards to keep me out, you’re not keeping me away for long.”

It’s a lie, but only by omission. All of that is true. He just knows that when September comes and he has to leave his parents alone with that madman, he’s going to worry himself sick over it. But that’s not the real reason he’s refusing to leave.

What better time to spy on Voldemort than when the man will be living in his house?

~

It’s the night of the first Order meeting, and Harry’s just a little nervous about sitting with a bunch of adults while they talk about things they normally wouldn’t say to his face. He’s going to be between Sirius and Remus, which is nice, because if anyone tries to start anything, he’s pretty sure Sirius will hex their face off.

Sun sets, and people start pouring in. He’s standing on the stairs, watching adults he doesn’t know flow into the main room, and soon there are enough of them that he can’t really tell who’s new and who’s not, but then he catches sight of someone he does know.

“Fleur!” he cries, forgoing the stairs and leaping over the side railings. He’s fallen from heights way higher than that, so he easily lands on his feet. She turns to him, long blond hair and a tight dark blue dress that hugs her knees together and has
sleeves down to her wrists. “Harry!”

He beams and gives her a quick hug, remembering at the last second to kiss her on the cheek like Draco does. “What are you doing here? I thought you were going to spend the summer in Egypt with Bill.”

Before she can answer, someone calls out, “Oi! What are we, chopped liver? Do I need to put on a dress to get some attention?”

Harry launches himself at Ron, who thankfully hasn’t gotten any taller in the two weeks since they’ve seen each other. Maybe his never ending growth has finally coming to an end, which is good because if he gets any taller he’s just going to look silly. Ron catches him and spins him around just because he can, grinning. “What are you doing here?”

“Mum thought you could use some company during the meeting,” Ginny says, elbowing her brother aside to ruffle Harry’s hair in greeting. The twins are behind her, but they’ve already gotten caught up in a conversation with one of the portraits. He should tell them not to pull open the curtain. Sirius’s mother is behind it. She screeches something awful whenever she catches sight of Sirius, but has been perfectly civil with Harry the few times he’s had the misfortune of speaking with her.

His brain finally catches up with what Ginny said. “Uh. During the meeting?”

“Of course, Harry dear,” Mrs. Weasley says, pushing through her crowd of children to kiss Harry on the forehead. Arthur claps him on the shoulder, and he’d smile if it didn’t feel like his stomach is about to fall out. He just knows that Mrs. Weasley isn’t going to like this. “This way while we’re talking, you won’t be all alone, and you three can catch up!”

Ron is frowning at him, head tilted to the side. He can already tell Harry’s upset. “Mate?”

“I’m really glad you’re here,” he blurts, “but we’re going to have to wait to hang out. I’m going to be in the meeting too.”

“No you’re not Harry, don’t be ridiculous,” Mrs. Weasley says immediately, as if it’s already been decided, and he’s a silly kid for even bringing it up.

He hasn’t even had the time to decide if it’s worth the energy to be offended when Fleur says hotly, her accent coming out extra thick like it always does when she’s mad, “And why not? Harry was the one who saw Voldemort rise again. Why should he not be included?”

Harry loves Fleur.

“He’s a child!” Mrs. Weasley snaps, “This isn’t up for discussion.”

“If he is adult enough to be forced to participate in a death tournament and face Voldemort himself, then he is adult enough to know what is going on,” Fleur argues.

“Ladies, please,” Arthur says, voice pitched in that particular way that Hagrid does when he’s talking to wild animals.

Harry shares a quick glance with Ron and Ginny. From the look on their faces, this isn’t new. The sounds of their upset mother must have attracted Fred and George’s attention, because they’ve wandered over to stand behind their father.

A warm hand settles on his back, and Harry’s already relaxed by the time he’s turned enough to see Sirius’s smiling face directed at Fleur. “Miss Delacour, it’s an absolute pleasure to meet you. I’ve
heard nothing but good things. It seems I owe you a thank you for helping out my godson in the maze.”

Fleur goes from combative to charming like flipping a switch. It would be enough to give him whiplash if he hadn’t seen her do it before. “Mr. Black, please, call me Fleur. I was only returning the favor. If Harry had not supported me in the first task, then I would not have been to live with myself.”

“Then I insist you call me Sirius,” he says, grin smaller but more genuine.

“Sirius!” Molly says, “Harry has this ridiculous idea that he’s attending the Order meeting.”

“That’s because he is,” Sirius says.

Arthur, the twins, and Ginny take an unconscious step back. Harry assumes Ron stays at his side because his loyalty outweighs his fear of his mother, which is incredible touching, and something he’ll take the time to savor later. When he’s less worried that Molly is going kill Sirius with her eyes alone. “Absolutely not! That’s unacceptable, and irresponsible. Really, Sirius, I expected better from you. What kind of godfather are you?”

Sirius isn’t grinning anymore.

Harry kind of wants to get between them, and kind of wants to hide and pretend this isn’t happening, because Molly isn’t his mum, and Sirius isn’t his dad, but they’re the closest that he’s ever had, and he doesn’t want them to have a fight about him. He’s pretty sure he’d fee the same way if Remus or Arthur got in a fight with Molly, or any combination of the four or them, actually.

“Watch it,” Sirius says, tone even and pleasant, which is a sure sign that Molly is on thin ice. She seems to know it too, because she grudgingly inclines her head in acknowledgement. “This isn’t up for debate. Either Harry’s attending the meetings, or you can find someplace else to have them.”

“He’s not old enough!” she protests. “He doesn’t need to worry about this, he should focus on school, not fighting You-Know-Who.”

Sirius just stares. Arthur coughs, “Uh, Molly honey, I think, maybe, given past experiences, we should consider that that’s not exactly within Harry’s control.”

“Well, that doesn’t mean he has to go looking for trouble!” she answers.

Harry thinks he might be a little offended at that. He doesn’t go looking for trouble! Trouble just happens to walk by with its door open an awful lot, and going through it just always seem to be the reasonable thing to do at the time.

Sirius glances at him, then says to Molly, “My house, my godson, my rules. Harry’s going to be attending tonight’s meeting. If you want to discuss the future after that, then we can do that later. In private.”

Molly’s already opened her mouth to argue, but then she does a quick sweep of them all staring at her and, and her cheeks turn red. “Fine.” She turns to address her kids, “But none of you are attending, do you hear me? You can wait in Harry’s room.”

She looks like she’s getting ready for an argument, but Ron just shrugs and says, “Okay.”

“No problem,” Ginny answers.
“We’ll find some way to amuse ourselves,” George says.

“Might not be in Harry’s room, though,” Fred adds.

Arthur sighs and runs his hand down his face. He catches Harry’s eye, and Harry knows that Arthur knows that Harry’s going to tell absolutely everything he knows to the rest of them. The only reason they don’t care about attending the meeting is because they think Harry will fill them in later, and they’re absolutely right. But Arthur doesn’t point this out, and Molly seems pacified by her kids’ easy agreement, at least.

“Come with me,” Fleur says, hooking her arm through Harry’s. “There are more friends for you to see again. Your auror friend is here too.”

His auror friend? He has no idea who she’s talking about. “Bye!” he calls out over his shoulder as Fleur marches him past the double doors into the dining room. He can faintly hear Sirius giving the Weasleys directions to his room as the doors swing shut behind him.

The dining room is always ridiculously large, able to seat over twenty people. But Remus had expanded it this morning so it could fit everyone in the Order who’s showing up today. It isn’t everyone, because that would require a ballroom rather than a dining room, but it’s still a lot of people. Some of them must have come by floo through the fireplace in the back of the room, because there’s more people in here than he thought, and more people he recognizes. Snape and McGonagall are in the corner, speaking in low tones to Dumbledore and a couple he doesn’t recognize, a man with golden brown skin and a pale woman with dark hair. He sees the top of Kingsley Shackbolt’s bald head amongst a crowd of people he doesn’t know, and the real Alastor Moody talking to Remus. Or, well, who he hopes is the real Alastor Moody.

“Harry!” A woman with bright pink hair waves at him and Fleur drags him over. Oh, his auror friend! Tonks.

She grabs him around the neck and ruffles his hair, and he pretends to pull away, but doesn’t put that much effort into it. “Tonks! Hey!”

“Glad to see you,” she says cheerfully. “This place is crazy, right? My mum told me about the Black house, but this is wild. Can I get a tour later?”

“Yes,” he answers, surprised. He forgot that Tonks is a Black too. “Most of the house is still in need of cleaning and repair, but the parts they’ve finished look great. Neville and I have just started working on the attic.”

Her eyes light up. “Is it as big as Mum says it is?”

The meeting is called to order, with Dumbledore at the head. It’s not the first meeting they’ve had, but it’s the first in this house, and the first Harry’s attended, and he can’t help but feel the weight of everyone’s attention on him. Maybe he shouldn’t be sitting in between his godfather and Remus? It makes him seem like a kid sitting with his parents.

The first twenty or so minutes of the meeting seem normal, Dumbledore giving updates on supposed and suspected Death Eater movements. Draco’s father is among them, and Harry can’t help but
squirm, even though he’s not surprised. Should he tell Draco they’re watching his father? He has to already know.

The front doors to the dining room open, then slam closed, cutting off one of the Order member’s reports, and she falls silent.

Percy rushes down the aisle, robes askew and a wild look around his eyes, clutching a large book and several scrolls. “Sorry, sorry, yes, I know I’m late.”

Tonks kicks out the empty chair next to her, and he collapses into it without question, plopping everything he’s holding onto the table. Molly is frowning, and Harry can only assume that she’s not thrilled with her son being here, even if he is an adult. “How wonderful for you to join us, Mr. Weasley,” Dumbledore says, but he does it in the way that makes it clear he’s laughing at him.

Percy scowls and points an accusing finger at Dumbledore, “Don’t you start with me, old man, this is all your fault.”

“Percy!” Molly cries, but Arthur is laughing.

“I could have accepted the Crouch’s old position, they offered it to me, I could be the Head of International Magical Cooperation. I’d have been the youngest head of a ministry department since its inception! I’ve been doing the work for nearly a year anyway, no training needed, I could have had an office and a title, very nice and cushy, but no,” he says, wild eyed. “That would have been too easy!”

“Breathe,” Tonks tries to say, but she’s turning red from the effort of not laughing at loud, so it’s not very effective.

“Take the position as assistant to the minister, you said, the pay is worse and the work is worse, and it’s just all around worse, but hey! You’ll make a difference, you’ll be able to get real things done, it’s an opportunity to do things that matter.” Percy slams his hand on the table, leaning forward and staring at Dumbledore. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to convince Fudge not to destroy everything around him? To stop and think and not be a blithering idiot for more than five minutes? I could have had an office, Albus!”

Dumbledore looks at Percy over his half moon glasses. “That sounds very trying, Mr. Weasley. Lemon drop?”

Tonks buries her face in her hands, shoulders shaking. Percy takes one of the scrolls off the table and starts whacking her with it. She can’t contain herself after that, her bubbly laughter erupting and filling the dining room. “What are you laughing about?” he demands. “We could be living comfortably, we could have had a lovely apartment in Horizon Alley, and instead our best bet is signing the lease for a closet with horribly loud neighbors that smells of cabbage.”

“It has character!” Tonks gasps out, still giggling uncontrollably.

“You’re moving in together?” Molly asks, a cross between pleased and offended. “Percy dear, why didn’t you tell me? Don’t you think it’s a little early? No offense, Tonks, of course.”

They should probably get this meeting back on track, but everyone seems too amused to protest the detour into the Weasley’s family drama.

Percy shrugs. “I’ve lost control of every other facet of my life, I might as well commit to a girl I barely know.”
Tonks rolls her eyes, exasperated rather than offended, “You’ve known me since school, and we’ve been dating for a year.”

“We’ve been dating for six months!” he protests.

She pats him on the shoulder, “That’s what you think.”

“Those first six months weren’t dating, they were stalking and harassment, and I’m not entirely convinced I’m not experiencing Stockholm Syndrome,” he says, but he’s smiling big and dopy, in a way Harry’s never seen Percy smile before, so it’s clear he doesn’t mean a word of it. He catches his eye and blinks, “Harry, what are you doing here?”

Before Harry has a chance to answer, a woman pipes up, “Yes, what is Harry Potter doing here? Do we let children into the Order now?”

“Harry’s attendance is a requirement of these meetings taking place in the safety of Grimmauld Place, Hestia,” Dumbledore answers.

She doesn’t budge. “We shouldn’t let inexperienced children be privy to Order information, even if they’re Harry Potter. This isn’t a spectator sport, it’s war, and it should be treated that way.” There’s a murmuring of agreement around the table.

Remus is glaring, and Sirius is tense and furious next to him. He taps them both on the shoulder before they can do anything, because he can’t let them speak for him, if he does he’ll just be proving Hestia’s point.

He remembers last summer, getting attacked by a group of adults, and the way Draco had appeared out of nowhere. He’d walked into that clearing and, using nothing more than words, made the adults feel foolish. He was only a kid, but by the time he left he wasn’t being treated as one. What would Draco do if he was here, what would he say? Harry isn’t good with words, not like that, he doesn’t know how to wield them like a weapon or a tool like Draco is so good at doing. But he has to try.

“Have you faced Voldemort?” he asks.

“Excuse me?” she responds, incredulous.

“Have you faced Voldemort?” he repeats. “Fought him off with nothing but your wand and a lot of luck on your side?”

“I’ve seen more than enough battle,” she says, face white.

He can work with that. “So you haven’t faced him,” he answers. “Good. I can’t recommend it. Because I have. Four times.” Everyone is completely silent and staring at him, which is unnerving, but he thinks that’s what he wants. “First when I was a baby. Then when he was a spirit possessing the body of my professor, who I ended up having to kill. Then in the Chamber of Secrets where I had to fight a basilisk he had under his control to get free. Then again just over a month ago, where I was bound and gagged and forced to, once again, fight Voldemort. We dueled, actually, but he cheated. I’m sure that doesn’t surprise you. I was put against Voldemort and all his Death Eaters, and still, I escaped.” He looks down the table, tries to seem cool and in control and not like a teenager who’s just winging it. “Who here besides Dumbledore has faced Voldemort four times?”

No one moves.

“Right,” he nods, leaning back in his chair. “Maybe there are people here who are inexperienced, who think war is something you can spectate rather than something you’re forced to be a part of. But
I’m not one of them. I’m here because Voldemort seems hell bent on killing me, and I’d rather he didn’t do that, if that’s okay with you?”

Hestia doesn’t say anything at all. Neither does anyone else.

Then there’s the sounds of clapping. Harry turns, and it’s the couple who’d been talking to Dumbledore. “Bravo!” the man cries, “Magnificent, inspiring! How can we deny him after that?”

“Let the boy stay,” the woman adds, winking at him even from so far away. “He’s surely to be right in the middle of this war no matter what we do. I can’t imagine keeping him ignorant will help matters.”

“Surely not!” the man cries, turning to him and beaming. “Your adventures sound most interesting, Harry, you must tell me more about them sometime.”

Harry can’t help but smile back. The man’s defense of him is nice, but it’s mostly the friendly and open air he exudes, like he’s inviting everyone to be in on some sort of joke. The woman is the same, but different. She seems like she knows the punchline to whatever joke the man is telling, but isn’t interested in letting anybody else in on it.

Dumbledore sighs. “Now seems as good a time as any to introduce our newest members, and future professors at Hogwarts.” Harry blinks, not expecting that. New Defense Against the Dark Arts professors? “Please meet Nicolas and Perenelle Flamel. They’ll be resurrecting the Alchemy elective at Hogwarts, as well as providing another layer of security to the school’s defenses.”

Harry’s mouth drops open, and he takes a closer look. They look older, maybe in their sixties, but they definitely don’t look over six hundred years old. Hermione’s going to lose her mind when she finds out there’s a class being taught by Nicolas Flamel.

“I thought Nicolas Flamel was French?” a man Harry doesn’t know asks.

Fleur turns, the same look on her face as when she killed Barty Crouch Jr, and Harry hopes the man who said that never finds himself alone with her in a dark alley.

“I was born in France,” Nicolas says, dry, “I live there, I married there, and, according to the muggles, I died there. I consider myself pretty French. But my parents were from modern day China, if that’s what you’re asking. The books always manage to leave that part out.”

“Oh,” the man says, “Er, sorry.”

“Nicolas and Perenelle are old friends,” Dumbledore says, diplomatically pulling their attention back towards him. “They’ve agreed to do this as a favor.”

Nicolas leans back in his chair and winks at him, “Anything for you, Albus, you know that.” Perenelle rolls her eyes.

Harry blinks, disbelieving. No way. Is – is Dumbledore blushing?

This is amazing. He can’t wait to tell everyone.

The rest of the meeting is uneventful after that, although it is enlightening. In just a few short weeks, Dumbledore has managed to put together a very thorough spy network. The fact that it already existed from the last war doesn’t make it any less impressive, especially considering so many of the previous members had died. He wonders how many people in this room will still be alive when this war ends, and then he stops, because it’s just too depressing to contemplate.
Zaira is delighted to let the kids spend the summer at one of the many buildings in Italy that still fall under the Severan Estate, as Draco assumed she would be.

Blaise and Pansy are pissed that he’s not coming with them. His parents aren’t too thrilled either, but short of disowning him so the wards don’t recognize him anymore, there’s not much they can do about it. Pansy is sitting on his bed with her knees pulled to her chest while Blaise paces across his room and scowls. “This is a horrible idea.”

“I know,” Draco says. They’ve already had this conversation. Several times.

“You could be killed,” he continues.

He doesn’t sigh, but he wants to. “unlikely.”

“Have you told Harry yet?” Pansy asks, looking over at him with her big brown eyes.

“I’ll tell him tomorrow,” he says. He’s not planning to lie to his soulmate about it, but avoiding it for as long as he can is definitely on the top of his list. “Actually, that’s a good point. I’m going to either have to send him his mirror or break it, since I can’t risk anyone finding it and using it. I can use Winky to send him letters, since she can’t be tracked.” The thought of spending the next month and a half without even being able to speak or see his soulmate is more than a little discouraging. Going without Harry for that long is going to suck even more than having Voldemort in his house.

Blaise stops in front of him and crosses his arms. “You know, you’re not going to be able to berate Harry for being reckless and stupid anymore. This is way dumber than anything he’s ever done.”

“Sacrifices have to be made for the greater good,” he answers. “Also, don’t underestimate him. I’m sure he’ll do something dumber, just give him time.”

Blaise uncrosses his arms to hold them out, palms up, and this is as close to begging as Draco’s ever seen from Blaise. “You know, you’re not going to be able to berate Harry for being reckless and stupid anymore. This is way dumber than anything he’s ever done.”

“Sacrifices have to be made for the greater good,” he answers. “Also, don’t underestimate him. I’m sure he’ll do something dumber, just give him time.”

Blaise uncrosses his arms to hold them out, palms up, and this is as close to begging as Draco’s ever seen from Blaise. “Come with us. You love Milan. We can spend the whole summer in Milan, and at that villa in the countryside you like, and there will be no war, no Death Eaters, and no Voldemort breathing down your neck.”

It sounds great. But he can’t. “Just because we can’t see the war, doesn’t mean it’s not there. I have to do this.”

“You wouldn’t ask of us what you’re doing to yourself,” he says. “You know you wouldn’t.”

Draco doesn’t even have to think about it. He’d be furious if any of his friends were stupid enough to attempt what he is, but it’s not like he’s going to admit that. “I have to go get Millie. Are you coming, or do you want to stay here?”

Blaise doesn’t answer him, just turning away and looking out his window, shoulders high and tense. Pansy says, “It’s probably better if you go alone. The Bulstrodes like the Malfoys.”

He’s pretty sure they just want to be able to call him an idiot while he’s not around, but he’s not going to argue with them about it. “Sure, I’ll be right back. Hold on.”

The fireplace in the main room is closer than the one in his parents’ room or his father’s office, so it’s the one he takes. He tosses the floo powder into the flames and calls out, “Bulstrode residence!” There’s several long seconds where the flames don’t change color, and he worries they’re not going to let him through. He’s pretty sure the shop a couple blocks from their house has a public floo, and
he’ll take that if he has to. He’s about to give up and just go to the shop instead when the fire finally turns a bright emerald green.

He steps into it, and walks out into the Bulstrode’s sitting room. A tall woman with Millie’s nose and hair is waiting for him. “Have you come to take the child away?” she asks.

“Yes,” he answers, raising an eyebrow. “Her father said it was all right.”

She sniffs, “Good,” before turning and walking away.

Millie comes running into the room, calling out, “Draco!” but she doesn’t notice the woman until she nearly runs into her, and has to scramble backwards to keep from knocking her over. “Aunt Ophelia,” she greets politely, looking at her shoes rather than her face.

Ophelia sighs, “Hello, Millicent.” She doesn’t wait for a response before leaving.

When Millie looks back at him, her smile isn’t quite as wide as it was before. “Hi Draco! Thanks for coming to get me.”

“My pleasure,” he says, “Where’s your luggage?”

She reaches into her pocket, then takes out a shrunk trunk and shows it to him. “I assume no one’s going to care about underage magic, right? I’ll just unshrink them when we get there.”

He nods, and asks, “Do you have to say goodbye to anyone before we get going?”

“I said bye to Dad this morning before he left for work,” she says, “Let’s go, I’ve never been to Italy before. Dad never takes vacation, so I’ve only been places on weekend trips.”

Because Mr. Bulstrode doesn’t trust his daughter with the rest of his family, so any trips she takes he has to be there for. The naked relief that had swept over the man’s face when Draco had asked him if Millie could stay with the Zabinis over the summer had frankly been a little embarrassing for him to witness. Millie doesn’t mention saying goodbye to anyone else in the house, and Draco doesn’t ask.

She doesn’t know that he’s not going with her yet. He’s really not looking forward to getting yelled at when Zaira shows up to pick everyone up except him.

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It’s barely dawn when he’s awoken by a rattling sound from his bedside table. He blindly grabs for his mirror, flips it open, and croaks, “Vanakkam.”

“Kalai vanakkam,” Draco says, nothing more than a pale blob in front of him, so he reaches for his glasses. “Ūṅkaḷ muṭṭi oru kuḷappam.”

He’s so not awake enough to translate anything more than the most basic Tamil. He’s pretty sure Draco said something about his hair, but that’s all he’s got. “What’s up? Why are you even awake?”

As his boyfriend comes into focus now that he has his glasses on, it’s immediately clear that something is wrong. There are purple bruises under his eyes, like he hasn’t slept at all, and his smile looks more like a grimace. “I have to tell you something, and I don’t want you to be mad.”

“Okay,” he says cautiously. He doesn’t like this at all.

Draco explains, first slowly, then all at once, words tumbling over each other, like he’s worried if he pauses for breath then that will give Harry an opportunity to yell at him. He tells him about
Voldemort looking for a place to stay with his supporters, about how it was only a matter of time before he ended up at the manor, so Draco convinced his dad to cut out the middle man, about how the rest of their Slytherin friends are spending the summer safely in Venice, but he’s staying right at home, right in the middle of danger. He finishes, trailing off even as he’s clearly searching for more words, something he can say to justify what he’s doing.

“This is fucking crazy,” he says bluntly. “Have you lost your mind? Go to Italy! Why would you stay? You’ve already faced Voldemort once in the chamber, and let me tell you, he hasn’t exactly gotten nicer with age.”

“Remus and Sirius are in the Order of Phoenix, right?” he asks, ignoring him. “I overheard my dad talking about it. They know Dumbledore has resurrected it, and they’re not happy about it.”

“They’ve got eyes on your dad,” he blurts out, before he can think better of it. Lucius may be a murderous Death Eater, but he didn’t kill Harry when he had the chance, and Draco loves him. That’s more than enough reason to protect him, as far as Harry’s concerned.

Draco smiles at him, real and fleeting, then says, “He assumed so, but thanks. But don’t tell me anything else.”

“Why not?” he argues. “I’m telling the Weasleys. It’s not like I trust you any less.” Son of a Death Eater or not, he knows what side of this war Draco is on.

“What I don’t know can’t be tortured out of me,” he answers, and Harry’s blood runs cold. “You can fill me in when we get back to Hogwarts.”

“You’re not doing this,” he snaps. “It’s idiotic and pointless. Go with Blaise, come here, go live in muggle London! But don’t stay there and live under the same roof as bloody Voldemort out of some twisted sense of duty.”

He rolls his eyes, “Like you’re one to talk. Besides, he’s trying to kill my soulmate, and a whole lot of good people besides. I’d say it’s less out of a twisted sense of duty, and more because I have a personal interest in the outcome of this war.”

“I don’t care!” he says, but he’s just a few shades off from shouting. “You’re not doing this! I won’t let you!”

Draco’s whole face shifts, and Harry already knows he’s lost. He’s back behind his cool, unaffected pureblood mask, his cold anger that comes out so rarely and Harry’s so bad at fighting against. “I’m not asking permission, I’m telling you.”

It’s the same thing he said to Draco about lending his broom to Cedric instead of using it himself. But it’s not the same. “I’ll go to the manor myself and drag you out.”

“You’ll be dead before you reach the front door,” he returns. “Wards, remember? It’s the reason Voldemort wants to be here in the first place. Even if the whole Order showed up, they wouldn’t be able to make it through.”

“Well, what am I supposed to do?” He’s definitely shouting now. “Just sit here and hope you don’t die? Wonder everyday if I’m ever going to see you again?”

Draco softens, although not by much. “You’re being overdramatic. My parents are here. They won’t let him kill me. I won’t let him kill me.”

Harry knows Lucius and Narcissa love their son. He’s pretty sure they’d die for him. But if they do,
then who will protect him? Harry won’t be able to, not when he’s here and Draco is there. “I hate this.”

“It gets worse,” he admits. “I’m going to have to break the mirror. If any of the Death Eater’s find it and figure out who its connected to, then I’m screwed. I can send Winky with letters though, if you want.”

“One letter a day,” he says, gripping the mirror so tightly that his knuckles turn white. “One letter every single day, Draco, or I’m breaking down your front door myself, wards or no wards.”

“You really will die if you try, I feel the need to reiterate that,” he says. “But fine.”

“Fine,” Harry says. “Just – fine.” He doesn’t know which of them closes their mirror first, but he does know that there’s a tight ball of misery sitting in the center of his chest.

He knows he’s not going to be able to go back to sleep after his conversation with Draco, no matter how hard he tries. Well, it’s not like one night of limited sleep is going to kill him. He pulls on an old pair of jeans and a long sleeve shirt, determined to work out some of his frustrations doing something productive, which means disappearing into the greenhouse. Neville comes over almost every day to work on the attic, to the point that Remus ended up just adding him to their floo network, so he’s pretty sure if he stays there long enough that Neville will show up, and then he can rant at him about how much of an idiot Draco is. The thought is strangely comforting.

Pulling the fireweeds is dangerous, and hot, and takes pretty much his full concentration if he doesn’t want to get set on fire. He thinks the fireweeds are rather pretty, but Neville insists they’re strangling the redwoods that tower up to the ceiling. It seems unlikely to him, because they’re so big and the weeds are so small, but there’s a reason Neville is the expert and Harry is usually just there to do as he’s told.

He’s been up there for maybe three hours when he finishes pulling the weeds, and he’s at a loss of what to do next. He doesn’t want to start on something else only to be told he’d messed up whatever carefully laid plan Neville has going on. It may be in his house, but this whole attic garden is definitely Neville’s project.

Someone clears their throat, and he turns to see the door cracked open and an arm waving a white handkerchief. “We come in peace!” Sirius calls out.

Harry rolls his eyes, “Just come inside.”

Sirius pokes his head past the door, then the rest of him, inching his way into the room in a manner that’s clearly meant to be comical, and Harry can’t help the smile that tugs at the corners of his lips. Remus follows like a normal person, seeming a little pale and grey around the edges, which Harry assumes is thanks to the full moon that’s only a couple days away. He looks at the pile of fireweeds, eyebrows raised. “We don’t mean to pry,” he starts.

“We mean to pry a little,” Sirius interrupts, “Just a small amount. If you don’t mind.”

“A little bit of prying,” Remus amends. “Because, you see, we can’t help but notice that you were yelling this morning, and then you spent hours doing dangerous manual labor, all before breakfast, which is a little odd. A bit out of character, if you will.”

“Doing dangerous manual labor not carefully enough,” Sirius adds, snagging one of Harry’s wrists. He doesn’t know what they’re talking about until he takes a long look on his hands, and oh, he really hadn’t noticed getting any of those burns. “Which, is a bit concerning, as your godfather and
godfather-in-law, you understand.”

“Just a little,” Remus echoes, and merlin, Harry bets they were just like this in school too. It’s a wonder that McGonagall didn’t strangle them.

He lets out a long, slow breath, because he doesn’t want to snap at them. He’s already pissed off one person he cares about this morning, there’s no reason to make it three. Besides, he’s not mad at them really, just like he wasn’t really mad at Draco. That doesn’t make the anger go away, but it at least makes it easier for him to shelve until he can take it down again when it’ll be useful, like when Neville comes up with some other dangerous plant for them to wrestle into submission. “I was talking to Draco. He told me something I didn’t like.” He knows they won’t ask, but that they want to ask, so he adds apologetically, “I can’t tell you what.”

“Are you okay?” Remus asks, running his hand through Harry’s sweaty hair.

He almost says yes on autopilot, but they hate when he does that. “I’ll be okay,” he says instead.

“Go take a shower, then come downstairs and eat something,” Sirius says. “If you’re still feeling restless, you can help me and Remus attack the doxies that are hiding in one of the spare bedrooms. We cleaned them out of the living room months ago, but it looks like there’s more of the blighters hiding. They’re good target practice.”

He can’t help but be cheered at that. Remus and Sirius are still against him helping clean the house, but every once in a while, they’ll find something fun and interesting enough that they’ll let him join in.

~

After his not quite an argument with Harry, breaking the mirror is more satisfying than it should be. Shattering the glass shatters the enchantment, but he banishes the pieces just to be sure.

It’s just before nightfall when there’s a knock on his door. Draco is wearing dark, heavy robes, and his hair is pulled back and tied at the nape of his neck. “Come in,” he says. Abigail is crawling over his lap and around his arm, restless like she always is when he’s upset.

His father steps in, similarly attired, and takes a seat next to him, watching him carefully. Draco tries to summon a smile, but he doesn’t think he does a very good job. “Are you really sure that you don’t want to go somewhere else? Anywhere else?”

“I’m sure I don’t want Voldemort in my house,” he answers, “but that’s not something that we get a say in. He wants to be here, and he’ll end up here.”

“I was hoping to stave him off until you were back at school, at least,” Lucius admits. “I don’t want you around this. You’re going to see and hear things I don’t want you to see and hear.”

That’s actually a large portion of the reason he’s refusing to leave, but he’s not stupid enough to tell his dad that. “I’ll be okay. It’s more important that Voldemort doesn’t have a reason to hurt our family.”

Something dark flashes across Lucius’s face, but before he can question it, Lucius leans forward and presses a kiss to his forehead, a gesture Draco associates more with his mother than his father. “Be careful. Please. Stay out of the way as much as you can.”

“Okay,” he answers, and guilt squirms at the bottom of his stomach. He’s not planning to be that careful, after all.
When Voldemort sweeps into his house with his snake and Pettigrew trailing behind him, Draco is standing by his mother’s side. Lucius gets on his knees and kisses the top of Voldemort’s outstretched hand, and Draco wants to retch, or possibly set him on fire. His father shouldn’t bow to anyone, much less someone like Voldemort.

He takes a long look at the man, and he’s not sure what he was expecting, exactly. Something like Tom Riddle from the chamber, maybe, handsome and young even as his eyes glittered with madness. But this is almost – Draco would call it sad, if it was anyone else.

He’s tall and thin, with white skin, blood red eyes, and a flat nose like a snake that goes right alone with his lipless mouth. Draco knows power, he’s soulmates with Harry Potter and walks the same halls as Albus Dumbledore, he grew up learning of magic in his parents’ laps, both of whom are unusually strong. He knows what power feels like, the weight of it in the air in the scant moments between when a spell is cast and the magic actually reacts.

Draco knows power when he sees it, and nothing about Voldemort seems particularly powerful, not when compared to what Draco’s used to. He’s a thin, pale man, with hatred and anger and just enough magic to make himself believe that that counts for something, that his hatred makes him special and interesting rather than boring.

By the time Voldemort’s turned to him, Draco’s almost completely relaxed. Voldemort is dangerous, strong enough to fight and influential enough to alight this war anew, but he’s not otherworldly. He’s just a man. Draco has faced scarier things than that. “My lord,” Lucius says, “you remember my wife, Narcissa. This is our son.”

“Draco Malfoy,” he says, and his voice sounds silky, like Snape when he’s not yelling. “I’ve heard of you. Interesting boy.”

Blech. Just the way he says that makes Draco want to punch him. “Thank you, my lord,” he says, the only acceptable answer.

Voldemort takes a step closer to him, and Draco sees his mother tense out at the edge of his vision. He places a single pale finger under his chin and lifts his head so he can look him in the eye. Draco meets his gaze before he can think not to, and then it seems foolish to look away. He’s still afraid, of course he’s afraid, but it’s not the kind of fear he was expecting. Fear of what he’ll do, of the horrible things he could inflict on Draco and those he cares about? Of course. But fear of the man himself? Not a chance.

“Interesting,” Voldemort repeats, and then turns away from him, walking down the hallway like he owns it. Draco’s sure that, in his mind, he does.

This is going to be a long summer.

~

Harry wakes up too early again the next morning, pacing in his room out of a lack of anything else to do. He’s completed most of his coursework already, and he can’t concentrate enough to be any use at that anyway. Neville’s popping by again after breakfast, so at least he’ll be able to work in the greenhouse again. Harry hadn’t ended up telling him about Draco yesterday, not because he didn’t trust him, but because he was still so tangled up about it that he was certain as soon as he started talking about it, he was going to end up yelling about it, which wouldn’t be fair to Neville.

It’s not like Draco would send a letter in the middle of the day, right? That would be dangerous, and stupid. Harry supposes he could send it late at night, after everyone else goes to sleep, but if that’s the
case, then Harry’s just going to end up spending the whole day on edge.

He’s just decided that he’s going to floo Ron and convince him to come over so he can complain when there’s a soft knock on the door. “Harry?” Remus says. “Are you awake?”

“Yeah, come in,” he answers.

Remus blinks when he sees him up and fully dressed, but doesn’t comment on it. “There’s a house elf trying to get through the wards, insisting that she has to deliver something to you. I don’t suppose you know anything about that?”

“Winky!” he cries, overjoyed. “She’s Draco’s elf!”

“Good thing we stopped the wards from eviscerating her then,” he says, and Harry hopes he’s not being literal.

He runs downstairs, Remus following at a more sedate pace. Sirius is standing next to Winky, who’s in a very pretty bright pink dress that she must have made from one of Draco’s old quidditch jerseys. She brightens when she sees him, “Mister Harry!”

“Is he alright?” he asks before he can stop himself.

Winky frowns and she puts her hands on her hips, and for some reason seeing a house elf look irritated is hilarious. “Master Draco is being very stupid, but is fine.” She rubs her thumb and middle finger together in way that’s clearly meant to be a warning. “If someone is trying to make my master not fine, then I shall be taking care of it.”

“Brilliant,” he says. “Did you bring the letter?”

She holds out her hand, and a folded piece of parchment lies in the center of it. He snatches it and flips it open.

Not dead.

HOS is a bloody wanker. Trying to call someone to him? To gain more people? Not humans. Snakes?

Forever yours,

You-Know-Who

P.S. Burn this

Harry bites the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing. He knows Draco is talking about Voldemort, but it takes him several long moments to figure out that HOS stands for Heir of Slytherin. The trying to gain more people thing is interesting, and if it is snakes, the only makes sense. Could Harry gain an army of snakes? Does he want an army of snakes? He doesn’t know how much good it would do him. An army of wyverns, maybe.

He grabs his wand from his pocket and lights the letter on fire, banishing the ashes before they can reach the ground. “Can I give you a letter in return?” he asks Winky.

She shakes her head. “That is not being a good idea. Just in case. But I can be bringing a message?”

“Oh,” he says, even though that makes sense. The last thing Draco needs is to be caught with a
message from Harry Potter. “Tell him – uh, well. Tell him I’m sorry.” He’s not sorry about what he said, because he meant it, but he’s sorry they got in a fight, he’s sorry that the last time they’ll see each other’s faces all summer it was while they were angry.

Winky smiles. “In the case that you are saying sorry, Master Draco has told me to say he is being sorry too.”

“Asshole,” he says fondly. “You keep an eye on him, all right Winky? I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Yes Mister Harry,” she agrees, and then disappears with a crack.

When he looks up, both Remus and Sirius are staring at him, and neither of them look happy.

“Okay,” Sirius says, “now we are prying. What was that about? Why would Draco send you a letter when he can just use the mirror?”

He bites his bottom lip, because he knows neither of them would put Draco in danger, but if he tells them the whole truth, then they’re going to have to choose between lying to the Order or betraying Draco. He thinks they’d choose the former, but he’s also pretty sure that he doesn’t want to put them in that position. “We can’t use the mirror for the rest of the summer, so Winky’s going to be bringing messages.”

“But why?” Remus asks. “You’ve never had a problem with the mirror before.”

“Things are different now,” he answers, which is true, and even though it’s not the whole truth, it’s at least a truth. “It’s more dangerous for Draco. We’re trying to make it … less dangerous, if we can. That means no more mirrors during the summer.”

“His parents wouldn’t hurt him,” Sirius says, but it almost sounds like a question. “Narcissa would kill her husband, herself, and possibly the whole world before letting anything happen to her child.”

“There are more people around Draco than just his parents,” he says. “It’s fine. He knows what he’s doing.” Now, that part is a big fat lie, but it’s one he’s doing his best to tell himself too, so it only seems fair.

Sirius and Remus glance at each other, then apparently decide to drop it. Remus says, “Arthur flooed me last night. They’re taking the kids school shopping today, and Sirius and I have to go prep the cottage for the full moon, so we’re going to be gone most of the day anyway. Do you want to go with them?”

“Sure!” he answers, his excitement at getting to spend the day with his friends almost managing to push away the last of his worries about Draco. “Although, I still think you should just stay here for the full moon. I can lock myself in my room if you’re worried about it.”

“We’re not locking you away just because there’s a slight chance I might lose control,” Remus says, stern. “Sirius and I will go to the cottage, and you’ll stay here. You can invite some of your friends over if you want. Have a sleepover.”

It seems wrong to be having fun with everyone while Remus is struggling, but he knows this isn’t an argument he’s going to win. “Okay. Are we still having an Order meeting tonight?” Sirius and Molly had locked themselves in a room after the last meeting, and hadn’t come out until nearly an hour later. Harry doesn’t know what they said, but he’s still invited to the meetings, even though Molly isn’t happy about it.

“Yes, but it’ll be late. You should have plenty of time,” Remus assures. “Don’t worry, we’re not trying to sneakily exclude you, and we won’t let Molly do it either.”
That hadn’t been what he was thinking, but he’s touched they’re looking out for him anway.

“Thanks,” he says honestly. “Tamil practice until I go to meet the Weasleys? Since we’ll be missing a couple days.”

“Just one, I don’t have to sit up to speak,” he says. “Kālai unavu. Piṇṇar paṭikkum.”

Breakfast, then studying. Then after that, getting to go to Diagon Alley with the Weasleys. Perfect.

~

Draco doesn’t know what wakes him up, but one moment he’s fast asleep and in the next he’s not, heart beating fast in his chest even as he struggles to keep his breathing even and under control. Something’s wrong. He’d woken up early to send Winky with the letter and then gone back to sleep. It’s still early, he thinks, still morning, but he can’t say for sure. There’s sunlight hitting his face, but that doesn’t mean much. He doesn’t want to open his eyes, and he can’t say why, just that something is telling him that’s not a good idea.

He’s warm under his blanket and his window is closed. He’s curled on his side with half his face pressed into the pillow, and there’s a familiar weight across his legs. Abigail is crawling over him and draping herself across him, which is odd. She’s affectionate, sure, but crawling over him while he sleeps usually ends up with her getting squished when he turns over, and she hates that. She settles her head in front of his, making a low, warning hissing sound. Is she directing that at him? She hasn’t bitten him in years, not since he was a little kid who didn’t know how to handle her properly, and it’s not like he’s doing anything to her, he’s just lying here. Is it just Abigail being mad that woke him up? Is his angry pet snake the thing that’s making all his sense go on high alert?

That doesn’t seem right. If Abigail bit him, it would hurt, but it wouldn’t kill him, not even close. So why is he so tense? Why can’t he bring himself to open his eyes or move?

“You be getting away from Master Draco right now!” Winky cries, “Get! Shoo!”

Draco’s eyes snap open. Nagini is coiled in front of his bed, watching him with large black eyes. He doesn’t move, just taking in a sharp breath. Abigail is hissing angrily at Nagini, not him. What he wouldn’t give to have Harry here to translate right about now.

Winky snaps her fingers together and uses her magic to push Nagini back from his bed. “I said shoo!”

Nagini opens her jaws wide and lunges for his house elf.

Draco reacts without thinking, leaping off his bed and reaching for Nagini with both hands. She’s bigger and stronger than Abigail, but the principle is the same. He grabs under her head, using both thumbs to press against her jaw to force it open. He pulls his knees together to grip on either side of her body, although she continues to thrash, tail hitting his back in an attempt to get him to loosen his grip.

Well, fuck. Now that he’s got her, what’s he going to do with her?

Snakes understand English, right? Harry says Abigail does. He can’t imagine Voldemort would be keeping a snake around that was dumb, so presumably Nagini does too.

“No eating the house elves,” he says firmly. “If you want to go hunting, we have the forests. Understand?”

She hisses at him. He has no idea what that means. Winky is wringing her hands together and glaring
at the same time, a combination of not liking him being this close to her fangs, and wanting to personally teach her a lesson, he assumes.

“I’m going to let you go now. If you attack me or mine, we will have words, Nagini.” Again, she hisses, and again, he has no idea what that means. He gets off of her and, with only the smallest hesitation, lets go of her head.

She twists and knocks into him, pushing him to the ground. Winky cries out, but Nagini doesn’t bite him. She just settles on his chest and stares at him, tongue darting out of her mouth every so often to taste the air. He holds still, waiting, but nothing happens.

He looks over to Abigail, the only reliable gauge he has, and she’s not angry anymore. “Should I be worried?” he asks.

Abigail turns away from them and settles into the warm patch he left in the bed. He guesses that means Nagini isn’t planning to eat him. He looks to Winky and says, “Are you okay?”

“Yes, Master Draco,” she says. “Is you okay?”

He considers this. He feels like he’s lost years off of his life, but he’s not bleeding or dead. Maybe a little bruised, but that’s fine, he supposes. “Yeah, I’m good. Report to the kitchens.”

She curtsies and disappears. He wants to ask if she delivered his letter to Harry, but that’s going to have to wait until Voldemort’s English understanding snake isn’t around to eavesdrop. He cautiously pushes Nagini off his chest, and she doesn’t complain, just slides onto his carpet. Well, there’s no getting back to sleep after that.

He takes a quick shower and gets dressed, and when he steps out, Nagini is curled up on his bed next to Abigail. He has no idea how to react to that, so he ignores it, combing out and drying his hair, then grabbing a robe to put on over his clothes. He turns, and nearly trips on Nagini, who’s moved from his bed to circling his feet. “Are you being annoying on purpose?”

She doesn’t even bother to hiss at him.

In the end he jumps over her to get the door, and she follows him out. He eyes her suspiciously, but she doesn’t even look at him, like it’s nothing more than pure coincidence that they’re heading to the same place at the same time. He enters the dining room to see his parents, Pettigrew, and Voldemort eating breakfast. It makes sense, the man is still human, but seeing Voldemort place a piece of buttered toast in his mouth is possibly the weirdest thing he’s ever seen. It’s going in his next letter to Harry. He pauses inside the room, and Nagini takes that as an invitation to climb up onto him, curling around his torso and settling her head on his shoulder. He’s not entirely convinced she’s not planning to squeeze him to death in front of his parents just for the drama of it all. “It seems as if you’ve misplaced something, my lord.”

The conversation comes to a sudden halt as they all look over at him. Lucius’s fork falls onto his plate with a clatter, and his mother is already half rising from her seat, wand raised. Pettigrew looks about ready to piss himself.

Voldemort opens his mouth and out comes a low, hypnotic sound that’s not quite speaking and not quite hissing. It’s very strange for him to hear what he’s come to think of as Harry’s language coming out of someone else’s mouth. Nagini hisses in return, but unlike Draco, Voldemort can actually understand her.

“My lord?” Lucius asks, pale.
Voldemort glances at them, and luckily he seems amused by their reactions rather than insulted. “Relax, your son doesn’t have enough meat on his bones to make a good meal.” Well, that’s rude, he spent countless hours last year working out until he threw up under Cassius’s maniacal supervision. He worked for these muscles! “She says you grabbed her by the neck.”

“She was trying to eat my house elf,” he says. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to find decent help?” Oh, merlin, his mouth is going to get him killed, and then his mother is going to resurrect him just so she can kill him all over again.

Voldemort doesn’t have any eyebrows, but he gives the distinct impression of raising them anyway. “I see.” He doesn’t say anything after that, instead going back to his meal like nothing has happened.

His parents are still frozen, and Nagini is still wrapped around him like an extremely heavy twenty foot necklace. Well, in for a penny, as Hermione would say. “All right, that’s enough,” he starts tugging on Nagini, “I want to eat, and I can’t do it with you all over me.”

“Draco!” his dad says harshly, hands clenches into fists.

“I can’t!” he says, and finally just leans over, pushing her off and over his head like she’s nothing more than particularly heavy rope. She makes irritated hissing sounds that cause both his parents to twitch, but he figures if she didn’t bite him for pinning her and holding her jaw open, he’s pretty much golden.

His hair is a mess. He hopes she’s proud of herself. He pulls out the chair opposite his mother, but only stares at her pointedly until she sinks back into his chair. The he sits, making sure the legs of his chair doesn’t bump against the snake.

That’s it. He’s sending Abigail with Winky tomorrow so she can tell Harry what all that was about, so then Harry can tell him.

The first twelve hours of Voldemort in his home is going rather well, he’d say. All things considered.

Sirius goes with him through the floo to the Leaky Cauldron, just in case. But the Weasleys are waiting right outside the fireplace for him, and it’s not just them.

“Hermione!” he calls out, and happily accepts a hug that involves getting a face full of her hair. “What are you doing here?”

“I just couldn’t stand being out the of loop, so I asked if I could come stay early,” she confesses.

“And of course we were happy to have her,” Molly says, absently smoothing Hermione’s hair down. Sirius bows to Hermione, taking the back of her hand to kiss it. “Why, Miss Granger! When I saw you last you were a little girl! Now you’re young woman.”

She rolls her eyes, but she’s grinning. “Hi Sirius! You’re looking a lot better.”

“Well, I would have been hard pressed to look worse,” he says.

Molly is frowning at him, “Sirius, you know Dumbledore doesn’t like you going out in public. You’re not even wearing a glamour!”

“Well, what Dumbledore wanted might matter to me, except, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I
graduated Hogwarts almost twenty years ago. Besides, watch this.” He calls across bar, “Oi, you there! Do you think I look like Sirius Black? I got the nose, don’t I?”

Molly gasps, and Ginny laughs hard enough she snorts.

A couple people turn around to look, but most go back to what they were doing. One just says, “No,” and then goes back to what she was doing.

He turns back to Molly, hands spread. “See?”

“Oh, get out of here,” she says, but she’s doing a bad job of hiding a smile. “We’ll see you at the meeting tonight.”

“Have fun. Try not to let my godson get captured by Death Eaters.” He ruffles Harry’s hair, winks at the rest of them, and then disappears into a wall of green fire.

Molly bustles all of them to the alley entrance, and Hermione falls into step next to him. “Better than the Dursleys?”

“So much better than the Dursleys,” he grins.

Their lists are shorter this year, although Harry reads the back of their required book for Defense Against Dark Arts while they’re in line, and he’s not impressed. It’s all correct, from what he can see, but he doesn’t like the vague, impractical way the author talks about it all.

They all end up waiting for Hermione in Flourish in Blotts. She buys her customary enormous stack, which Fred eagerly shrinks for her. The twins, having turned seventeen last year, are taking every chance they can to use magic in front of their mum, who isn’t even a little amused by it.

Quality Quidditch Supplies is next, where both Molly and Hermione seem equally disinterested while they go in and touch and look over everything they can. They have a new practice snitch that Harry is itching to try, but he still has the one Draco gave him for Christmas during their third year, and he doesn’t need another. They also all crowd around the newest broom, the Firebird, which is bright red from trim to tip, and claims to be just as fast as the Firebolt while being twice as durable, meaning it will need to be replaced only half as often. Which is also why Harry assumes it’s nearly twice the price. Any broom can last as long it’s cared for, the but the permeant unbreakable charm it’s supposedly imbedded with doesn’t hurt. If only his Nimbus had had that, it might not have met its gruesome end in the Whomping Willow.

Molly eventually drags them all away, saying they need to go to the Apothecary before it closes, since it doesn’t stay open long past sundown.

They step outside, and for a jarring moment Harry thinks they’re too late, that the sun has already set, because it’s dark wherever he looks. He can see his breath in front of his face, which doesn’t make sense, it wasn’t cold when they entered the store. Then he hears the screaming.

He looks up. The sun hasn’t set. Instead, the sky is covered in more dementors than he’s ever seen before, enough of them that it blocks out the sun. They’re all heading down, straight for the people filled alley. The soul filled alley.

“Run!” Molly cries, grabbing onto the first kids she can reach and pulling them away.

He’s lightheaded and his skin is clammy, but he’s not running. He shakes off Molly’s grip and thinks of Sirius’s smile, of Remus’s comforting hand on his back, of this entire summer of kindness. “Expecto patronum!”
Prongs leaps from his wand, shining silver as he gallops through the swarm of dementors, breaking them apart and pushing them away. It’s not enough. There are hundreds of dementors, and he only has one patronus.

“Lumos maximus!” Hermione cries, a beam of light erupting from her wand. It doesn’t hurt the dementors, of course but they shy away from it, making displeased rattling sounds in the back of their throats.

“Good thinking,” Ron says from his other side, mouth in a grim line. “Do you think they’re covering the whole alley?”

“I hope not,” she answers. “They’re going to start sucking out souls, we have to do something!”

Harry considers telling them to run, then decides it’s not worth the wasted breath. “I can direct the patronus, but it requires a constant connection, so I can’t cast it twice. As soon as I try, my first one will vanish.” A dementor tries to duck towards them, but Prongs leaps forward, spearing it on his antlers and then tossing it down the alley.

“Nothing but patronus magic can hurt them, but they’re physical, right?” Ron says.

When Harry turns to look at him, his eyes are gleaming. “Right,” he says warily.

Ron steps forward, jabs his wand forward, and casts, “CREPITUS!”

A store front window bursts apart, the glass shattering into a nearby dementor and causing it to shriek. The person it had been advancing towards uses that chance to run. The twins appear at the corner of his eye, and they take their little brother’s lead, exploding windows nearly in unison down the street, and sending dementors shrieking away.

There’s crack after crack as people apparate away. But not everyone can do that. The alley is full of kids with their parents, kids who are going school shopping or are here with friends, adults that never learned how, and people who don’t want to abandon their shops and families. They need a better idea.

“MUM!” Ginny yells, and they all turn, horrified, but it’s just to see Ginny twisting out of her mother’s grip. “Stop it, we have to help!” She raises her wand and cries, “Accio brooms!” There’s a crash as an assortment of brooms burst out of the store windows, and Harry’s pretty sure there are supposed to be anti theft charms on those. “Get up high,” she says, directing a broom at each of them and climbing onto one herself. “We can use the height to our advantage.”

“Get back here!” Molly cries hysterically, “Stop that, we have to leave!” Harry feels a pang of guilt, but they can’t leave. Can’t she see that there are people in trouble?

“Clever,” Ron says approvingly, climbing onto the bright red Firebird. Harry grabs the Cleansweep. He doesn’t need speed, just accuracy. “Distract, attack, and try not to let anyone get kissed. Once the aurors get here, fall back.”

They give an echo of agreement, and then they’re in the air. Someone casts an extra powerful lumos charms, and the other uses the distraction to send something toppling down on top of the dementors. George is summoning rocks, while Ginny is plucking hairs from her head to transfigure into knives, which he hadn’t know she could do, and he’s faintly horrified by this revelation.

Prongs is strong, spearing and tossing dementor after dementor out of his way, and leaving them crumpled on the ground oozing thick black goo, but he’s just not enough. There’s no other patronuses, and Harry doesn’t know if that’s because no one else knows how to cast one, or if the
ones that did apparated away. It better be the former.

“Cover me!” Ginny shouts, and goes diving towards a group of dementors. Her brothers all cast a lumos in her direction, blinding all the dementors, but Ginny too. She must have good aim, because there’s horrible high pitched moaning, and then her flying out of the shaft of light unharmed. There’s a half dozen dementors moving sluggishly on the ground, kitchen knives jutting out of them in key spots. Hermione summons a shower of bricks above them, and they may not be dead, but they’re not moving either.

This isn’t working, not on a large scale. For every dementor they stop, there’s still ten more, and Harry’s getting sick of waiting for the aurors to arrive. Isn’t the point of apparition that they can be someplace almost instantly? Yet, they’re still not here.

They need more patronuses. But the only person who can cast one is him, and he can only make one at a time. Which means they need more people – but they don’t have more people, and the ones that were supposed to show up aren’t here yet. So one patronus needs to do the work of many, otherwise people are going to start losing their souls. If only Prongs could at least be bigger –

He pauses, thinking. Can Prongs be bigger? Patronuses are supposed to be the size of the animals they imitate, but he doesn’t see why they have to be. They’re made of magic and happiness, and that doesn’t have a size limit.

He has enough magic, he knows that, all power and no control. He has enough power to make a bigger patronus, if that’s even possible.

Does he have enough happiness?

There are still people running and screaming below them, and his friends are using every ounce of their strength to help them. How can he do any differently? Of course he does, of course he has enough happiness. He has to.

He takes a risk and closes his eyes. He thinks of Sirius and Remus, of his friends, of Draco. He thinks of the feel of Tamil on his tongue, of seeing his mother’s eyes in the mirror, of Draco’s hand in his and Ron’s arms around him and Pansy painting his nails and Hermione’s hair on his face and Blaise’s warm smile. That may not be enough, and it has to be enough, so he reaches deeper. He thinks of the smell of Aunt Petunia’s garden, the way the Dursleys all knew he was the best cook, and his triumph over outrunning Dudley as a kid.

He has enough happiness. Not all of it is easy, or nice, or fair. But it’s his.

Maybe his life should have been easier, been fuller, but this is the life he has. He’s not going to let it fade, and he’s not going to the life fade from the people down there either. He’s going to squeeze every drop of happiness and laughter and hope from his hard, unfair life, and he’s going to use it to save everyone.

He points his wand to the ground, takes a deep breath, and shouts, “EXPECTO PATRONUM!”

Prongs disappears, and for a long moment there’s nothing. That’s okay. All the hair on his arms is standing upright, and his friends have frozen, probably because of the weight of his magic in the air.

The light that leaves his wand is blinding. The force of it shoves him backward, nearly pushing him off his broom. There’s a long moment when he thinks something’s gone wrong, when he thinks he’s just staring at a shining patch of patronus light, which wasn’t what he meant to make.

But then he realizes he’s just too close.
All the dementors have frozen in fear. Standing before them is Prongs, regal head tossed back, and he’s certainly bigger. The tips of his antlers just barely peak over the top of the shop buildings, and his body is almost too wide to fit down the street. His patronus is about the size of a small house.

“Harry,” Ron breathes, “that’s bloody fantastic.”

The dementors try to run, but they don’t get very fair. Beneath Prongs’s enormous silvery hooves they become nothing more than black goo oozing out of a robe. He trots through the streets of Diagon Alley, casually squashing dementors beneath him. He swings his head and uses his antlers to knock down any dementor foolish enough to think it can fly away. His silvery form passes harmlessly through buildings and people both, and everyone can’t seem to help but stare after him, eyes wide and mouths open.

“I think I need a nap,” he says. It’s a struggle just to stay on his broom. He’s barely finished that sentence before he has George on one side, and Fred on the other.

“Best not to fall over and die now, mate,” George says kindly, clearly ready to catch Harry if he does fall. “Let’s get your feet back on the ground, yeah?”

“That sounds nice,” he sighs.

He flies down, and the twins are the closest, but everyone’s fanned out around him, just in case. He’s barely touched back onto the street when there’s the sound of dozen or so cracks, and a small crowd of aurors appear in front them. He sees the exact moment they see Prongs cheerfully making his way through the streets, destroying every dementor he comes across, because all their faces drain of color. He doesn’t see Tonks among them, and actually the only one he recognizes is Kingsley. “You’re late,” he says, then yawns, which probably ruins whatever cool effect he was hoping that would have.

“You’re very lucky Harry was here,” Hermione says angrily, “If he hadn’t been, dozens of people would have died before you got here. What took you so long?”

Harry doesn’t think that’s very fair, because they’re the ones that came up with using lumos and throwing things and flying, but he’s about two seconds from pulling a Cho and climbing onto Ron’s back to take a nap. “I’m going to leave now,” he says, looking behind him. Prongs is gone, so he assumes that means the dementor situation is taken care of. Even if it’s not, Harry doesn’t have enough energy summon another patronus, so there’s not much he can do about it. “Okay?”

“We should take a statement,” one of them says, but it ends up coming out more like a question.

Molly comes marching over from around the corner, her expression somewhere between relief and fury, and it’s only then that Harry realizes they’re several blocks away from where they started. “Do you think she can ground me even if I don’t live in her house?”

All of the aurors just look confused, but the Weasleys and Hermione wince. Kingsley turns just enough to catch sight of Molly, and it’s probably not a good sign when a senior auror looks afraid.

“Yes,” Ron says, not at all sympathetically.

Well, he’s never been grounded before. At least it’ll be a new experience without the threat of death, unlike most of his other new experiences.
i hope you liked it!

**megalania-prisca** has done several gorgeous pieces for siat that you can view [here](#) (she's added more since the last chapter!)

**tsuraiwrites** did a fabulous portrait of harry that you can view [here](#)

diayaorbit made an adorable pic of harry and fleur gliding that you can view [here](#)

**a-side-of-fries** did several cute sketches from the last chapter that you can view [here](#)

**lita-of-jupiter** made a few really adorable rinmarus that you can view [here](#)

as always, feel free to follow / harass me at: shanastoryteller.tumblr.com

i post writing updates in my 'progress report' tag if that's something you're interested in knowing :)
Abigail is wrapped around his waist and draped across his shoulder as he works, and he’s a little worried about the fumes from the potions. Their dungeon isn’t exactly well ventilated, but Narcissa doesn’t want him brewing in any of the main rooms just in case he blows something up. Maybe he can get his parents to let him add a potions lab outside? They have a couple rooms that clearly used to be used for potions making, but those are also the same rooms that have scorch marks on the ceiling, so maybe his mother has a point about the explosions.

He’d tried getting Abigail to wait outside, but she’s been sticking close ever since this morning with Nagini. She doesn’t seem angry at the large snake anymore, which is a relief, but after breakfast she’d seemed equally uninterested in letting him out of her sight.

Winky silently passes him a bowl of freshly mashed flesh eating slugs, and he adds it into the scar softening salve he’s brewing. It’s exactly the right amount and consistency. She really is picking this up quickly. At this rate, she’s not even going to need his help to make potions.

He hears the sound of an explosion first, the deafening crash that has Winky folding down her ears and covering them with her hands. Draco’s first thought is that he’s just proven his mother right, and the explosion is his fault. But he feels it next, the ground shaking beneath his feet, and it’s like an aftershock hitting them. His potion is still intact, so there’s no way it’s him, and it’s not where it came from anyway. It seems like it came from the other side of the house. “Stay here and finish this up,” he says, summoning a stool for Winky to stand on.

“Master should not go alone!” Winky insists.

He picks her up under the armpits and plops her on top of it, forcing the ladle into her hand. She’s scowling something awful at him, and he’d be impressed if he wasn’t so worried about whatever is going on upstairs. “I’m not, Abigail is coming with me. Keep stirring this, then add the eucalyptus once you bring it to a boil, but not for more than four minutes.”

“Master Draco!” she calls out, but he ignores her, moving quickly up the stairs towards the strange sound. He’s pretty sure she won’t disobey and come after him, but if she did it would hardly surprise him.

He hears his father’s screams as he gets closer, and he wants to run in, he wants to help. But he knows he can’t, that throwing himself in the middle of whatever’s going on will only make it worse for his parents. So he casts a silencing and disillusionment charm on himself, then sneaks closer. He peaks around the corner into the dining room, and what he sees isn’t what he was expecting.

It’s not just Voldemort and his parents in the room. It’s lined with too-thin, sunken cheeked figures wrapped in rags. His father is convulsing on the floor, screaming himself raw as Voldemort looms over him. His mother stands with her hands clasped in front of her and her head lowered. Draco wouldn’t know anything was wrong if it weren’t for the line of tension across her shoulders.

“You dare and try and keep my loyal followers from me?” Voldemort says, his silky voice deadly. “When your own loyalty fled you as soon as you’d heard rumors of my death?”

Lucius tries to form words, but can’t choke anything out past the screaming sobs. Draco glances
around the room again, slower this time, and a sort of cold, horrible realization settles in his gut.

These are all former prisoners of Azkaban. It doesn’t take him long to pick his Aunt Bellatrix and Uncle Rodolphus out from the emaciated strangers. He doesn’t remember them, of course, but he’s seen pictures, and Bellatrix was once just as lovely as his own mother. Now, of course, she’s far from lovely.

Lucius tries to gasp out a response, but Voldemort’s crucio is still leaving him breathless and unable to speak. Draco hates this, he hates that he can’t do anything but stand here and watch this. But even if he was stupid enough to try and cross wands with Voldemort, he knows he wouldn’t last a minute in a room full of Death Eaters.

“My lord,” Narcissa says respectfully, “the wards do not allow unannounced intruders onto the grounds. It’s why you graciously chose our home. Of course, we will key all your loyal supporters into the wards.”

“Did I ask you?” Draco can already tell what’s going to happen. Voldemort stops cursing his father, so he goes limp on the floor, and turns his wand onto Narcissa. “Crucio!”

The curse hits his mother directly in the chest, and she falls to her knees. Draco braces himself to hear his mother’s screams, but they don’t come. Narcissa sits on her knees, skirts flung out around her and with her head bowed submissively and her hands still clasped together in front of her, but she doesn’t make a sound. If he looks closely, he can see her shaking, but that’s the only sign of the unforgivable curse piercing her body.

“Crucio!” Voldemort casts again, as if he thinks the first time didn’t have enough power behind it. It hits her once more in the chest, and she rocks back at the force of it, but all she does is tremble, as if she’s stayed out too long in the cold. Voldemort stalks forward, grabbing Narcissa’s chin and forcing her to look up at him and for her curtain of pale hair to fall back from her face. She’s not even biting her lip, showing no signs of strain. “Won’t you scream for me, Narcissa?”

She lowers her eyes back to the floor. She does not scream.

“Pretty Cissy,” Bellatrix sneers. “She won’t ever do something so unrefined, she’s too delicate.”

Delicate? Delicate? There are lots of words that can be used to describe his mother, but he doesn’t think delicate is among them.

“I suppose pride is a valuable trait,” Voldemort muses before ending the curse. Narcissa barely reacts, just taking in one big breath before slowly rising to her feet.

There’s a crack of someone apparating into the room, and Draco’s almost surprised to see his Aunt Sophia in the middle of all this. She’s an auror and had never been on great terms with his father. He’d always assumed that was because of Lucius’s involvement in the war, but apparently he was wrong.

His proud, powerful, accomplished aunt drops to her knees, and Draco wants to go in there and shake her, wants to pull her to her feet and remind her she’s a Malfoy! They don’t bow to anyone. “My lord, I have unfortunate news.”

“I’m listening,” he says. Lucius has pushed himself to his knees, but seems dubious about his ability to stand. Narcissa glances at Voldemort, sees he’s not looking at her, and then quickly moves over to Lucius, subtly offering him a hand to pull him to his feet. Draco’s pretty sure he’s the only one that can tell how heavily his father is leaning on his mother.
Sophia continues, “The attack on Diagon Alley was … unsuccessful, my lord. The dementors were overwhelmed and defeated.”

“No matter,” he says. “The main purpose of sending the dementors away from the island was to provide a means of escape for my loyal followers. Were any killed? How many aurors did it take to subdue them?”

She swallows, and her eyes are too wide. She’s scared – no, she’s terrified. “I – all of them, my lord.”

Voldemort goes deathly still. Everyone lowers their heads, like a bunch of kids in class who are hoping the professor won’t pick them as long as they look away. “All the dementors?”

“Yes,” she whispers, cringing away.

“How is that possible?” he snaps. “Did they have a hundred aurors on the scene within moments? I instructed you to delay them! How have you managed to so thoroughly fail me already?”

She says, “I – I did delay them, my lord. But by the time we arrived, the situation was – um, handled.”

“My darling Sophia,” Voldemort hisses, red eyes flashing, “I suggest you become more forthcoming with the details before I do something to help jog your memory.”

“It was Harry Potter,” she blurs. Draco’s mouth falls open. Why is it always Harry? “When we arrived, he’d managed to summon an unrestrained patronus, and it was just finishing destroying the dementors. There were attacks in other sections of Diagon Alley, of course, and they managed to do some damage. But then Potter’s patronus took them all out. They tried to fly away, but, um, his patronus wouldn’t let them.”

Voldemort hand is a fist around his wand. “How large was the patronus?” Sophia doesn’t answer, and he roars, “HOW LARGE?”

“It was taller than the buildings, my lord,” she whispers.

Oh, bloody hell, of course it was. Draco doesn’t know what he expected.

“Crucio!” Voldemort snaps, and Sophia cries out, collapsing like a puppet whose strings have been cut as she withes under the effects of the curse.

Draco’s eyes narrow. Considering he’s staying at the Malfoy Manor, Voldemort’s being a bit too liberal with his abuse of the Malfoy family, in his opinion.

Voldemort eventually gets bored of torturing his aunt, and they move on with the meeting. Apparently all these filthy convicts are going to be staying in the manor with them, which is just lovely. They’re not like Sirius, thin and angry but still people. There’s something empty and hungry in all their faces. But maybe they were like that before they were thrown in Azkaban. Maybe following Voldemort, maybe being willing to go to Azkaban for Voldemort, requires a certain amount of emptiness, a certain amount of hunger.

He stays peeking around the corner into his dining room until the meeting is over, hidden with nothing more than a silencing and disillusionment charm. Which is incredibly stupid, but not as stupid as fighting all the dementor’s of Azkaban on his own, so he’s still pretty sure he’s winning here. Then again, if he compares his idiotic actions next to Harry’s, he can justify almost anything, so he probably shouldn’t do that too much.
When the meeting’s over, he goes back to the dungeon first. It’s sparkling clean, and the scar softening salve has been finished and put into an airtight jar. Winky is sitting on the table with one of his old curtains in her lap, a needle in her hand and moving almost too fast for him to follow. Whenever he sees her like this, she reminds him of Pansy. There are sewing spells, of course, and Pansy knows them, but insists that if she can’t do it by hand, it won’t turn out as well when she tries to do it by magic. “Winky, what are you still doing here?”

“Master Draco is saying to stay here,” she says, not looking up at him, her voice tight with anger. “So Winky is being a good elf and doing as she’s told. I is staying here in the dungeons, while Master Draco goes and is sneaky around the bad people.”

Merlin, she really does remind him of Pansy. “You know I didn’t mean you had to stay here until I told you not to.” That’s not how giving elves orders work. They’re not bound by the letter of a command, and they’re barely even bound by the spirit of it. If Winky had chosen to go after him, she would have been able to.

“That is not the point!” she says, pushing her sewing to the side to get to her feet. “Master Draco should not be being so reckless with his own life! If he is being gone, where will I be? Where will Winky go without Master Draco?”

“Harry would take you,” he says immediately, because he would, and he has more than enough magic to support a whole army of house elves, never mind just one.

Winky stomps her foot. “That is not the point! I do not want to serve Mister Harry! I will serve Master Draco, or I will serve no one at all,” she says firmly. “So if you will not be careful for your own sake, you should be being careful for mine!”

He blinks, mouth falling open for the instant before he remembers to close it. Oh. “I am being careful,” he says, softer this time. “It’s dangerous, but it’s important. I don’t want to die either. Harry would kill me if I did.” And considering his boyfriend’s recent unplanned dabbling in necromancy, it’s entirely possible that Harry could bring him back just to kill him all over again.

Winky narrows her eyes and crosses her arms. “Master Draco needs to be more careful.”

“I’ll do my best,” he says, which doesn’t seem to placate her in the slightest. “Can you gather the nerve regeneration potion and a calming potion and meet me in my parents’ rooms?”

“Which calming potion?” she asks. “The Calming Draught will be making the mind slow.”

She’s right. There’s no way his parents will take anything that will impair their thinking, not now. “Bring up Dreamless Sleep and the Relaxer Tonic.”

Winky nods and disappears with a crack. He doesn’t want to take the hallways, doesn’t want to risk getting caught. Luckily, he doesn’t have to. The manor was constructed with several secret passageways, ones he’s hoping Voldemort and his followers don’t know about, or if they do, then they won’t bother to take them. There’s a winding staircase in the corner of the basement that leads to a narrow passage that then leads to the East Wing of the house, which is where the family bedrooms are.

He’s halfway through the narrow passage when he sees someone moving ahead of him, and freezes. Fuck, he should have just taken the main hallways. This is a crap place to get in a fight, and he can’t even run. Maybe he can transfigure the floor into something gelatinous, and sink through? The house is spelled against that kind of modification, but he might be able to do it, since he’s part of the main family.
“Who are you?” a familiar voice snaps, “These areas are off limits!”

Draco lets out a deep breath. “It’s okay. Aunt Sophia, it’s just me.”

A lumos charm illuminates the corridor, and she’s pale and shaking as she glares at him. “What are you doing skulking about? You should be in your room!”

“Well, it’s my house,” he snarks. “I’ll go where I please. What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be helping rehabilitate our new guests?”

“How do you know about that?” she asks. He only raises an eyebrow. He’s not going to admit to hiding outside of the dining room door and peeking through the cracks like a kid, but she should know better than to think he would let something that major go on in his home without sticking his nose in it. “Fine, never mind.” She holds up her shaking hands and says, rueful, “I was hoping there were some healing potions in storage.”

“I’m way ahead of you,” he returns, grabbing her by the shoulders and pushing her back the way she came. “I assume our lord sent my parents back to their rooms, so he can pretend this is his manor and not ours?”

“Draco!” she snaps, appalled. “You shouldn’t speak like that!”

He curses internally, because she’s right. Just because she’s his aunt doesn’t mean she’s on his side. “You’re right, I’m sorry. I just hate being forced to hide in my own house.”

She sighs, “Well, that’s understandable enough. But yes, you’re right, he did send Lucius and Narcissa away. Is that where we’re going?”

“Obviously,” he says, frowning as he reaches the end of the corridor. He taps his wand against the wall in a particular pattern, and the wall shimmers like a heatwave. He steps through it, and Sophia is only a half step behind him, but then he freezes.

She walks into him, and he almost stumbles forward, but pushes back against her. “Ow! Draco, what are you–”

“Be quiet,” he snaps. Abigail raises her head from his shoulders and lets out a low, angry hiss. Sophia freezes, then slowly shifts to look over his shoulder, and he knows that she understands when she tenses against his back.

Nagini is curled in front of his parents’ room, all twenty feet of her coiled and ready to attack. Oddly, she’s facing the hallway, which doesn’t make much sense. If she’s there to keep his parents in, she should be facing the door. Or maybe she just assumes her presence is enough of a deterrent that it really doesn’t matter where she is in relation to their door, which is correct. Her lost few seconds from facing the wrong direction don’t mean much when no one would be stupid enough to harm Voldemort’s pet snake.

“Let’s go,” Sophia says softly, tugging him backward.

Yeah, right.

He takes a step forward. Sophia grabs onto his elbow, but he shakes her off. He glances at Abigail, who hasn’t relaxed, but doesn’t seem any more upset than she had before he’d walked forward. He does it again, and Nagini lifts her head and bares her fangs. Sophia makes a strangled, terrified sound, but Draco’s pretty sure the massive snake is just yawning.
“Are you going to be a brat, or are you going to let me see my parents?” he asks.

“Draco!” Sophia whispers.

He ignores her. He walks forward, and Nagini’s black eyes blink up at him, and she’s still not attacking him. But she’s not getting out of his way either. Abigail doesn’t seem concerned, so he won’t be either. “Come on, don’t be like this,” he tries. He gets on his knees to start pushing her out of the way. “I’ll use a levitation charm on you, don’t think I won’t.” Nagini takes the opportunity to start slithering around him, and by the time he manages to push himself to his feet, it’s too late. She’s curled as much of her massive body around him as she can reach, which has caused Abigail to move down and wind around his arm to keep from the getting squished under the much heavier snake. “I really don’t understand why you insist on doing this.”

The door opens, and he turns just in time to watch his mother’s mouth drop open. “It’s okay,” he says before she can reach for her wand. “Is Winky here?” Narcissa pushes the door open a little wider, revealing his father sitting upright in bed with Winky in front of him, a tray of potions in her hands. Nagini reaches out her head towards Narcissa, but before she can get close, Draco knocks it back, pushing the flat of his hand against her nose. She tightens around him a little too tightly at that, but doesn’t try and reach for his mother again. “Winky, get a dose of each of the same for Aunt Sophia. Give her the Dreamless Sleep to go.”

“Yes, Master Draco,” she answers.

He’d wanted to cast diagnostic and general healing spells on his father, just in case, but he doesn’t particularly want to do either with Nagini keeping watch. He assumes whatever she sees she’ll report back to Voldemort, and while there’s nothing wrong with him knowing that Draco can heal, really, his knack for healing spells doesn’t mesh well with the obedient little follower façade he’s supposed to be projecting. Not that he’s been doing a great job at that, honestly.

Draco tries and gets Nagini to let him go, but she only winds even more of herself around him. “Okay, okay! I get the idea, but can you let go of me, please? I can’t walk with you like this, you’re too heavy.” She doesn’t budge, so he just does the same thing as he did this morning. He leans over and pushes her off of him, pushing her heavy body aside so he can jump away. It only works because she lets it work, which he’s pretty sure means she’s just being a pain for the fun of it. He really needs Harry to tell him what’s going on here. “Can’t you use this restless energy for something useful? Like catching deer? What do you even eat, anyway, because keep in mind that eating the house elves is strictly prohibited.”

She loosens her jaw and extends it, so he has a prime view down her throat. Sophia whimpers. He’s not impressed. “I’m too big for you to swallow whole, I’d just give you indigestion. How about some nice juicy rabbits? Little bite sized snacks, and the grounds has a ton of them.”

Nagini nudges the back of his shins, pushing him forward. He lets her, because it’s not like he can stop her. “If you’re saying you want to go now, you’re going to have to wait. It’s dark out, and anything you could find would be scared away by my lumos. If you insist on being annoying, you can hang out with me while I study charms.”

He walks towards his room, and after a moment of silence he hears the sound of her slithering after him. He turns around and waves, “Bye Aunt Sophia!”

She raises a hand, but doesn’t say anything, just watches him and Nagini disappear down the hall. He doesn’t understand the big deal. Clearly he’s just Nagini’s recent plaything, and bothering him is more interesting than roaming the halls of the manor on her own.
Abigail finally lets go of his arm when they enter his room, instead crawling up the side of his bed. Nagini curls in the center of his room, waiting. Well, it’s not like he has anything better to do. He snags his most recent charms text off his bookshelf, then sits on his desk, so he’s facing Nagini. “I hope you find this interesting, because reading aloud while I study is about as exciting as the rest of tonight is going to get.”

She blinks at him.

He takes that as agreement, opens to where he left off, and starts reading. He doesn’t bother putting a silencing charm on his door because, honestly? He’d love for someone to catch him doing this.

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It’s still dark when Draco wakes up, which is what he was expecting. He’d asked Winky to wake him up before dawn so he could write his letter to Harry. But he feels – heavy. Or something feels heavy on top of him, actually, he doesn’t feel heavy. He pushes himself up, which takes a lot more effort than it should, and he understands why.

All twenty feet of Nagini is lying in his bed. She still seems asleep, but is most definitely there, in his bed. Unbelievable. It doesn’t take him long to find Abigail, who’s curled into the far corner of the bed, one that’s safe from Nagini’s girth. She doesn’t like sleeping with him, but clearly she likes sharing even less. He looks over, and Winky is at his bedside. She looks at the large snake, scowling, and he shrugs, holding up his hands. What’s he supposed to do, kick her out? She’s a giant venomous snake. He’s pretty sure he doesn’t get a whole lot of say in the matter.

He silently moves out of bed and over to his desk, taking out a parchment and quill. He glances over his shoulder, but Nagini is still asleep, and even if she wasn’t, it’s not like she can see what he’s writing. He doesn’t think snakes can read English, but he’s just guessing. That’s definitely something he should ask Harry about.

He sends Winky away a half hour later with a letter and Abigail wound around her shoulders like a ridiculous shawl.

She returns two minutes later with both Abigail and the letter. “Mister Potter is in a sleep. He is having magic exhaustion from casting his patronus. Should Winky leave the letter and Miss Abigail for Mister Harry?”

Draco blinks, taken aback. He didn’t think there was any spell powerful enough to leave Harry knocked out for so long. This hadn’t even happened when he’d faced Voldemort and summoned a graveyard of undead, for Merlin’s sake! “No, that’s okay. We’ll try again tomorrow. Thank you.” He doesn’t want his letter getting into anyone’s hands but Harry’s. Well, okay, Ron, Hermione, Neville, George, Fred, or Ginny would be okay, but it’s not like he can guarantee that any of them would be the one who opened it.

He’d planned to go back to bed, but Nagini has shifted in his absence to curl in the warm spot where he was sleeping, and he’s not sure if it’s worth the effort to push her aside so that there’s enough room for him to fit into his own bed.

Well, he might as well get to start on another day of sharing his house with Voldemort and convicted, half-mad Death Eaters.

He wonders how all his friends are doing in Italy. Blaise has to make an appearance in Rome, of course, so they’re probably still there. It would be so easy to hop right over and spend the rest of the summer with his friends and talking to Harry, and not watching his family get tortured or being
harassed by Voldemort’s pet.

Well, nothing for it. He’s not a Gryffindor, but he’s not a coward, so he’ll just have to stick it out, or
die trying.

Hopefully he won’t die trying.

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The first thing Harry is aware of is that he’s uncomfortably warm. The second is that he’s starving.

He pushes his heavy comforter off of him and breathes deeply, like he’s breaking the surface of the
great lake all over again. He feels hot and sticky, and he’s conflicted if he should shower or eat first,
because both seem like equally important concerns.

Just kidding, the first thing he has to do is use the toilet. He’s never been happier to have his own
bathroom attached to his room than he is right now.

Once he’s in there, the shower’s right there, and it seems silly to go downstairs and then have to
come back up to shower. Plus he has an insane urge to scrub his skin off, so the sooner he takes care
of that, the better.

He still feels too warm, so he takes a quick, cool shower, washing his hair and using the rough cloth
Draco had told him to use. He doesn’t get it, something about exfoliating, but whatever. Draco had
given one to Ron too and practically begged him to use it. He wraps a towel around his waist and
steps back into his room, then freezes.

He was too preoccupied to notice before, but Sirius is sleeping in a chair at his bedside, twisted into a
position that can’t be comfortable, with his legs folded underneath him and his head resting on his
folded arm. There are dark circles under his eyes, and he must be in a deep sleep if all of Harry’s
moving around hasn’t woken him up.

Harry makes an effort to be quiet as he gets dressed, throwing on the Chudley Cannon sweatpants
that Ron had given him for Christmas last year and white long sleeve shirt. The oppressive warmness
is gone, and he’s starting to think that taking a cold shower wasn’t the best of ideas. He’s still hungry
though, so he glances at Sirius one more time before going downstairs to the kitchens.

It’s still the sober grey of early morning, light barely streaming through the windows, and it’s strange
to be in the house while it’s so quiet. Unlike when he was at the Dursley’s, he’s rarely the first
person up and moving around. He crams half a banana in his mouth even as he pulls out the eggs,
milk, and bread. Scrambled eggs on toast sounds perfect. After a second thought, he goes back for
some bacon, because chewy bacon and scrambled eggs cooked in bacon fat sounds even better than
perfect.

The food’s almost done, and he’d eaten two bananas and a large glass of milk while he was waiting,
so now he doesn’t quite feel like his stomach is about to start eating itself. There’s a tell tale crack,
and he’s half expecting it to be Kreacher, but when he turns around it’s Winky. Not just Winky,
actually, because Draco’s snake is curled around her.

“Winky! What’s going on?” he asks, reaching forward to take Abigail form her, and only realizes
after he’s said it that he was speaking Parseltongue.

“You are awake!” she cries, delighted. “I was being worried that you would still be in the sleep, like
you was yesterday.”
“Yesterday?” he repeats, confused, and taking the time to make sure he’s speaking English. He reaches for his wand and casts tempus, then pales.

Shit.

He’s been out for two days. No wonder Sirius looks so exhausted. Last night was the full moon, which meant he spent the whole night awake with Remus, and then came home to sit by him. He feels his cheeks flush, a little bit because he’s pleased but mostly because he’s embarrassed. Sirius didn’t need to do that! He was just tired out from summoning such a large patronus.

Winky pushes two letters into his hands. “Master Draco is having very important information for you. Also he requests that you be asking Miss Abigail what is going on with Nagini.”

Nagini, as in Voldemort’s snake? What the hell.

“She’s a presumptuous bitch,” Abigail hisses, curling around his arms and settling around his shoulders. “She thinks just because she is big she can barge in and take what she pleases, thinks my human is nice and that we should share. Ha! Why should I share? She has her own human, if he isn’t nice to her then that’s her problem.”

This is an awful lot to handle this early in the morning, and he still hasn’t eaten.

Wait, no! His breakfast!

It’s too late. Everything is burning, and the smell of burned eggs is one of the worst smells in the world, and he’s including freshly awoken corpses in that assessment. He groans and goes to toss it and start over, but Winky snaps her fingers and his ruined breakfast disappears, along with the horrible smell.

“Winky is fixing,” she says impatiently, pushing Harry towards the small table in the kitchen. “Mister Harry is talking to Miss Abigail.”

She’s so bossy. She definitely got that from Draco. Well, it’s easier to do what she says than argue with her, and he’s dying to find out what he’s missed anyway. “Start from the beginning.”

Abigail slithers from his shoulders onto the table, curling in front of him so she can look at him while she speaks. “She came in his room that first nigh she was there, threatening and baring her fangs at him, but not lunging. Her human had told her to scare him to see what he would do. I was telling her to go away when my human woke up, and then his elf pushed her away, and then she lunged for the elf. But my human grabbed her head and pushed her jaw open so she couldn’t bite, and then he talked to her in his human language! He told her not to eat the elves and spoke nicely and didn’t attack her when she lunged for him, and now she’s decided she likes him and that he should be her human too, but he’s my human! Mine! You tell him in your human tongue that he’s mine and if he must have another snake, it won’t be her! She doesn’t listen, and she’s too big.”

That is so much information to process all at once. “Voldemort’s murderous snake wants to be friends with Draco?”

“She’s no more murderous than the rest of us,” Abigail says, and it sounds like it pains her to defend Nagini. “Her human is busy and doesn’t spend time with her, doesn’t speak to her or consult with her. She doesn’t like it. When her human first found her, he spoke to her all the time, and asked for her help, and so she gave it, she liked not being alone. But now she’s alone again and wants to have my human, but she can’t! I don’t want to share with her!”

“She’s killed a lot of people,” he feels the need to point out, still stuck on that bit and not Abigail’s
Snakes don’t have the necessary biology to shrug, but Abigail somehow manages to convey the same sentiment anyway. “Her human told her to. If my human told me to squeeze someone to death, I would. What do I care if a human who doesn’t belong to me dies? There are so many of you.”

Okay, well, that’s fair, if a little concerning. But he supposes it’s a little unfair to expect creatures to prioritize human lives above, or even equal, to their own. “I think you should share Draco with Nagini.”

Abigail rears back and hisses at him, furious. “Why! I don’t want to!”

“Voldemort and those who follow him are dangerous. If Draco’s going to be in the same house as them, it wouldn’t hurt for him to be known as friendly with Voldemort’s snake. They might be less likely to mess with him.”

She drops back down at the table, considering this. “Fine. But once the bad people are gone, she goes too!”

“Okay,” he answers, because he’s not sure what else to say. “Is there anything else going on with Voldemort?”

She points her head towards the letters. “Yes, but my human wrote it all down. Can I have some bacon?”

“Abigail wants bacon,” Harry says, twisting in his chair to face Winky. But his eyes catch on the entrance to the kitchen. Sirius is leaning against the door frame, arms crossed and a grin stretched across his face. “How long have you been standing there?” It’s a good thing Sirius doesn’t speak Parseltongue, otherwise he would have totally just spilled all his soulmate’s secrets.

“Not that long,” he says. “Your father would be so proud of you.”

Harry’s face feels like it’s on fire. “Oh, um. What?”

“He was always so upset that his aunt hid her Parseltongue abilities, and was always urging her to tell people, to stop hiding it. But she never did. He’d be so proud that you use your abilities,” Sirius finishes. He crosses over to him and cups Harry’s face in his hands, leaning over to press a kiss to his forehead. “What you did in Diagon Alley was very impressive, but you scared the crap out of me, kid.”

“Sorry,” he winces. “I didn’t mean to. I was just trying to help.”

“You did a little more than help,” he says dryly. He takes the seat next to Harry and nods to the snake on their kitchen table. “Who’s this?”

He briefly considers lying, but he doesn’t want to lie to Sirius. He has to, a little, but he’d rather tell him as much truth as he can. “She’s Draco’s. She came to tell me to tell him that he’s not allowed to be friends with any snakes but her.”

Sirius looks like he’s not sure what to do with that, but Winky comes over with a plate in each hand before he can question him further. She places one in front of each of them, and then snaps her fingers so a small plate of bacon appears in front of Abigail. “I will be taking a plate to Mister Remus.”

She turns around, but there’s another crack, and Kreacher appears in front of her. Harry thinks this
might be the most surprising thing that’s happened this morning. Usually Kreacher doesn’t make an appearance unless it’s to wail at Sirius and Remus cleaning something he doesn’t want cleaned. “Interloper!” he screeches, hunched over and eyes wide as he points an accusing finger. “Get out of the noble house!”

Winky is unimpressed. “I is wondering when you would be coming. Kreacher is a bad elf.”

Kreacher snarls. Sirius half rises from his chair, but Harry puts a hand on his arm and shakes his head. He’s not exactly sure what’s going on, but he trusts Winky not to do anything truly horrible.

“You do not belong to the ancient house of Black! You should not be here!” Kreacher hisses.

“I am belonging to Draco Malfoy, who is the son of Narcissa Black,” she counters. “I is the elf of a Black, and I am having a right to cook and clean in this house. I should clean it all, and be teaching you a lesson. Had you nothing to be doing for twelve years? It is a mess!”

“My mistress is dead,” Kreacher says, “and only her traitorous son is left behind. I have no true master.”

Winky rolls her eyes. “You is having a house. Is this house not your new forests? Is it not being a thing you wish to protect?”

“What’s the point?” he sniffs. “My mistress is gone.”

“Humans die,” Winky says bluntly, “that isn’t meaning our work is done. You is surviving off the magic of the house, so you should be taking care of the house.” She snaps her fingers, and Remus’s plate floats in the air behind her. She grabs the back of Kreacher’s dirty pillowcase and drags him out of the kitchen. He tries to dig in his heels to stop her, but she barely pauses at his resistance. “Winky is a nice, helpful elf. We will feed Mister Remus, and then I will be helping you to start the cleaning!”

Kreacher wails, but doesn’t magic himself out of her grip, so Harry assumes he’s not that upset about it.

“Should I stop her?” Sirius asks as the two house elves disappear around the corner.

Harry shrugs, “It’s not like she can make it any worse, right? Might as well let her do what she wants. How was the full moon? Is Remus okay?” They’re eating breakfast, so they should be speaking in Tamil, but he wants to find out everything he’s missed first.

Sirius rubs the back of his neck. “It was fine. These days the transformation just leaves him tired. Remus is a bit mad at me right now, actually. He told me to stay with you and that he’d spend this full moon alone, but I didn’t listen.”

“Good,” Harry says, surprised. “I was just sleeping, that’s boring. Remus has spent too many full moons alone. You made the right decision. I would be mad at you if you hadn’t spent last night with Remus.”

“Maybe tell him that?” He sighs, “He’s refused to speak to me ever since he turned back into a human. I was planning to go keep an eye on you anyway, but he locked me out of our bedroom, so I assume he’s still not too pleased.”

Harry’s still laughing at him when a sharp eyed eagle knocks against the window. Sirius magics the window open, and it lands in front Harry. “What’s the point of a magical, secret base if all the messenger birds know where we are? Voldemort could just right me a cheerful little letter and then
follow his owl here.”

“The Fidelius is an impressive bit of magic because it does things like allowing us to remain completely hidden while still getting the mail,” he points out.

Harry opens the scroll, absently petting the head of bird with the back of his index finger. He reads quickly, and at first he’s filled with disbelief, but that quickly fades. This is just about what he should expect to happen to him, really. His life always goes like this, and he should probably start getting used to it. “Know any good lawyers?”

Sirius pauses in shoveling eggs into his mouth. “Obviously not, otherwise I wouldn’t have been stuck in Azkaban for twelve years. Why?”

“I’m being brought to trial over using underage magic,” he answers, and Sirius chokes. “And considering the giant patronus I summoned in front of all of Diagon Alley, I’d say the evidence is pretty damning.”

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Winky’s been gone for hours, and Draco’s more than a little worried. Surely Abigail and Harry don’t have this much to talk about? Or maybe they do. He hopes they do, because any other explanation makes his stomach turn.

He’s out in the forest with Nagini, riding his broom low to the ground so he doesn’t lose sight of her. He made the mistake of coming out and trying to keep up with her on foot yesterday, which had been an obvious failure. He can’t say this for certain, because how would he know, really, but he’s pretty sure that Nagini was laughing at him.

There’s a crack, and Winky appears in the forest below him, Abigail wrapped around her. He comes to a halt, letting Nagini get a head start so she’s hopefully out of ear shot. “Is everything okay? What took you so long?” He holds out his hands, and Abigail eagerly moves from Winky onto him.

“I is sorry, Master Draco,” Winky says. “Some of it is my fault. Winky is helping Kreacher be a good elf.”

He has no idea what that means, but Harry had complained about the grouchy old elf before, so it only seems like it can help. “That’s fine. Is Harry okay? What did he say about Abigail?”

“Mister Harry is awake, and he’s fine. He is saying that Nagini likes you and wants you to like her too.”

Draco wrinkles his nose, because it makes no sense and too much sense at the same time. Nagini claiming him for her own is the only explanation that makes any sense, but it still leaves him with more questions than answers. “Did he say why?”

Winky shakes her head.

“Anything else?” he asks, sighing. It’s not like he minds. Nagini is a brat, but so is Abigail, and it’s nice to have someone in the manor who likes him besides his parents.

“Mister Harry also told me to tell you that he’s to appear in front of the Wizengamot for breaking the underage magic law,” she says.

He stares. Harry had performed underage magic, obviously, but who was dumb enough to try and put him on trial for it?
As soon as he finishes the thought, he knows the answer.

“Fudge is asking to be impeached,” Remus says in wonder, looking over Harry’s summons. He’s still in bed, and Sirius has used his distraction to lean against Remus’s side. “People are going to be very upset about this.”

Harry is sitting cross legged on the edge of Sirius and Remus’s bed. He tilts his head to the side. “Why? The Prophet’s been calling me a crazy liar for saying that Voldemort is back for weeks. They didn’t care about that. All the articles about him probably would have been more upsetting if he wasn’t constantly surrounded by people who believed him.

“Yes, well that was before you very publicly saved the lives of several hundred people from a deadly attack with a single spell,” Remus says dryly. “Tonight’s Order meeting will be interesting.”

Harry wrinkles his nose. “Everyone else helped too. And I fell asleep after I cast it, so it’s not that impressive.”

“Not that impressive, he says,” Sirius ruffles his hair. “Never mind that the only people I can think of that can make an unrestrained patronus are all stuffy old masters, and no one’s ever made a patronus quite that large.”

“On the official record,” Remus amends. “Needless to say, your display has historians wondering if some of the stories they’d dismissed as legends might actually be true.”

Harry’s saved from having to respond to that by Kreacher appearing in front of them with a crack. “Filthy blood traitors are here to see you,” he says, scowling.

“Uh, thank you,” Remus says, startled, but Kreacher is gone before he finishes speaking. “Since when does he leave his nest under the boiler?”

“Winky came by earlier and lectured him about being a bad house elf,” Harry answers. “Should we head down?”

Sirius waves his hand, “Go on ahead, it’s probably for you. I’ll stay here. That is, unless Moony kicks me out again,”

Remus’s eyes narrow. “Maybe I will. What are you going to do about it?”

Sirius grins in a way that means Harry wants to get out of here right now, immediately. Gross. Like, he’s glad they’re not having a serious fight or anything, but still gross. The best thing about magic is silencing charms. He doesn’t know anything about their sex life, and he never wants to.

The ocean of bright red hair tips him off before anything else, and he’s grinning as he slides down the banister into the group of Weasley kids, plus Hermione. “Hi!”

Ron catches him in a bear hug, then bends him over to give a noogie. Harry tries to pull away, but fails. “Harry! You’re finally awake. We were getting worried.”

“It’s hard to be this pretty,” he answers, giving up on trying to get away and instead going limp. Ron yelps and lets him drop, so he’s able to roll to his feet and duck behind Ginny. “Not that I don’t love seeing you guys, but what are you all doing here?”

“Mum and Dad are having a row,” George says, rolling his eyes. Hermione winces. “They don’t
want to argue in front of us, so Mum sent us here.”

Harry blinks. He doesn’t think he’s ever seen Arthur and Molly have an actual argument. “About what?”

Ginny sighs. “Dad thinks that, in light of our little adventure, we should be allowed to attend the Order meetings.”

“Merlin,” Harry breathes. “Does he have a death wish?”

Molly didn’t like that her three eldest sons were in the Order, never mind the rest of her children. Besides, Arthur knows that Harry’s telling them everything anyway, so what’s the point? Why does he think it’s worth getting into an argument with his wife?

There’s another crack, and Kreacher appears next to them. Everyone jumps. “Young Mister Longbottom is here,” he announces gloomily. “Will horrid, disgusting guests be wanting snacks?”

“Er, that’s okay Kreacher. Thank you,” Harry says.

He’s gone almost before he’s finished speaking.

“Um,” Fred says, “what was that? I thought he was on strike, or something.”

“I have no idea. It’s actually a little disconcerting,” he admits.

Neville comes running from the sitting room into the main entrance way. He nearly barrels into Harry, but in the last second he grabs him by his shoulders and shakes him. He hopes nothing’s gone wrong in the greenhouse. “YOU’RE BEING TRIED BEFORE THE WIZENGAMOT FOR UNDERAGE MAGIC?”

The twins and Hermione are scandalized, while Ginny is furious. Ron, for some reason, looks delighted.

“Oh, yeah,” Harry says. “I got the notice this morning. How do you even know about that? It’s not for another month.”

“My cousin has a seat in the Wizengamot, and he came over this morning to tell Gran about it. Why aren’t you more upset?” Neville demands.

He shrugs. “At least it’s not fighting Voldemort and his supporters alone at night while tied to a tombstone?” That’s his new metric for how upsetting something is. “Look, so what? They find me guilty, they snap my wand, I’m kicked out of Hogwarts. Which sucks, because I’m rather fond of the place and all, but then I move to France, get a new wand, enroll in Beauxbatons, and join the gliding team.”

The prospect of being on a gliding team almost makes getting kicked out worth it. But he doubts that’s going to happen, because considering the massive amounts of underage magic that’s going on all the time, he finds it a little unlikely that his punishment will be that bad.

“You don’t speak French,” Ginny says. “Which is what they speak in, you know, France.”

Shit, that’s a good point. “It’s possible this plan has a few minor flaws.”

“What about the rest of us? We were all using magic!” Hermione snaps. “We should all be brought up on the same charges!”
“Yeah, but we’re not the one Fudge has a personal vendetta against,” Fred says.

Ron claps his hands together to get everyone’s attention. Because they all know him, they’re all instantly wary at the grin stretching across his face. “Harry, this is fantastic. It couldn’t be better if we’d planned it ourselves.”

“What part of this is fantastic?” Hermione demands. “This is a nightmare!”

“This, my friends, my siblings, my accomplices, is an opportunity. We need Zaira Zabini and Rita Skeeter,” he turns to Harry, “Blaise’s place in Italy is hooked up to the floo network, right?”

“One way to find out,” he answers. “But what on earth are you planning to do with Zaira and Skeeter?”

“You’re right, we should get Luna too,” Ron says. Harry has no idea how Ron got that from what he asked.

Ginny pinches her brother’s waist, and he squirms away from her, batting her hands away. “What are you planning, Ronald?”

“Nothing major. Just some public unrest, maybe a riot or two. A coup would be nice, but let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” he muses.

“We’re in,” the twins say in unison. Harry’s pretty sure they don’t know what their brother is planning. They just relish the opportunity to cause chaos.

“Can we continue this in my room?” he asks. “I have two letters from Draco I’ve been dying to read, and I haven’t been able to.”

George frowns. “Why is he sending you letters? Isn’t the whole point of the mirrors that he doesn’t have to? I’d wish Cassius and had thought to make some for ourselves”

“No thanks,” Fred gags. “Watching you read his letters while grinning like an idiot is bad enough.”

George’s whole face goes red, and Ginny elbows Fred in the side. “You’re one to talk. How many letters have you and Angelina exchanged?”

“Shut up,” he says, which is answer enough.

“Let’s continue this in my room,” Harry repeats. He hasn’t told any of them about Voldemort staying at Malfoy Manor, but maybe it’s time to. However, he doesn’t want to discuss anything in front of the portraits. That’s just asking for trouble.

They all go upstairs and into his room, piling onto his bed and spilling onto the floor when it becomes clear that it’s impossible for all seven of them to fit on it comfortably. Harry fills them in on everything and is gratified when they’re just as upset as he is.

“He’s just using a silencing and disillusionment charm on himself?” Fred asks, horrified. “Is he suicidal? There are so many better ways to go.”

“Here,” George says, and casts a summoning spell. In the next moment he’s holding something that looks like a thin red rope. “Fred and I came up with these before we knew that you would be attending the Order meetings. They’re called extendable ears, and with a few glamour charms they’ll at least be less likely to be noticed than Draco peeking through cracked doors, for merlin’s sake.”
“We’ll have to work on something to replace his eyes,” Fred muses.

Harry takes the extendable ears, and the wave of relief that comes over him is probably a little embarrassing. “Thank you. I don’t suppose you’ll let me pay you for these?”

“Shut up,” the twins say at the same time.

He rolls his eyes. “You can’t bankroll your whole life by gambling and making bets. Besides, if your mum ever finds out, she’ll kill you.”

“What Mum doesn’t know can’t hurt us,” Fred says. “Also, our gambling habit has been incredibly profitable so far, so stuff it, maybe we can survive on it, you don’t know.”

Harry drops it, because this is an argument they’ve had a dozen times. Harry’s more than happy to just give them the money for their inventions and shop. He has enough of it, it’s not like he has anything else he’s going to spend it on. All the Slytherins in their group had offered to invest, since they all had investment portfolios that they’d been managing since they were eleven, because that’s what rich parents did with their kids to teach them responsibility, apparently. Blaise’s is the most profitable, but Draco’s is more stable, or so they say.

Pansy’s isn’t either, but apparently she’d carefully selected her investments to maximize social capita rather than cashflow. She has a hand in a dozen up and coming designer in the fashion world, which Harry thinks is pretty impressive, even if Blaise insists she’s just throwing money away.

Millicent, thank merlin, has a trust fund and that’s it, and thinks the rest of them are insane. If nothing else, he likes having Millicent around because she’s a great barometer for when something’s a pureblood Slytherin thing, and for when their friends are just strange, but haven’t figured it out yet because they’re too busy being strange together.

“Can we focus please?” Ron asks. “Timing is very important here.” Harry still has no idea what he’s talking about.

While the rest of them work on drafting a letter to Skeeter, he reads the letters from Draco, and he doesn’t like what he reads. Excepting Draco’s rant on Voldemort’s choice in breakfast foods, because that’s hilarious.

“Harry?” Hermione asks, nudging him with her knee. “What’s wrong?”

“All of it,” he says. “But a lot of this doesn’t make any sense to me. Voldemort and his Death Eaters are making things miserable at Malfoy Manor, which is only to be expected I suppose. But Voldemort keeps going on about getting his hands on some sort of prophecy? Which, okay, if I was trying to take over a country that wouldn’t be my first priority, but whatever. There’s talk recruiting from our age group, which no thanks, and there’s a whole bunch of stuff about politics that just goes over my head.”

“Give it here,” Ron says, and Harry hands it over.

Hermione scowls. “This is ridiculous, we know where Voldemort and a good portion of his supporters are staying. Shouldn’t we tell someone? So that we can go in and fight them?”

Neville snorts, “Yeah, like that would work. They’re at Malfoy Manor. Trying to storm that is a suicide mission.”

“There’s no point,” Ginny agrees. “We could tell the Order where everyone is, but it wouldn’t change anything. That place is so well warded that anyone who tries to force their way in will
probably just end up dead. Or worse.”

“Well, this sucks,” Ron announces, looking up from Draco’s letter. “Looks like Voldemort is planning to destabilize the government. Or, well, watch as the government destabilizes itself under Fudge, with a couple little nudges from key people.”

“Give me that,” Hermione snatches the letter from Ron’s hands. He rolls his eyes. A moment later her shoulders slump. “Maybe a coup wouldn’t be such a bad idea. There’s no way Fudge can run the government while Voldemort is around attempting to undermine him.”

“Fudge can’t run the government now,” Ginny says dryly. “Every time I see Percy he’s juggling about ten different things that should be the minister’s problem, but are somehow his.”

Ron shakes his head, “A coup might just make everything worse. Maybe Percy should just keep trying to keep Fudge in line until the war is over. I feel like an election will just give Voldemort something to rig.”

“No election if we kill him,” Neville says.

Everyone freezes and turns to looks at him.

“What? I’m right! If he dies in office it’ll just go to the … maybe we shouldn’t kill him,” he finishes, grimacing.

“Supreme Mugwump,” Ron sighs. “I agree. Making Dumbledore the Minister of Magic would only make things worse. The man can barely keep Voldemort from infiltrating Hogwarts, never mind the whole government. But one problem at a time. Let’s go talk to Blaise and see if his mum’s around.”

“You still haven’t explained what you want Zaira for,” Harry complains, pushing himself to his feet.

“To represent you in court, of course,” he answers. “You don’t need a lawyer. According to the law, you’re guilty, and everyone knows it. You need a performer.”

That doesn’t answer any of his questions, but Ron’s already left his room in search of the fireplace, so he has no choice but to follow him.

Ron throws some floo powder into the fireplace, then frowns. “What’s the place they’re staying again?”

“Rome Severan House,” Ginny answers, and the flames shift to green. There’s a long moment, and then a man Harry doesn’t know sticks his head through the fireplace and says something in Italian.

Harry only has a moment to panic before Neville responds in kind, the foreign language easily falling off his tongue. The man disappears, then Blaise’s head appears in the fireplace. “What’s up? How’s Draco?”


Blaise stares. He’s knocked to the side, and then Pansy’s head appears next to Blaise’s. “What’s going on? Did something happen? Besides Harry killing a bunch of dementors, of course.”

“How do you know about that? You’re in Italy!”

“We have newspapers in Italy,” Blaise says dryly. “You made the front page.”

Uhg, gross.
“Is your mum around?” Ron asks. “I want for her to represent Harry in front of the Wizengamot.”

Pany’s and Blaise’s heads are pushed to opposite sides of the fireplace, and Millicent’s head appears between them. “Why?”

“My mother isn’t a practicing attorney, I feel like you all forget that,” Blaise says.

“Who cares about an attorney? I want her to stand there and make the Wizengamot feel like a bunch of idiots who are in danger of losing their seats in the next election,” he says.

Blaise sighs. Pansy and Millicent are delighted. “She’ll do it.”

“Shouldn’t you ask her first?” George says.

“No, trust me, she’ll do it, and thank you for the privilege.” All three of the Slytherins tilt their head to the side, listening to something that the rest of them can’t hear. “We have to go. Try not to cause any more trouble.”

Harry sputters, offended, but they’re gone before he can answer. He doesn’t cause trouble! Or go looking for it! Trouble happens to him independently of his own actions, and anything to the contrary is lies.

“Come on,” Neville says, “you can all help me in the greenhouse until the meeting starts.”

“I didn’t come here to do chores,” Fred complains, but he’s already following Neville out of the room.

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By the time they all leave the greenhouse several hours later, they’re filthy and starving. A few quick scourgify charms take care of the former, but they swarm the kitchen for the later. Remus and Sirius are sitting at the table, and Remus is looking better, the dark circles under his eyes not quite so pronounced.

“Have fun?” Sirius asks as seven teenagers go about tearing his kitchen apart. The twins are putting together a small mountain of sandwiches while Harry pulls out a giant jug of pumpkin juice, and Ron grabs the plates.

“I’m going to eat all of this,” Hermione says, holding a lemon loaf that’s definitely at least meant to feed four. She jumps onto the counter and takes a bite out of it, not even bothering to cut it into proper slices.

Ginny is neck deep in their fridge. “You guys have pickles, right? What kind of people don’t have pickles? I’m going to drink all the juice.”

Neville wrinkles his nose, pulling down cups for Harry to pour the pumpkin juice into. “That’s disgusting.”

“Your face is disgusting,” she says, emerging triumphantly from the fridge with a jar of pickles. She pauses, “I didn’t mean that, I like your face.”

He coughs and his ears turn red. “I know. Drink your disgusting pickle juice.”

The twins start levitating plates of sandwiches onto the table, including one each for Remus and Sirius. “Thanks,” Remus says, “You guys now people are going to start arriving for the Order
meeting in about five minutes, right?”

Hermione takes the last bite of her lemon loaf and summons one of the plates back over to her. George snatches it out of midair. “Sit at the table!” She scowls, but hops down from the counter.

“We’ll finish before then,” Ron says, voice muffled through his mouthful of food.

“It’s like watching a swarm of piranhas,” Sirius mutters, but he’s grinning.

They don’t quite finish in five minutes, so Sirius and Remus head out to greet people while they finish eating and clean everything up. “That’s my cue to leave,” Neville sighs. “I’ll be over tomorrow to continue working on the greenhouse?”

“I assumed,” Harry grins. He waves goodbye to everyone else and heads upstairs to use the fireplace in Remus and Sirius’s room, since the main one is currently in use from the Order members.

As soon as they leave the kitchen and enter the dining room, people are staring at them. Well, mostly Harry, but the rest of them aren’t exactly invisible. “Well, this is awkward,” Fred mutters.

“Well, this is awkward,” Fred mutters.

“Welcome to my life,” Harry says under his breath. Ginny snorts.

“Harry!” Molly comes out of the crowd and makes a beeline for them. She grabs Harry in a smothering hug that he doesn’t mind at all. “I’m so glad you’re okay, that was a very foolish thing you did! You could have died!”

She’d said as much when she’d caught up with them, but she’d sounded a lot angrier before, so he’ll take it as an improvement. “Someone had to do something, Mrs. Weasley.”

She doesn’t respond to that at all, instead rounding on her children and Hermione. “Go upstairs right now, the lot of you, this isn’t a place for children.”

There’s a beat where they stare at each other, and Harry’s certain he’s about to find himself at the center of a Weasley family fight. But Ron shrugs and says, “Okay. We’ll be in the greenhouse.” Hermione is obviously disappointed, but she’s staying with the Weasley’s. She’s under Molly’s roof, so she’ll stick to Molly’s rules.

“Don’t do any work up there without Neville. He’ll kill you,” Harry says.

They’ve all taken a couple steps towards the door when Arthur walks forward, his eldest sons trailing behind him. Fleur and Tonks are behind them, and they’ve got a look on their face like they want to get involved too, but are holding back. For now. Harry’s pretty sure that Fleur is dying to jump in. “Kids, hold on. Molly, we talked about this.”

Her eyes narrow. Charlie winces, and Bill looks like he’d rather be anywhere else. “Yes, we did, and I haven’t changed my mind.”

“Mum, please,” Percy says, rubbing at his forehead. “Harry tells them everything anyway. They led a defense against a swarm of dementors. Just let them sit at the table. George and Fred are seventeen anyway.”

“And Ginny is fourteen!” Molly hisses. “Much too young to be involved in any of this!”

Ginny raises her hand. “I’m not invested one way or another, but, for the record, Voldemort possessed me when I was eleven, so we can just assume going forward that I’m a little involved. If I don’t get to hex that asshole at least once before this war is over, I’ll be cross.”
It’s fairly obvious that everyone else has gone silent so they can watch them. Quite a few people are
looking at Ginny as if she’s mad, but those people don’t know her.

“Let’s not fight,” Ron says, holding up his hands. “Dad, thanks, but it’s really okay. We’ll go wait
upstairs, it’s not a big deal.”

“It’s not a big deal because you’ll find everything out anyway,” Arthur says dryly. “We might as
well cut out the middle man.”

“Why are you so determined to thrust our children in the middle of this war?” Molly asks, not
shouting but not far off.

“They kind of already are, Mum,” Charlie says, cringing even as he says it. “Look, Voldemort is
going to keep coming after Harry, and he’s one of ours.” Harry’s whole face flushes a bright red.
“What’s Ron supposed to do if Harry’s attacked? Run away? Should Ginny lie over and play dead?
Perhaps the twins can apparate away and leave Harry to be tortured or killed or both? Is that what
you want?”

“Charlie!” Molly says, appalled, “Of course not!”

Bill places a hand on his mother’s arm. “Would you prefer if Harry died rather than one of us?”

She’s steps away, face an ashen white, and it’s clear that’s the worst thing he’s ever asked her. “No!
No one is dying! Not you or Harry! Not any of my children!”

“Can we please stop arguing about this?” Percy asks, exasperated. “I have to get back to the office
tonight so I can look over the legislature they want Fudge to sign tomorrow. Mum, please, just let
them sit in. It’s just information.”

“Terribly sorry, I don’t mean to intrude,” Perenelle says, and they’d all been so focused on the
discussion that they hadn’t even noticed her walk up beside them. “But the meetings about to start, so
perhaps you should save this discussion for a later date?”

“Oh, let them stay!” Mad Eye Moody growls. “They did just as good in that fight as any of my
aurors. They’ve done more to earn a seat at the table than some of the people here.”

To Harry’s surprise, Molly turns and finds Sirius in the crowd. He meets her gaze and shrugs. “You
know what I think. But it’s not unreasonable of you to want to protect them, Molly.”

For the first time, Harry is burning with curiosity over whatever their conversation behind closed
doors was about. Neither her husband nor children had done much to sway her, but she’s still
looking at Sirius as her shoulders slump. “Fine.”

“Mum, we can go upstairs,” Ron says, wrapping an arm around Molly’s shoulders. “It’s really
okay.”

She looks up at Ron and manages a weak smile. “It wouldn’t change anything, would it? Harry tells
you everything.”

“Well,” Ron says, floundering for a moment, “You can’t really expect him to lie to me, right? He’s
my best friend.”

“Sorry,” Harry adds, rubbing the back of his neck, because Ron’s right. He’s going to tell him the
truth no matter what, even if it makes Molly angry or upset. Maybe that’s not the right thing to do, he
should probably respect Molly’s wishes about her children, but – they’re his friends. He doesn’t want
to lie to them.

Molly softens just the tiniest amount. She reaches out to smooth his hair back, just like she does with her children, “It’s alright, dear, I’m glad you can all talk to each other, at least.”

They all find their seats after that, and Ginny sits next to Fleur, Fred sits next to his mum, George is next to Percy, and Ron and Hermione sit on either side of him, which is more comforting than he can say. Somehow, this long table full of adults isn’t nearly so intimidating when he has his best friends next to him.

Harry’s ready to fade into the background, to just sit and listen, which is why he’s so surprised when Dumbledore clears his throat and says, “In regard to Mr. Potter’s upcoming court date—”

“Does everyone know about that?” he exclaims. There’s a ripple of laughter down the table.

“Most of us know someone who knows someone in the Wizengamot,” says a young woman. “Your trial is an open secret. I’m sure it’ll be appearing in the gossip rags soon enough.”

Oh, it will, Ron is making sure of that. But he’s pretty sure he’s not supposed to say that. So he just goes, “Oh.”

“It’s completely ridiculous,” Tonks says. “Underage magic happens all the time! No one goes to jail over it!”

“You try telling Fudge that,” Percy mutters. “The man’s absurd, and a walking public relations nightmare to boot. We’ve already gotten a handful of letters complaining about it, and I’m sure more will start rolling in.”

Dumbledore sighs. “Regardless, allowing Fudge to make a spectacle out of Harry will only make him more vulnerable. If Fudge gets his way, Harry will be expelled, and his wand snapped, then we’ll have a whole other mess on our hands.”

Okay, he gets he’s central to the war and everything, but he doesn’t appreciate a group full of strangers talking about his personal affairs like they all have a say in it. “I was planning to go to Beauxbatons, actually, and join the gliding team. There’s the small issue of me not speaking French, but one problem at a time.”

“Something tells me they would make an exception for you,” Fleur says, grinning. “France would be very happy to claim Harry Potter as our own.”

“I could write a very compelling recommendation letter,” Nicolas adds, “considering I’m one of their oldest alumni. You’re a smart boy, I’m sure you’ll pick the language up quickly enough.”

“The Blacks have a summer home in Paris,” Sirius says, looking down the table to wink at Harry. “You’d like it. We can be escaped convicted felons together, won’t that be fun?”

“Except Harry would actually be guilty of his crimes,” Remus says, elbow on the table and chin in his hand. Harry glares at him, but he just shrugs.

Dumbledore clears his throat. “Well, it’s nice to have a backup plan. But, ideally, no one would be convicted of anything. I’ll represent Harry in court, which should be more than enough of a deterrent to the majority of Wizengamot.”

He feels a flash of irritation that he quickly pushes back down. Dumbledore could have asked, or talked to him about it first. “Thanks, but I already have an attorney.”
Seeing Dumbledore be genuinely surprised is rare enough that it pretty much makes up for the rest of it. “Excuse me?”

“Thanks for the offer,” even though he didn’t offer, he just decided, “but Zaira Zabini is going to be representing me.”

Kingsley lets out a bark of laughter that startles everyone else at the table. “That’s a brilliant idea.”

“It was Ron’s,” he says, nudging his friend in the side. “So I’m good. And worst case scenario, I learn French.”

“Harry, I really think it’s better if you allow me to handle this,” Dumbledore says.

“He said Zaira was representing him, so Zaira is representing him,” Remus says firmly. “That’s the end of the discussion.”

Sirius, Remus, all the Weasleys, and Fleur are glaring at Dumbledore, daring him to cause a fuss about it. He raises an eyebrow. “Very well. On to other matters.”

He lets out of the breath he’d been holding, relieved. Thankfully the rest of meeting has nothing to do with him. He just sits there and listens for the next hour, and the meeting’s beginning to wind down. But then they start talking about the dementor attack, and Percy mentions something about how they still haven’t pinned down the cause of the delay in the reports of a dementor attack reaching the aurors, and he freezes.

They don’t know why the aurors didn’t arrive in time to help.

Harry does.

He knows because Draco told him.

His soulmate is risking everything to get him information, to tell him all the things he’d listed in his letters. Surely he’s meant to do something with that, right? Because if it’s just Harry and their friends who know, it’s useless, they can’t do anything. If they’re the only ones who know, then there’s no reason for Draco to be there in the first place, because they can’t really do anything with this information.

But the Order can.

He has to tell them. Draco’s information has to get to the Order if it’s going to do anyone any good.

“It was Sophia Malfoy,” he says, heart in his throat. He hopes that he’s doing the right thing.

Everyone’s eyes are on him, and he swallows. “Excuse me?” McGonagall says.

“Sophia Malfoy purposely jammed the reports so that the aurors would be too late,” he says. “She was waiting to intercept them, because she knew they would be coming, because she knew about the attack.” He turns to Kingsley, “She was the one who told you about the attack, right? She sounded the alarm.”

“How do you know – yes,” Kingsley answers. “But Sophia wouldn’t do that. Harry, I know you have a bit of a strained relationship with the Malfoy family, but she’s not like that.”

“Yes, she is,” Harry says. “Just because she doesn’t have a Dark Mark doesn’t mean she’s not a Death Eater. If all of Voldemort’s followers were marked, the man wouldn’t be able to have any
spies. I know Sophia Malfoy supports Voldemort and is taking orders from him.”

There’s some upset mutterings around the table, but it’s Dumbledore who looks at him over his half moon glasses with those piercing blue eyes and asks, “How could you possibly know that, Harry?”

He flounders. What can he say? He can’t mention Draco, but they need to believe him, he needs them to believe him otherwise everything Draco is doing is for nothing –

“He has visions of what Voldemort is doing,” Hermione blurts out. “They share a mental connection, and Harry can see what he’s doing sometimes.”

Thank merlin for Hermione! It’s perfect!

“Yes,” he says. “It’s not all the time. But I saw the aftermath of the attack. Voldemort tortured her for failing. She’s working for him.”

“It’s not just that,” Ron adds. “Harry’s seen other things. Some of Voldemort’s plans for the government, and that he’s obsessed with getting something. Some prophecy.”

Harry wouldn’t have noticed if he wasn’t looking right at him, but there’s a minute movement on Dumbledore’s face that Harry would describe as a flinch if it were anyone else.

The quiet is broken after that, everyone shouting at and over one another. It lasts for another fifteen minutes before Fleur sets the table on fire just to shut everyone up. She puts it out a second later, but it’s still very cool. “Silence,” she snaps. “If Harry says he sees what Voldemort is doing, then I believe him.”

“He had similar visions last summer,” Remus says quietly. “They all ended up checking out. You know that, Albus.”

Dumbledore glances at Nicolas, who raises an eyebrow. “Tell us what you saw, Harry,” he says. There’s another outbreak of angry voices, but Dumbledore raises a hand, and they all fall silent. “We’ll double check everything we’re told. We won’t act irrationally. But to dismiss this significant advantage out of hand would be shortsighted, which isn’t something we can afford to be.” He waits, but no one says anything further. “Harry, please. What do you know?”

He tells them everything, every scrap of information Draco had given him in his letters. The meeting runs long by over an hour, but no one moves to leave, everyone listening as it all spills out of him. Dumbledore hadn’t been taking notes or anything, but as soon as Harry’s done speaking, he’s giving orders. He tells different people to double check different things, and he seems to know exactly what everyone at the table does and everyone they know, all just in his head. Harry understands why some people get angry at Dumbledore for using them all like chess pieces, he knows he gets upset about it too, but watching him now – well, this is the man’s third war, and it’s easy to understand why he is the way he is. He’s good at this, he’s smart and calculating and good at weighing people and their abilities against each other. It doesn’t seem like the type of skill one can easily turn off, even when it’s existence is to everyone’s detriment.

He’s finished, and he looks around the table with his piercing blue eyes, and asks, “Any questions?”

Everyone shakes their heads, except Nicolas, who leans on the table and sighs dreamily. “You’re so attractive when you take control like this.”

There’s a moment where everyone freezes and processes that, as if not quite believing it’s just happened.
“Nicholas!” Dumbledore exclaims, with the faintest red across his cheeks. “This is hardly the time or the place.”

Harry sneaks a glance at Perenelle, but she looks more amused than anything else. McGonagall has her hand over her mouth, but he’s pretty sure it’s to hold in a laugh. He’s reminded of her hitting Dumbledore upside the head for being dramatic, and he knows professors are people, obviously, but it always throws him when he sees them acting that way.

“I’m pretty sure it’s time for us to go to your place,” Nicolas says. Dumbledore just stares, unmoving, like he can’t think of any sort of acceptable way to respond to that.

Perenelle snorts. “Honey, stop embarrassing our young man.”

**Our young man?** Forget all the stuff about Voldemort, this is the most important thing he’s ever heard.

“You’ve been saying that for eighty years,” he complains.

“That’s because you’ve been embarrassing him for eighty years,” she returns.

Ginny tilts her head to the side. “So you guys met when Dumbledore was thirty?” It’s incredibly strange to him to imagine Dumbledore as anything but an old man.

“Oh, no, we met when he joined my wife’s alchemy class,” Nicholas answers. “But it wasn’t until his thirty fourth birthday that we–”

Dumbledore doesn’t so much as blink, but there’s a fission of magic in the air, and Nicholas’s mouth is still moving, but no sound is coming out. He realizes it after a moment and pouts, crossing his arms.

“I think that’s quite enough of that,” Dumbledore says mildly, once more back behind his familiar mask of headmaster. Harry can’t help but be a little disappointed. He likes Dumbledore best when he forgets to act like he knows what he’s doing. “If that’s all, this meeting is adjourned.”

Dumbledore sweeps out of the room. Harry’s pretty sure he’s not the only one who notices Nicolas trailing after him. Perenelle stays behind, gravitating towards Fleur and striking up a conversation in French. Bill awkwardly hovers nearby, and for a moment Harry thinks he’s going to be in need of a rescue, but Fleur turns around, loops her arm through Bill’s, and literally yanks him into the conversation. He seems delighted to be there, and starts responding in kind, which Harry hadn’t expected. “I didn’t know Bill spoke French.”

“What?” Ron says, then shifts to look over where Harry is. “Oh, he doesn’t. He can read it well enough, but his pronunciation is crap. You should hear his German accent, it sounds terrible to me, and I don’t even speak the language. But at least his German is understandable.”

“Why would he just learn to read a language?” Hermione asks.

He shrugs. “He needed it to get his curse breaker certification in Egypt. A lot of the original literature on Ancient Egypt is written in French and German, so to take the exam he had to be semi-fluent in one of them. But he chose to just mostly learn both instead of becoming totally fluent in one, which Mum told him was a bad idea. Granted, she thought it would be because of his career, and not because his soulmate would end up being a French witch who’s language he messes up whenever he tries to speak it.”

Harry thinks it’s about time they got out of here, because there are still way too many curious eyes on
him, and Sirius and Remus are huddled together and whispering with Arthur and Molly, which just can’t mean anything good for any of them, so escape seems like the most reasonable course of action. He’s about to suggest they sneak back in through the kitchen when someone claps him on the back and says, “Harry Potter, James Potter’s son! You’re your father’s spitting image.”

He turns and finds himself looking down at a middle aged Indian woman. He’s pretty sure he can name all the Indian witches he’s ever met on one hand, so he’s certain he’s never met her before. However, she hasn’t mentioned anything about his scar or being the Boy Who Lived, so she’s doing a lot better than most of the strangers who randomly accost him. “Hi?”

“My grandmother and your great aunt were good friends,” she says, and Harry doesn’t even know who his great aunt was, never mind who her friends might have been. “She adored James, and would have loved you too, I’m sure.” This whole conversation kind of makes him feel like he’s about to break out in hives and it’s only been thirty seconds. But she still has her hand on his back, and she’s being nice, so he intends to say thank you, but she steamrolls over him, continuing to speak before he gets the chance. “I heard you talking about languages, your father so loved his languages. How many do you speak?”

“Uh,” he says, taken aback. There’s something rancid squirming at the bottom of his stomach, but he doesn’t want to be rude, not when so far she’s only been nice to him. “Just two.”

“Oh,” she says, disappointment flashing across her face before she gets ahold of it. “Well, we all have to start somewhere! Which is it, Hindi? Bengali? Oh, no, of course it’s Tamil, that’s where your family is from, of course.”

Of course. It’s not like he knew that until Sirius told him, but complete strangers know.

“We’re all learning Tamil,” Ron says, and Harry blinks. Ron is tall, but he very rarely uses that height, slouching so as to not draw attention to it. But he’s currently standing straight and looming beside him, his arms crossed and an uncharacteristic scowl twisting his lips. Harry looks to Hermione for an explanation, but she looks just as irritated as Ron does.

“How nice of you to learn Tamil for your friend,” she says, still friendly, but she’s totally misunderstood what Ron said. Again, Harry means to correct her, but he doesn’t get the chance. She continues talking, but it’s not in English, instead speaking to him in rapid fire Tamil that he can’t even hope to follow.

She finishes and looks at him expectantly, waiting for a reply, but he doesn’t know what to say. He barely caught a word of anything she just said, and it’s not his fault, the Dursley’s were a one language household, but shame still makes his face hot.

Draco, he thinks, what would Draco do? Not stand there silent and embarrassed, that’s for sure.

"I was talking about Parseltongue, actually," he hisses, holding the image of Abigail in his mind to make sure all his words come out properly. She pales, and her mouth drops open, and for the first time he actually gets a chance to speak. "I’m still learning Tamil, along with my friends."

There had been a comforting lull of background conversations around him, but all that has come to a halt. He can feel the weight of everyone’s eyes on him, and he really needs to start speaking Parseltongue more so people don’t stop and stare at him every time he does it.

He doesn’t know if it’s the expression on his face or hers, but the silence has barely turned awkward when Remus appears beside him, smile on his face. “Kashvi, it’s so good to see you, it’s been too long.” She closes her mouth and nods, still staring at Harry. Remus begins talking to her in Hindi,
which Harry only knows enough to recognize.

Somehow Ron and Hermione get shuffled over to the center of the room, and someone loudly asks a question about the dementor attack. It takes a beat, but then Hermione begins to answer. At the same time, Percy and Tonks materialize seemingly out of nowhere and guide him back through to the kitchen while everyone's focused on hearing about the fight in Diagon Alley.

The kitchen is empty except for Kreacher morosely mopping the floor. He doesn’t realize how tense he was until he relaxes, and now he’s embarrassed for a whole different reason, but it’s a softer kind of embarrassment, it’s one he can handle. “Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Percy says, ruffling his hair. “She works in the trades department. You’re neither the first nor the last person who will have to be saved by her well meaning, minefield filled conversations.”

“She was nice,” he says, because she was, it’s not her fault Harry’s all messed up about his father’s heritage. “It was just – I mean – I don’t know, do you ever feel like you don’t quite fit like you’re supposed to?”

He looks up, and he’d forgotten Tonks was there, and now he feels like an idiot. He doesn’t mind saying that in front of Percy because he knows Percy’s felt that way, that for all he loves and is loved by his family there are moments when he feels separated from them. But Tonks is a metamorphmagus, and he feels extra silly for asking her that question.

“Sorry,” he squeaks, “never mind, I was just thinking out loud.”

Percy and Tonks share a long look, and it’s like the ones that Remus and Sirius share, like the ones between Cho and Cedric. It’s a whole conversation in less than a second. “Go,” Tonks says, “I’ve got this. I know you have a pile of work to do.”

“I miss when you were always just down the hall,” he sighs, then leans forward to press a quick kiss against her cheek. “I’ll probably be there all night. Stop by and say hi if you’ve got the time tomorrow morning?”

“Always,” she says, then grabs his shirt to drag him forward and kiss him on the tip of his nose. Harry’s pretty sure they’re not actually kissing because he’s there, and Percy is protective of his privacy. “Good luck with keeping our government from collapsing from mismanagement.”

She says it like it’s a joke, but Harry’s pretty sure it’s not. After Percy’s gone, she turns to him and says, “Come on, take me to the roof, I’m going to need the stars for this conversation.”

Harry has no idea what that means. “Really, everything’s fine, we don’t have to have a conversation.”

She gets in his space and looks him in the eye, and that would make him uncomfortable if it was just anyone, but it’s Tonks, and he likes her, so he doesn’t mind if she gets too close. “I’ll go away faster if you just give in.”

“I don’t want you to go away!” he protests. He just doesn’t want to look dumb in front of her. “Okay, okay, we can go the roof.”

They’re still trying to avoid everyone still lingering in the dining room, so Harry shoves open the kitchen window and transfigures a bunch of the vines into a ladder. He goes up first, but Tonks follows right behind him, scaling up the side of the house in a few minutes. He gets to the top and then lowers a hand to help pull Tonks up, even though it doesn’t seem like she needs it, and cancels
the spell on the vines. Tonks summons a blanket and spreads it out on the rooftop, and there must be some other spellwork going on, because when Harry sits on it it’s firm and comfortable, and not like a thin blanket laid over roof shingles.

Tonks sits next to him and tilts her head back, looking up at the sky. He copies her, unsure what it is he’s supposed to be looking for. “Burned tapestry or no burned tapestry, my mum is still a Black, and so am I. We have a history of taking our names from the stars. So she gave me a traditional Black name, one that I would have gotten if she was still speaking with her parents.” She pauses, and Harry can’t see her as well in the darkness, but it seems like she’s hesitating. He doesn’t want any secrets she doesn’t want to give, and he’s opened his mouth to tell her that when she says, “That’s why she named me Orion.”

He blinks, taken aback. “But – Orion’s a boy’s name! And your name is Nymphadora!”

“Don’t remind me,” she groans. “I let Mum pick it when I was ten, because choosing her kid’s name was important to her and I mostly went by my last name anyway, and so of course she chose the worst name possible.”

“I like your name,” he says, mind still stuck on the first bit, but not sure if it’s be rude of him to ask further.

Tonks knocks their shoulder together. “Thanks. My mum loves it, and I don’t mind Dora so much, so it’s fine.” She’s silent for a long moment, and he wants to know more, but if this is the end of the conversation, then that’s fine too. “By the time I’d figured out I wasn’t a boy, I’d also gotten a pretty firm handle on my metamorphmagus powers, which seemed like a perfect solution to me. I was lucky, and grateful, because I could change anything about myself that I wanted. My parents didn’t care, they were buying me dresses while I was going by Orion, and they just wanted me to be happy.”

Harry scrunches his nose. “Is it weird that I can’t imagine you in a dress?”

She snorts, “No, eventually I figured out I hated the things, but – girls wore dresses, and I knew I was a girl, so I thought I had to wear them too. But by the time Hogwarts started, I was presenting as a girl, and I didn’t use my powers to change anything, really, because I wore skirts and everyone called me Miss and I was staying in the girls’ dorms, and that was good enough for me. My abilities are natural, I was born with them, but they still use my own magic and energy to maintain the changes. Not a lot, and as an adult the strain is hardly noticeable, but it was a big deal as kid. It was just like how kids aren’t supposed to use magic outside of school to give their magic some time to rest, so I didn’t use it much, and it was fine. But then when I was in my second year, things changed. I changed, and I hated it. My voice started cracking, and I started getting hair everywhere, and I didn’t like it. I didn’t want it. So I used my metamorphmagus abilities to change it.”

“All the time?” he interrupts, wincing internally, because he knows that his magical capacity is abnormal, but even he wouldn’t want to keep a low level spell going constantly, and definitely not in second year.

“All the time,” she confirms. “Which was fine, for a little bit. But I was tired all the time, and cranky, and I didn’t want to be, but I was just so exhausted. My grades dropped, because I didn’t have enough spare magic to do my work properly in class, and about six months in, I was at the end of my rope. It all came to head in potions class when I was too tired to pay attention. I put the wrong ingredient in at the wrong time, and caused a small explosion. Which wouldn’t have been so horrible, but the force of it knocked me backward, and I hit my head pretty hard on the way down. I was too disoriented to focus, and everything slipped, I dropped my transformation for the first time in months. I was so embarrassed, because I felt like I looked so different, and everyone was yelling and
crowding in around me. It was because they were worried I was hurt, but I didn’t know that, I didn’t understand that. I just knew they were seeing me in a way I didn’t want to be seen, and in my panic and exhaustion I couldn’t even manage to change myself back. So I freaked out, pushed everyone aside, and ran. Severus went after me and grabbed me before I could get too far, and merlin, I’ve never seen him so furious."

Harry scowls. “It was an accident! Obviously you didn’t blow up your potion on purpose.”

She grins, shifting from looking up at the stars to face him. “He wasn’t mad about the potion. He didn’t care about that. He was mad at me because I’d been using in my abilities in a way that hurt me. He’d thought I was taking hormonal replacement potions, and that’s how I was changing my body, and was angry that I wasn’t. I hadn’t even thought about it. I didn’t think I’d need them. I thought that I shouldn’t need them, because I was a metamorphmagus, what kind of shitty metamorphmagus needed potions to change their appearance? But it doesn’t work like that, obviously. So he marched me to Madam Pomfrey and demanded a potions regiment be set up for me, and that I be prohibited from using my abilities until my magic had recovered from the strain.”

Harry is so surprised that he can’t help from asking, “Really?”

She nods. “I was so mad at him, but looking back, it was absolutely the right thing to do. My potions are paid for by my work now, but Severus made my potions for me for the rest of my Hogwarts years. He was a huge jerk about it,” she says, but she sounds fond, “Always grumbling, and calling me a trouble maker. He gave me more detentions than all the other professors combined. But he always made sure I had what I needed.”

“Do you use your metamorphmagus abilities a lot now?” he asks, and regrets asking as soon as it’s out of his mouth, because it’s none of his business. “Sorry, don’t answer that.”

Tonks smiles, so at least she doesn’t seem offended. “I’ll make you a deal. I’ll show you what I look like without my abilities if I can touch your scar.”

He grins and sticks out his hand. “Deal. But if you want, you can touch it without showing me, I don’t mind.”

“Nah, a deal’s a deal,” she shakes his hand, and then goes a bit cross eyed. Her short pink hair turns a mousy brown and goes down to her shoulders, and the skin beneath her eyes becomes dark and purple.

“You need to get more sleep,” he says automatically, and he looks her over, searching for any other differences, but if there are any, he can’t see them. “It’s just your hair?”

“You sound like Percy,” she grumbles. “But yes, just my hair, and my skin if I’ve got a spot or bags under my eyes.” She bops him on the nose, and now he’s the one going cross eyed, trying to follow her finger. “I like myself the way I am. I fit just the way I am. And so do you. Even if it doesn’t feel that way sometimes.”

His whole face goes hot, and he ducks his head down. “Thanks. I just – I just wish I knew more. About my dad, about his family, about how he grew up and all the things he knew.”

“You’re still Indian no matter what,” Tonks says firmly. “It doesn’t matter if you don’t speak the language or know your whole family tree off the top of your head. You’re a Potter. You can learn all those things if you want, but not knowing doesn’t change who you are.”

“Thanks,” he says again, but it’s warmer this time, and he manages to actually look at her. He takes
off his glasses and pushes his hair back. “A deal’s a deal.”

She slowly reaches forward, lightly pressing a finger against the top of his scar and slowly following its path down his face. It’s barely raised and pale against the rest of his skin. “Does it hurt?”

“Not unless Voldemort is touching it,” he says. “So, no, not like on its own or anything.”

She’s silent for a long moment, still tracing his scar, and then she asks, “Does it bother you to have it?”

“No,” he answers, surprised. Maybe it should. But, well, in the magical world the closest anyone’s every come to making fun of it was Draco calling him Scarhead, and that isn’t exactly an insult that he’s going to be upset over, even if he’d meant it. Dudley and the kids had school had made fun of him for it sometimes, but, well, they made fun of him for a lot of things. “It’s just … part of my face. It always has been. Maybe if I’d gotten it later? But I think it looks kind of cool, actually,” he admits, a little embarrassed, because as far as scars go, he thinks a lightning bolt is a pretty neat one to have.

“It’s very cool,” she says, pulling her hand away. He sticks his glasses back on his face and grins at her.

There’s a loud crack and George apparates between them. “There you are! Everyone’s gone, are you done hiding on the roof?” He blinks at Tonks. “Nice hair.”

She rolls her eyes and shifts so it’s purple and curly. “We weren’t hiding.”

“Could have fooled me,” George answers. “Can we go now? How did you even get up here?”

“I’ll meet you downstairs,” Harry says, then stands and jumps off the roof. George screams, but Harry’s laughing all the way down, casting a cushioning charm so he easily bounces back on his feet.

He looks up and Tonks gives him a thumbs up. George calls down, “Harry, I’m going to kill you.”

“You have to catch me first,” he answers cheekily, then disappears into the house.

~

The next morning, Harry’s sitting up in bed and reading another of Draco’s letters. He’d given the extendable ears to Winky, who’d hugged him around the knees before going back. It’s still not quite dawn, light just beginning to filter through his window, which is why he’s surprised by a knock on his door.

“Come in,” he says, putting the letter on his bedside table. Remus pushes open the door, and Sirius is behind him, holding a mug in his hands. “You guys are up early.”

“We couldn’t sleep,” Remus says. They both sit on either side of his bed, and Sirius pushes the warm mug into Harry’s hands. It’s chai, and he should learn to make this for himself before he goes back to Hogwarts, but he really likes that Sirius takes the time to make it for him, and he doesn’t want him to stop. “We want to talk to you about something.”

“Okay,” he says warily.

Sirius runs his hand through Harry’s hair, then starts fiddling with his bed spread, apparently needing something to do with his hands. “About your visions. With Voldemort. I know they’re helpful to the war effort, and all.”
“But they’re dangerous too,” Remus says, “and we don’t want – he could – we want you to learn occlumency. It may help.”

“I can teach you,” Sirius says, and he’s not smiling, his face is pinched, and they both look so tired, like they really didn’t get any sleep. “I’m sorry, I should have thought of it earlier, and now he’s in your head, and,” Sirius’s voice cracks, and he has to pause to clear his throat.

Protecting Draco is important. It’s the most important thing. But he can’t do this, not to them, not when they love him so much. He feels terrible that he’s put them through this, and he didn’t think, he should have known that this wasn’t a lie he could tell without consequences. “I’m not getting any visions from Voldemort,” he blurts out. “I lied. Neville and Blaise taught us Occlumency last year. I haven’t had any dreams since then. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to worry you.”

The both freeze, blinking.

“But, then how did you know all those things?” Sirius asks, frowning even as his shoulders slump in relief. “They were accurate, everything you said was right.”

He hesitates, then swallows. “It’s a secret. I can tell you, but you have to promise not to tell anyone else. Not Dumbledore, not Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. No one.”

Remus pales and says, “Oh, merlin above, it’s Draco.”

Harry flinches, and Remus is staring at the letter on his bedside table. Sirius’s face goes slack. “No.”

“You can’t tell,” he says, holding his chai in one hand so he can grab onto Sirius’s forearm. “It’s important. He’s already risking so much. If you tell, I don’t know what will happen to him. Please.”

Sirius covers Harry’s hand with his own, nodding. Remus asks, “How does he know any of this? I can’t imagine his father would tell him.”

They already know about Draco. There’s no point in holding anything else back. “Voldemort and his followers are staying at Malfoy Manor. Draco’s been spying on their meetings, and then he writes everything up and sends it to me in his letters. You can’t tell anyone that they’re staying at the manor either. I’ll mention it at the next meeting if you want, say I saw Voldemort talking to Mr. Malfoy about it.”

“No, it’s fine, Severus has been summoned to a Death Eater meeting in a couple of days anyway,” Remus says. “Harry, this is so dangerous, he could be killed, or worse. Why is he doing this? Does he need a rescue? We’ll go get him.”

“No,” Sirius says quietly. “He doesn’t need a rescue. He’s there because he wants to be, right? Narcissa wouldn’t make him stay.”

Harry nods. “His mum was really mad, actually, and he made sure the rest of our friends went to Italy with Blaise. But he stayed behind. I told him not to,” he admits, frustrated all over again, “We got in a fight over it. But he won’t listen!”

“Oh course not,” Sirius says, and he’s smiling, but he still seems sad. “We Blacks are a stubborn breed. If this is what he feels he has to do, then he’s going to do it, damn the consequences.”

“That’s an infuriating trait,” Harry informs him.

A bit of actual humor cracks through, and Sirius squeezes his hand. “I’m glad you’re okay, and that Voldemort isn’t rummaging around in your head. But I am worried about Draco.”
“Me too,” he admits. “But you understand, don’t you? You won’t tell?”

“We won’t tell,” Remus confirms. “We’ll keep this a secret for as long as you need us to. Okay?”

“Okay,” he says, and he leans over to carefully place his chai next to Draco’s letter. Then he pushes himself up and grabs them both in hug, an arm around each of their necks. “Thank you.”

If they squeeze him a little too tightly, he doesn’t complain. He knows exactly how they feel.

~

Nagini spends most of her nights curled up on his bed, and Abigail does too, but he’s pretty sure that’s just because she hates sharing only slightly more than sleeping on his bed. He has to sneak away in the morning to write his letters and give them to Winky, but that’s not so bad. What’s annoying is that Nagini almost always spreads out and moves to the warm spot he left behind, and the first two times he let her take over his bed, but on the third he just shoves her over and climbs back in. She hisses at him, but doesn’t kill him, so he figures he’s fine.

If Voldemort has any opinions on his snake deciding Draco is her new best friend, he doesn’t share them. It is, however, a little nice that the Death Eaters are reluctant to get too close to him when Nagini is crawling all over him. If anyone’s going to murder him in his sleep, it’ll be a Nagini, and not one of the mean Death Eaters milling about their home, because they’re all so scared of her that not even his parents will enter his room in the morning, instead waiting for him to get up and leave himself, lest they aggravate Nagini.

He’s walking the halls on his way to the basement and reading a book on healing potions when he knocks into someone and falls backwards. He’d have managed to right himself and save himself the embarrassment of falling, except that Nagini is right behind him, so he trips and falls half on top of her, sending the book flying. She hisses angrily, but he ignores her. “Ow.” He looks up, and Snape is staring down at him, wide eyed and pale with his wand out and pointed at him.

He’s confused about what he could have done to get Snape to curse him in his own home until he realizes Nagini’s head is raised to strike. He whacks her in the side as he pulls himself to his feet, “Stop that, he’s too big for you to eat, so you’d just be wasting food.” She swings around to hiss at him instead, but he ignores her, which he’s figured out she hates. He’s proven right when she abandons seeming angry for crawling all over him. “Hi professor. You can put your wand away, it’s fine, she won’t attack you.”

Snape slowly puts his wand away. “Mr. Malfoy. What the hell is going on?”

That’s a really good question. “What are you doing here?” he asks, glancing around the halls. “It’s not safe for you to be here!” Did his dad ask him here? But why? Is Voldemort planning to torture or kill him? Draco hopes not, because as much as he doesn’t like his head of house, it’s not like he can stand by and do nothing while he’s murdered.

“I’m here for the meeting,” he says.

That was so not the answer Draco was expecting. “You’re a Death Eater?” he demands, then realizes he sounds way too derisive, and amends, “Right, of course you are.” He’d known Snape served Voldemort before, but he was employed by Dumbledore, Draco thought there was no way he could still be a supporter now.

Then again, Dumbledore also employed a man possessed by Voldemort and a man who was serving him, so his track record isn’t great.
“Of course I am,” Snape echoes, but now they’re just standing there looking at each other suspiciously, which is pretty strange, even by his standards.

“Right,” he says, and starts the long process of trying to get Nagini to let go of him, “well, uh, it’s by the kitchens if you’re lost.”

“Thank you,” Snape says slowly, still staring at him, and Draco doesn’t know what he wants from him, and it’s not like he can walk away while Nagini is crawling all over him. She’s huge, and heavy, and if she doesn’t want him to move, then he’s not going anywhere. He summons Draco’s book from across the hall and raises an eyebrow at the cover. Crap, a book on healing potions definitely isn’t Death Eater like enough. Maybe he should charm the cover to just be one hundred ways to torture muggles. Or, at least a book on curses, and not healing. He hands it back to him, “Good evening, Mr. Malfoy.”

“Good evening,” he repeats, and waits until Snape has rounded the corner to begin the extremely undignified wiggle dance that it takes to get out of Nagini’s grasp. Voldemort always wants her at the meetings to looks menacing and lie at his feet, so it’s not like she has the time to harass him anyway.

Besides, the sooner Nagini goes to the meeting, the sooner he can sneak over and do some eavesdropping.

Thank merlin for the Weasley twins’ extendable ears. Maybe he’ll manage to make it through his summer without being killed in his own home.

Chapter End Notes

i hope you liked it!

megalania-prisca has done several gorgeous pieces for siat that you can view here (she's added more since the last chapter!)

a-side-of-fries did several cute sketches from the last chapter that you can view here

okjoonfire did a super cute pic of harry and ron that you can see here

as always, feel free to follow / harass me at: shanastoryteller.tumblr.com

i post writing updates in my 'progress report' tag if that's something you're interested in knowing ;)
Phoenixes Don’t Take Orders: Part Three

Chapter Notes

a bunch of people have asked if the new fantastic beasts info regarding nagini is going to affect this story. absolutely not. my nagini is a snake. not a woman cursed to be a snake. just. no.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry has spent all morning working on his charms essay, and he has to actually try this year because he doesn’t have Draco in his back pocket to help him like he has the previous two summers. Both figuratively and literally. He takes the stairs down the living room two at a time, determined to do something that isn’t studying or gardening.

The greenhouse is about finished, which is a plus, and while he definitely could fly in there without worrying about some random plant trying to kill him, he’s reluctant to do anything but basic moves, because if he messes up and crashes into something delicate, Neville will murder him. Even Sirius isn’t under any illusion that he gets a say what goes on in his greenhouse and has been staying away from it. Harry’s excited to see his godfather’s face when it’s finished.

He has gotten pretty good at gliding this summer though, since that is something he can do in the greenhouse without risk of damaging anything. Fleur will come practice with him sometimes, and they really need a few hours on a cloudy day where they can fly outside for real, because flying with Fleur is fantastic.

He’s already half made up his mind to floo the Weasleys and see who’s around and bored enough to hang out when he steps into the living room and freezes.

Sirius and Remus are playing chess. Which, they’re usually busy during the day, but it’s not like it’s that out of the ordinary. But their slumped soldiers and morose expressions baffle him. “You know you don’t have to play if you don’t want to.”

They both blink and turn to him. “What?” Remus asks, frowning.

“You don’t look like you’re enjoying yourself, is all,” he says, gesturing to the chessboard.

Sirius leans back in his chair and pouts. Harry bites back a grin. “There’s no more cleaning to do.”

“You’re done?” he asks, surprised. They’d been making good progress, but this place is huge. Sometimes it feels like new rooms pop up every time he turns a corner, and since this is a magical house, that’s not exactly outside the realm of possibility.

“No,” Remus sighs. “Kreacher won’t let us clean anymore.”

He’s so confused. “He’s been trying to get you guys to stop cleaning for like a year, right?” Also, full of resentment and spite about it or not, Kreacher is bound to Sirius. Couldn’t he just order him to let them clean? Which is a little rude, he has to admit, but so is trying to force half the house to remain untouched and filthy, like some sort of decrepit museum.

“He’s cleaning it himself,” Sirius explains.
Harry stares. “That’s … good?” Kreacher does know how to clean, right? He’s a house elf. Harry’s seen him clean things before, he just never seemed very happy about it. Remus makes a so-so gesture, which is fair, because Harry’s also a little worried to find out what constitutes as clean to Kreacher. “Is he going to take off all the curses and things in the rooms?” Some of the rooms are completely normal, and some of them are waiting to strangle the first person that steps inside. There’s a reason it had taken Remus and Sirius so long to get the house into half decent shape, and it isn’t because they’re especially bad at cleaning charms.

“We told him to,” Sirius says, but he doesn’t sound optimistic about the outcome.

“Okay,” he says, “well, that doesn’t really explain why you’re sadly playing chess.”

They both look down at the chessboard and make a face. Remus waves a hand, and the pieces begin putting themselves away. “We’ve been planning our days around fixing up the house. But if Kreacher wants to do it, we don’t want to get in his way. So now,” he shrugs. “I’m a kept man these days. It’s not like I have job to get to, so we’re sadly playing chess.”

“You were a kept man before, you just refused to use the money,” Sirius accuses. Harry raises an eyebrow. “Remus has had access to my personal accounts since I was seventeen, and I added him to the Black family accounts when my mother died. There’s literally no reason for him to have worked while I was in Azkaban.”

Remus rolls his eyes. While this is the first Harry is hearing of this, it’s obvious that it’s an old argument between them. “I thought you were the traitor, I wasn’t going to use your money.”

“All the more reason to use my money!” he says. “Look, if you don’t think I get a huge kick out of using my asshole family’s fortune on my werewolf soulmate, you definitely haven’t been paying attention since we were, I don’t know, twelve.” He pauses and points an accusing finger at Remus, who only looks amused. “Also, it’s our money, and has been for nearly twenty years, so nice try.”

Well, in lieu of cleaning, it seems they’ve fallen into their favorite pastime: arguing. They don’t fight, not really, but they can spend whole days arguing about things that Harry’s pretty sure don’t matter one way or another.

They’re interrupted when the fireplace roars to life, and Ron steps out of the flames, Hermione at his heels. “Harry!” he calls out, and Harry stumbles as Ron walks right into him, both of them scrambling to try and catch the other before they fall and failing, so they end up an undignified sprawl on the floor. Ron’s elbows should count as lethal weapons. How can he eat as much as he does and still be so pointy?

“Have you seen the paper?” Hermione asks excitedly, leaning over them. “It’s fantastic!”

“I do feel a bit sorry for Percy,” Ron says. “He’s not amused. He sent me a howler this morning, but Tonks was laughing in the background, so I’m pretty sure he won’t kill me.”

Harry turns towards his godparents, but they shake their head. They haven’t read it yet. Apparently reading the news of their precariously war torn country ranks under sadly playing chess. “Accio paper,” Harry says, and this morning’s Prophet comes souring out of the kitchen into his hands.

Across the front page in thick, dark letters it reads: BOY-WHO-LIVED THE BOY WHO SAVED!

The author is listed as Rita Skeeter, but Harry knows for a fact that Luna wrote most of it.

He scans it quickly, and it’s full of tearful testimonials from people who there on the day of the dementor attack. He has to fold the paper over and stop reading to keep his face from catching on
fire, because he hadn’t even seen most of these people, and it feels weird to read about their accounts of his giant patronus narrowly saving them from a fate worse than death.

Sirius holds out a hand, and Harry passes him the paper. “I still don’t understand the point of all this,” Harry says.

“I’m just priming them for Zaira,” Ron answers. “Rita is going to be writing all the gossip crap, since she’s actually good at it, and that’s phase two.”

“There’s no way Rita wrote this,” Remus says, and he’s draped across Sirius’s back so he can read the paper over his shoulders. “It’s not nearly exaggerated enough.”

“It’s by the same person who wrote the article on Cedric,” Sirius says.

Hermione blinks. “How do you know that?”

“I’m not just a pretty face,” he answers. “Who do you have writing articles for you?”

“Luna,” Ron says. “It was Draco’s idea. He was right. She’s quite good at it. But Rita wouldn’t agree to publish it under her name unless we let her write the incendiary stuff, but joke’s on her, because I wanted her to write those anyway.”

Remus is trying to look stern, but he’s doing a rather poor job of it. “You’re going to incite a revolt.”

“Hence Percy’s howler,” Ron agrees, scowling. “I didn’t tell him I was going to do this, so it’s rude of him to just assume I’m behind it. It’s only going to be a little revolt. Nothing to be worked up about.”

The fireplace flares green, and Neville steps out of it, a large dirty sack in one hand and the paper in the other. He waves it at them, “Nice job! My gran actually laughed. It was horrifying.”

Ron scowls and crosses his arms. “What’s in the bag? I didn’t come here to garden.”

Neville looks absurdly pleased with himself. “If you don’t help, I won’t tell you what they are.”

The implication, of course, being that Ron is going to be interested in the answer. “Fine,” he says, “but it better be good.”

“I’ll help,” Hermione says, and Harry waves at his godfathers before following his friends up to the greenhouse. He should really get Hermione to look over his charms essay before the school year starts. Hopefully Draco will have time before the first class, but if there are too many errors his soulmate will glare at him.

Draco hates the defense essay with everything inside of him, because the book is crap. It’s all crap, and he’s dying to know who the defense professor is going to be. His father had been furious about Fudge overruling their nominations, especially since he hadn’t even deigned to tell them who he was appointing. The minister is just making all kinds of enemies on all sides.

Winky appears in front of him, and he’s still working on the last paragraph of this stupid essay. “I’ll take lunch in here, if my parents don’t mind.” He has to put in an appearance at one of the daily meals, at least, otherwise the Death Eaters might accuse him of being a coward. Which he thinks is a bit rich, considering the way they all flinch away from Nagini.
She doesn’t answer, and instead taps his elbow, and he looks over. She hands him a note, and
blances at Nagini, who’s curled in sleeping in the patch of sunlight falling through his window. He
opens it up, and both of his eyebrows go to his forehead. It’s from his mother, ordering him to meet
her in the empty dungeon room tonight. He nods to Winky and sets the note on fire. She bows to him
and says, “Yes, Master Draco,” before disappearing with a crack.

Odd.

He’s distracted the rest of the day, burning with curiosity about what this could be about. The hardest
part, of course, is getting out of bed without waking Nagini. But he manages, tiptoeing out of his
room and down the hallway, until he can take one of the secret passageways into the dungeons. The
Western side is used for potion making and storage, but the Eastern side is kept mostly empty. It
consists of a dark, damp room that’s intended use is herbology, and a room twice the size of their
dining room and completely empty.

That’s the room his mother told him to meet her in, and when he steps inside he’s only a little bit
surprised to find both his parents waiting for him. “Is something wrong?” he asks, meaning, of
course, apart from the obvious.

His parents share a glance. “Summon your practice clothes,” Lucius says, “and get changed. We’re
going to start meeting here every night, and we want you to practice in the forests during the day, if
you can manage it without being caught.”

“Okay?” he says, because he spends his school year sneaking around at night, and during the
summer he doesn’t even have to get up at seven in the morning to run to class, this isn’t a problem.
But he still doesn’t know what’s going on. “What am I practicing?”

“Dueling,” Lucius says, and Draco pales and looks to his mother. Narcissa had been furious when
she found out that Draco had joined the dueling club in second year, which he thought was pretty
rich coming from her.

She smiles, tight and unhappy, “It was my idea. I don’t like it. But I can’t deny the necessity of it. I
don’t want you to fight in this war. I’d rather tear out my heart with my bare hands,” she says
frankly, without flinching, and it’s a good thing he’s used to his mother showing affection through
violence, otherwise he might find that proclamation a little disturbing. “But these kind of things aren’t
up to me. I wish they were. So in lieu of shielding you from the world, we’ll give you the tools to
endure it.”

“First, you’ll train with me,” his father says. “Once you’ve progressed to the point that you know
how to do everything properly, and to do it well, your mother will take over.”

“What will she teach me?” he asks, addressing his father even as he looks at Narcissa.

She grins, like a wolf in woman’s clothing. “How to win.”

“How to cheat,” Lucius corrects dryly.

“Mon amour,” she says, fluttering her eyelashes, “there is no cheating in war. Only survival.”

“All things are fair in love and war,” Lucius murmurs, and ugh, gross. His parents are so in love he
wants to throw up.

“I’m going to get changed now!” he announces loudly, and doesn’t miss the way they both bite back
a grin.
He should savor his lessons with his father. There’s not a doubt in his mind that Narcissa is a much, much more demanding taskmaster.

Harry is looking over his most recent letter from Draco, and there’s a paragraph that’s just a normal letter from his soulmate, and then two pages of information about the Death Eater meetings, and Harry’s not sure exactly what to do with it.

Hermione had pointed out after that first meeting that Harry couldn’t tell the Order everything that Draco sent him, because it would be too concerning for everyone if Harry was so embedded in Voldemort’s mind that he was getting all this information. He had to pick and choose. Usually, it was easy, because there was only so much information that Draco could get to him, and Dumbledore’s spy network was pretty thorough, plus the margin of difference narrowed even further once Snape started attending some of the Death Eater meetings. Harry just had to fill in the gaps.

But this is two pages of complex political information that he can barely read, never mind understand, and he’s tempted to call Ron and have him sort it out, but the thing is Ron knows maybe half of all the major players in government, which is certainly more than Harry, but this doesn’t sound like major players, it’s little people, it’s the beginning.

He really wishes Percy was in on this. He would know exactly who everyone is, what their jobs are, and why precisely Voldemort is planning to get them involved or kidnapped or murdered. But he can’t tell Percy, so he has to find someone else who would know all that stuff.

Harry’s used to having problems that need solving, and needing to solve them on his own. He can figure this out.

But, to be perfectly honest, he has a better idea.

He walks down the hall, and Sirius and Remus’s door is cracked open, he so pushes it open further and bounces down at the foot of they’re bed, shaking the whole thing. Remus wakes up immediately, like flipping a switch, pushing himself upright while Sirius just groans and buries his head under the pillow. Remus stares at Harry. Harry stares back. Remus pokes Sirius in the side, “Your godson needs something.”

Sirius’s arm emerges from the pillow, and Harry is completely unprepared when it blindly grabs for him, getting the front of his shirt, and yanks him onto the bed and into the narrow between his godparents. “Ow,” he says, face down in the comforter, but he’s grinning.

“Sleep time,” Sirius grumbles, flipping the bottom of the massive comforter with his legs until it folds over and covers at least half of Harry. “Sleep now.”

Harry rolls onto his back, and holds up his crumpled letter to Remus, who’s looking down at him in amusement. “This is Draco’s report. I’m not sure what to tell the Order and what to leave out.”

He frowns and takes the letter, leaning against the headboard as he scans the contents. “Forever yours?” he mutters.

Harry has no idea what he’s talking about until he remembers that’s how Draco signs off all his letters, and fuck, he did not think this through at all. “Uh, he’s just being dramatic to be annoying.” He’s not, he’s completely sincere and it makes Harry warm every time he thinks of it, but no one else needs to know that.

Remus hums, but thankfully seems more concerned with the contents of the letter than the signoff.
He reaches over and pulls the pillow from over Sirius’s head. “How well do you keep track of the current minor government officials?”

Sirius squints blearily at him, awake but clearly not happy about it. “I was in jail for twelve years, so, not well. I still know all the positions and who they work for, because my mother’s pointless political lessons will clearly haunt me until my death. What is this? Can it wait until morning?”

“It is morning,” Harry feels the need to point out.

Sirius glares at him, but with his bedhead, it’s not very intimidating. “It’s barely sunrise. It’s not morning. It’s a crime against humanity to be awake right now.”

“Does the library still have the self updating ministry staff lists?” Remus presses. “That would at least give us a place to start. Between that and what you remember, we should be able to figure this out.”

“Well, I didn’t get rid of it,” he says. “But that doesn’t mean it’s there, and it definitely doesn’t mean I know where it is. We could try summoning it, but I barely remember that it existed, never mind what it looks like.”

Harry pushes himself upright with his elbows, because he has an idea. “Kreacher?” he tries, and it ends up coming out more like a question than a summons. Should he snap? Draco snaps sometimes when he’s summoning Winky.

He’s about to try again when there’s a crack, and a morose Kreacher is standing in front of them. “Young master is calling?”

Remus gives an impressed whistle, and even Sirius looks more awake. They’re clearly just as shocked it worked as he is. “Uh, can you check the library for the ministry staff list? Please?”


A moment later he’s back, book in hand. “The spell connecting it to the active roster decayed and faded five years ago. It is not current.”

“Can you get a current one?” he asks, because apparently he likes pushing his luck. Kreacher frowns. There’s a shimmer in the air, and Winky appears beside him. “Um?” Harry says, and both his godfathers twitch.

“You is supposed to be saying yes, that is a thing you can be doing,” Winky says, but she sounds patient rather than patronizing. How often is she just hanging around Kreacher? He forgot that house elves could go invisible around people that weren’t their masters.

“I don’t have access to the family vault,” Kreacher says. “I can purchase a new copy, but I will need money.”

Winky turns on them, hands on her hips. “Why is Kreacher not having access? How can you be expecting him to do the cooking if he can’t buy food? How can he do your shopping or be replacing the broken things? No wonder the cleaning is taking so long! Not everything can be being fixed, some must be replaced.”

Sirius pushes himself upright, head tilted to the side. “Kreacher, do you want to do those things?”

He shrugs and looks away. “I will do them.”

That’s not a real answer, but Harry’s pretty sure if he didn’t want to, then he’d say so. Winky or no
Winky, Kreacher has never really had a hard time expressing himself. He nudges Sirius in the side, who sighs and looks over to his soulmate. Remus grabs his wand, and Harry doesn’t hear him cast a spell, but then there’s a glittering gold key in his hand. “To the Black vaults,” he says, holding it out to Kreacher.

It’s a test. Remus is a part of the Black family because Sirius says so, even though they’re not officially married, but he’s also a werewolf, which is something Kreacher’s mistress would have hated. Winky is silent, anxiously wringing her hands together as she looks between them.

Kreacher does nothing for a long moment, just staring at them. Harry worries he’ll change his mind, and return to how he was before, which won’t affect them, really, but as grumbly as Kreacher has been recently, he’s seemed – if not happier, exactly, then at least less depressed.

But he reaches out and plucks the golden key from Remus’s hand. “Thank you,” he struggles, biting his lip until it bleeds, then saying, “Master Lupin.”

“Very good!” Harry says before he can stop himself, because that’s what Draco says to Winky when he’s trying to tell her that she did something worthy of praise. Kreacher stands a little straighter, so it seems to mean the same thing to him. He bows to them, then disappears with a crack.

Winky is still there and beaming at them. “Very good,” she tells them firmly, then disappears, hopefully back to Draco, and not to creep around while being invisible.

“Well, that was unexpected,” Sirius says. “We’ll figure out which information to tell the Order after breakfast.”

“You might as well invite your friends to help,” Remus adds. “Between Ron and Hermione, I can’t imagine we’ll miss anything.”

“Are you going to fall back asleep as soon as I leave?” Harry asks suspiciously.

“No, of course not,” Sirius answers in Tamil, which he’s pretty sure is only because Harry has a harder time figuring out if he’s lying when he’s speaking another language. “Go get changed, we will start breakfast.”

When they make it downstairs, it’s to find a hot breakfast already waiting for them. Either Kreacher is serious about this, or Winky makes a very good invisible helper. Either way, the food is delicious.

Between his house crawling with Death Eaters and the dueling lessons, any hope he had of a restful summer is pretty much destroyed. His one comfort is that he’s actually really good at dueling. All the horrible situations he’s gotten dragged into because of Harry are finally good for something. No matter what spells are flying towards him or how close his father gets, he doesn’t hesitate or panic. Which means pretty soon his dad’s going to hand the reigns over to his mum, and Draco’s going to get his ass handed to him every night.

It would probably be even sooner, but getting some alone time in the forest is fiendishly difficult. Every time he goes out there, Nagini insists on coming with him, and how is he supposed to stop her? She’s a twenty foot long venomous snake. He’s pretty sure he doesn’t get a say in the matter. So his training is almost entirely confined to what he can get done at night or under the cover of a cloud, since the only place he consistently manages to go alone is the sky. He’s getting pretty good at standing on his broom without falling off, he should definitely get Harry to give him some gliding lessons when they get back to school.
Merlin, Draco is so desperate for the school year to start. No sneaking around and spying, worried he’s going to be tortured and killed in front of his parents, no Voldemort and his supporters breathing down his neck. Hogwarts being the safest place in the world is bullshit, but it is currently safer than the manor. Not that that’s hard. Lying facedown on the Diagon Alley’s Main Street is currently safer than the manor.

So he has a lot going on right now, obviously, which is why he’s panicking a little bit. Not about all that stuff, he’s handling it just fine, more or less. But his boyfriend’s birthday is rapidly approaching, and he’s struggling to finish his present.

The first night that Harry showed him his room at the Black House, so excited and happy about it in a way that honestly made his chest hurt a little bit, Draco knew exactly what he was going to do. He’s had a month to complete it and hasn’t finished. In his defense, he’s been a little busy with other things. But he hadn’t expected it to be this difficult either!

He’s in the dungeon, and at some point he started using it for his spellwork as well as his potions, and most of his school things and notes have managed to make their way down here. He buries his head in his arms, because he’s going to have to put in an appearance at lunch soon if he doesn’t want anyone looking for him, which he obviously doesn’t.

“What is being the matter, Master Draco?” Winky asks, and he moves his head just enough to see Winky pushing a steaming mug of hot chocolate towards him.

“I can’t get the spell to stick to the metal,” he says, pointing to the various bits of metal scattered around the room. He’s tried every combination and rune inscription he could think of, but no matter what he does, the spell won’t stick. He’d spent hours running the calculations to contain the spell to a smaller area, but every time he manages to get the magic to stick to the metal, it ruins the execution of the spell, which is the whole point of it to begin with. His article about this very thing is going to be published in the fall, and he can’t even manage to do it correctly.

“Magic is not wanting to reside in the material,” Winky says, holding one of the failures in her hand. “Can you not be using a container?”

“Nothing’s strong enough,” he mutters, because he’d thought of that. “Wood will break, glass will shatter. Obsidian might work, but only if it’s a whole unbroken sphere, which is a pain to find, and I don’t have time to go hunting for ingredients in volcanoes.” He could buy it, probably, but it’s rare enough that he wouldn’t trust anyone who was selling it, making it a moot point.

“So use wood that is not breaking or glass that is not shattering,” she says.

He’s very tempted to snap at her, but he’s certain she’d snap back. Oh, like he has any of that just lying around –

Wait –

“Are there any remembralls in the manor?” he asks.

She looks unbearably pleased with herself when she says, “Winky will find out, and will be bringing any to Master Draco.”

He thinks he’s still going to have to reinforce it, maybe with a titanium alloy, and strip it of the spells it contains without breaking it, which is going to be a whole other affair. But. It should work.

~
They’ve just wrapped up another Order meeting, and thanks to his friends and godparents, he’s managed to deliver another report of things he’s supposedly gleamed from Voldemort’s mind without raising too many skeptical eyebrows, which is about the best he can hope for. All the Weasleys who don’t know the truth keep shooting him worried looks, which he feels incredibly guilty about, but he can’t go around telling everyone. He wishes he could, but it’s not just his secret to tell.

They’re all filing out when Percy walks over and says, “If I do paperwork during the party, that’s fine, right?”

“No!” Tonks says before he can answer, “It’s not! Harry, tell him that’s unacceptable.”

Percy sighs. “Darling, not to be dramatic, but if I don’t read through the budget approvals, no one will, and I only have the next two weeks to do it. That’s on top of everything else I’m doing, mind.”

Arthur calls out, “If you don’t approve my budget, you’re disowned!”

“You spend too much on muggle items that aren’t cursed!” Percy responds immediately, almost before his dad has finished speaking.

“But consider this,” Arthur is doing a terrible job of keeping a straight face. He must be an awful poker player. “I’m your father.”

Percy glares. This is clearly an argument they’ve had multiple times.

“What party?” he asks, confused. They all freeze.

“Sirius!” Percy yells, “You didn’t say it was a surprise party!”

Sirius, deep in conversation with Molly, looks up and blinks. “It’s not a surprise.”

“Guys,” Harry says, “What are you talking about?”

Fred comes up behind him and puts him a headlock. He resigns himself to his fate, and only wriggles enough so that Fred knows he’s not even a little amused. “Ickle Harry, it’s your birthday next week! We’re throwing a party!”

He blinks, mouth falling open. Several people begin to look concerned. “Did you really think we wouldn’t throw you a birthday party?” Remus asks softly.

It’s not that. He wishes it was that, because the truth is more embarrassing, but he’s not going to let them feel bad just because he’s embarrassed. “I forgot it was my birthday.”

Usually he’s counting down the days, because every day is a day closer to getting out of the Dursley’s house. But here there’s nothing for him to escape, and the days blend easily into the other, with his friends and letters from Draco and Tamil lessons and flying. He’d honestly forgotten. He wasn’t used to his birthday being in and of itself something worth celebrating or counting down to, so it had slipped his mind.

There’s a moment of silence, then everyone’s laughing at him. He thinks at least some of it is out of relief. “It’s going to be in the greenhouse, in case you were wondering,” Fred says dryly. “We’re coming over the morning of to help set everything up.”

“I can help,” he says, and feels someone smack him upside the head, but Fred still has him in a headlock, so he can’t even glare properly.
“You will not,” Ron says haughtily, “What kind friends would we be if you made you set up your own birthday celebration? That’s barbaric.”

“I feel like we mentioned this,” Hermione adds, bending over so she can look him in the eye.

He shrugs as best he can in Fred’s grasp. “Probably.”

“Back to my original point,” Tonks says, “Tell him he can’t do paperwork!”

He hesitates. He’s inclined to do as Tonks tells him, but he’s very aware of the fact that Percy is running a significant chunk of their government, and he doesn’t want to get in the way of that.

Percy sighs. “Fine, if it’ll make you happy. No paperwork.” Tonks kisses him on the cheek, and he looks a lot less upset at the idea of not being productive for a few hours.

“Won’t Fudge be mad?” George asks, obviously concerned less about Fudge’s opinion than he is his brother’s reaction to it.

“Who cares? It’s not like he can afford to fire me,” Percy shrugs.

All the Weasleys freeze. Even Molly looks surprised.

George brushes a tear from his eye that Harry’s not a hundred percent sure is fake. Fred lets go of Harry to walk over and shake Tonks’s hand. “Thank you for turning our brother into a human being,” he says earnestly.

“I’ll revoke your apparition license,” Percy threatens even as Tonks breaks down into undignified snorts of laughter. No one takes him seriously.

It’s another week of Tamil lessons, and flying, and hanging out with his friends. Another week of letters from his soulmate and getting together with his godfathers and friends to figure out what the most important bits of information are, and how to convey them without sending everyone into a panic. Thank merlin he’s not doing this alone, otherwise he’s sure he would mess it up.

He stays up the night before his birthday like he always does, watching the clock tick down. It strikes midnight, and he smiles, pulling his comforter around him, in this room he loves, in a house he loves, one that has people he loves and who love him in return. No cold floor or tiny cupboard or sparse room in a house of people who hate him.

“Iniya Pirantanal valttukkal,” he whispers, wishing himself a happy birthday in Tamil.

If he’d told Remus and Sirius about how he always stays up, they would have stayed up with him, and he knows that. But it’s always something he’s done alone, and it seems silly, and stupid. It’s just, for a while, he was the only one who ever noticed his birthday, if he didn’t wish himself a happy birthday, then no one would. That’s not the case anymore, of course, and hasn’t been for a few years. But it’s a tradition he just can’t seem to shake.

Ritual complete, he closes his eyes and drifts off to sleep.

~

He wakes up the next morning later than he thought he would, the midmorning sun streaming through his window. He glances to his bedside table, wondering if maybe Winky hadn’t just wanted to wake him, but it’s empty. No letter. He’s disappointed, and a little worried. He hopes Draco is okay, and he’s late with his letter because of something silly, like he overslept or Nagini using him as her personal heater.
He showers and gets dressed, pulling on the dark jeans that Hermione had got him last year, and the tank top with a Hungarian Horntail that twins had given him for Christmas. He wonders if it says something that all his friends feel the need to dress him. He just doesn’t know anything about clothes, or really have any opinions on them. He gives his clothes to Pansy so she can tailor them and buys whatever she tells him to, and that’s about the extent of his interaction with his own wardrobe.

They must have heard him coming down the stairs, because he hears them singing happy birthday before he even steps into the kitchen. “HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU!” Remus and Sirius are doing what some people might call singing, while others might just call it yelling. Harry really doesn’t care either way, and he’s beaming as they pull him into a hug, then push him into a chair at the table.

“Iniya Pirantanvaluttukal,” Sirius mutters, pressing a kiss to his forehead, right where his scar is.

Harry’s flushes, but he can’t stop smiling. “Nandri.” Then, “When my friends arrive here?” He knows even as he says it that’s it not exactly correct, but it’s still much more than he could have done two months ago, so he can’t bring himself to be that embarrassed about it.

Remus says, “Avarkal eṇkaṇavē iṭkē irukkiṟārkaḷ. Nāṇkaḷ utava muṟvantōm, āṉāḷ avarkaḷ maṟtuviṭṭārkaḷ, nāṇkaḷ periattai pāḷkkiviṭṭāl avarkaḷ kōpamākavum kōpamākavum iruppārkaḷ eṇṟār.”

Harry blinks. The first part about his friends being here is easy enough, but then something about help, and angry, and destroying something? His friends need help angrily destroying something? That can’t be even a little right. He turns to Sirius and raises an eyebrow.

“Friends here,” he says, willing to simplify and break things down while Remus just says things like Harry is fluent, figuring he’ll pick it up faster that way. And he’s not wrong, but he’s still glad he has both of them teaching him, because between the two of them and their different teaching styles he’s picking things much faster than he thought he would. “We want to help. They say no.”

Oh, that makes sense. He’s about to ask when they’re allowed to go upstairs when there’s a crack, and Winky appears next to them. “Master Draco is being very sorry!” she says, pushing a letter and a small box into his hands. “He is telling me not to say this, but I is wanting you to know that he has not slept because he was trying to finish the present. It is a good present! Happy Birthday, Mister Harry.”

Before Harry can say anything to that, she’s gone again. Uh. Okay.

He unfolds the letter first, even though he’s dying to open the box.

Dearest,

I’m eternally grateful you’ve managed to avoid being killed for another year. To another year of not dying.

Forever yours,

You-Know-Who

Harry snorts, even as he feels warm all over. It also occurs to him that if anyone were to find this out of context, it would look like Voldemort is sending him love letters.

He usually burns the letters when he’s done with them, but there’s absolutely nothing incriminating in this one, and, well, it’s the letter his boyfriend sent him on his birthday, so he puts it aside for now.
The box is small, barely bigger than his hand, and made of polished metal. He opens it and nestled on a pillow of velvet is what looks like a remembrall, except for the band of intertwined copper and silver around the middle.

He holds up the box, and it’s very pretty, but he has no idea what it is. “Have you seen one of these before?”

“Looks like a remembrall,” Sirius says as Remus shakes his head. “Except for the metal bits.”

He picks it up, confident at least that Draco wouldn’t send him something that would hurt him – at least not without warning him – and as soon as his fingertips brush against the glass he lets out a deep sigh. He holds it gently, because it’s still warm with the heat of his soulmate’s magic. “He made it.”

“That doesn’t tell you what it does, though. Would it have killed him to include some instructions?” Sirius asks.

“Probably.” Harry concentrates, and this is likely a little weird, and falls into the realm of things he probably shouldn’t be able to do, but the magic is still there, barely settled, and it’s not too hard to follow the grain of it, to the direction Draco applied it. He rubs his finger across interwoven metal band, and as soon as he’d completed the circle, pale smoke appears in the glass orb. *Password?*

Remus rolls his eyes. “He didn’t send that either. Are you just supposed to guess?”

Harry smiles. “Potter stinks.”

A dark blue light bursts from the orb, and Harry flinches back from it. “Merlin’s balls,” Sirius breathes, and both of his godfathers have their heads craned back, their faces slack with surprise.

Harry looks up and forgets to breathe. Above him, stretched across the kitchen ceiling, is a bright, sunny sky, even though it’s overcast outside. He’d seen that sky just this morning, when he’d opened his eyes and looked up at his ceiling. He can’t know for certain, not until it gets dark and he can check the constellations, but he says, “It’s Tamil Nadu.” He looks back down, and inside the orb two smoky arrows are pointing in opposite directions along the metal band. He runs his finger along it, and the bright patch of sky above him gets smaller, and when he does it the opposite way it’s gets bigger. He can make it small enough to play above his dormitory bed, or large enough to fill the great hall.

He can take Tamil Nadu with him when he goes to Hogwarts. He can take it with him wherever he goes.

Sometimes he loves Draco so much it feels like there’s a fist squeezing his heart until it threatens to burst.

“This is incredible,” Remus says, “Being able to cast the sky replicating charm is impressive enough, but being able to shrink it, and contain it, and for it still remain flexible enough to change dimensions-”

“Draco must really give Hermione a run for her money,” Sirius says, but he’s smiling in a way that looks like it hurts a little bit, which is always how he looks when he’s thinking about Harry’s parents. Sirius has been there, to the place where his father’s family came from, has been there with his father, they would spend whole days there as children, running under the bright Indian sun and eating freshly made bhaji.

Harry knows that if he asks, they’ll take him. But he doesn’t think he’s ready for that yet, doesn’t feel
ready to face India yet. He already spends so much time feeling out of place everywhere else. He
doesn’t want to feel like a stranger in a land that should have been familiar to him, that should have
been a second home to him.

He looks back down at his present, this fantastic, incredible gift that Draco bent the rules of accepted
magic to give him, and merlin, Draco’s brilliant. Harry has power, sure, and he can think on his feet
when he has to, but he could never make anything like this, not on his own, not in secret while living
in a house filled with Death Eaters.

“Yeah,” Harry says, “he does.”

~

Draco is laying across his bed, his transfiguration book open in front of him, but he can’t focus.
Abigail is curled around the top of his poster bed, and Nagini is a familiar weight draped across his
legs, so he’s not in any danger of being disturbed. The only one brave enough to irritate Nagini is
Voldemort, and thankfully the Dark Lord hasn’t yet bothered to pay a visit to Draco’s room, which
can only be counted as a good thing.

Has Harry opened his gift yet? Does he like it? Did he figure it out? Draco almost included
directions, but thought this way would be better. Harry may be dense, but he’s not an idiot. If he can
figure out how to escape a huge crowd of Death Eater while tied to a gravestone or how to summon
a larger patronus than anyone’s ever seen before, Draco’s pretty sure he can figure out his present.

He has the materials to make a couple more, which he plans to do before the holidays are over.
Flitwick better fall off something when he shows him, because it’s his most impressive bit of magic
to date, and his ridiculous mentor better recognize that.

He hopes Harry likes it. He hopes he knows that it was hard to make, and Draco struggled, and tried,
and made it work because it was important, because Harry is important. Does he look different than
when Draco saw him last? He’s used to seeing his soulmate’s face every day, even when they’re
apart. He’s usually darker in the summer because of all the time his aunt forces him to spend
gardening, but there’s no overbearing aunt to force ridiculous chores on him this year, so maybe not.
That’s good. Harry gets too many sunburns over the summer. Is his hair longer? Draco’s is. It’s just
past his shoulders now. Does Harry like him with long hair? He’s never thought to ask. He guesses
he’ll find out.

He sighs and lays his head face down on the book. Being surrounded by mass murderers ready to
torture him at a moment’s notice sucks and all, but mostly he just really misses his boyfriend.

~

Harry lazes around until noon, at which point he’s allowed to go upstairs to his own party. He’s
more excited about his godfathers seeing the greenhouse than he is about his own celebration, and it
shows.

“You know I grew up with it, I know what it looks like,” Sirius says, rolling his eyes as Harry
pushes them up the stairs.

“When’s the last time you saw it?” he asks, “Because I’m pretty sure it was still in the middle of
when Neville and I were tearing it apart, and you didn’t make it much farther than the door.”

Remus snorts. Sirius sniffs, crossing his arms. “Well, we were looking for you, and that’s where you
were, so.”
Harry grin, then stop in front of the door. “Are you ready?”

“I’m pretty sure we should be the ones asking you that,” Remus says.

Harry pushes the door open and makes sure he’s looking at their faces as they step inside.

Neville has done a fantastic job.

The greenhouse is about half a mile long and high, the redwoods hugging the edges and towering above them at over three hundred feet. The grass is soft and a bright green, while white stones mark different paths into the forests. Neville had exhausted all of them by carefully shifting the earth to make paths and clearings within the small forest, and basically setting up a mini ecosystem in each one. Hermione had spent days huddled with Neville designing the pond that now existed in the corner, as well as the irrigation system that spread through the whole greenhouse. Exotic, tropical flowers bloomed at the base of the redwood trees, interspersed with singing tulips, who must be in a good mood based on the soft, sweet lullaby in the air. Harry didn’t think any of those things should go together, and he’s still not entirely sure how Neville managed it. There was a banyan tree in one of the corners, and the artificial sky above them is something he’d done the spellwork for, but Hermione and the twins had designed. It’s a grid system, so each part of the greenhouse gets exactly as much sunlight and rain as it needs. It also meant that nobody but a trained herbologist should move anything around, otherwise this whole system would collapse.

The front and center part of the greenhouse is like a normal park, lush and tamed and beautiful. But the deeper in, the more wild it becomes, but it’s the best kind. It’s wild by design. There isn’t a single leaf or petal in the whole place that Neville hasn’t personally added.

Sirius and Remus look even more shocked than when they’d seen Draco’s gift, and he’s beaming. He has very talented friends. Neville should be very proud of what he’s done, and he makes a note to tell him that before tonight is over.

There’s some more changes too, things that they did just for him. There’s picnic tables, and literal fairy lights, as well as large lumos charms that have been colored and frozen before being tossed into the air. The tables are laden with food, and his friends are here. Not all of them, of course, not the Slytherins, but almost everyone else.

Ron walks over and throws an arm over his shoulders while everyone else bursts into applause and starts a very off key rendition of Happy Birthday. “Do you like it?”

“I love it,” he says honestly.

Hagrid brings out a giant cake, pink with green icing, just like the very first birthday cake he ever had, the one Hagrid gave him on the day they met, only it’s bigger. Because that cake was just for Harry, but this one is for Harry and all the people who love him, so it’s bigger, because there are a lot of those now, more than he ever thought he’d have. Hagrid can bake normal cakes when he wants to, because it’s soft and delicious, and he doesn’t even have to soak it in tea to bite into it.

They eat and hang out and play until the sun sets, the greenhouse darkening to reflect the late hour even though all of the sunlight is artificial, so the lumos charms and fairies are what’s filling the room with light. He opens presents, and he loves everyone’s gifts, of course, but mostly he loves that how happy they all are to give them to him.

It’s nearing the end of the night when Remus and Sirius exchange a look and stand up. “Harry,” Remus calls out, “come here.”
Harry’s in the middle of a spirited discussion with Fleur, Charlie, and Ginny on the effectiveness of gliding moves in quidditch, and the fairness (or lack thereof) on referees calling foul when a player stands on their broom a couple seconds too long. He’s kind of invested in the conversation, but Fleur just pats his shoulder and says, “We will continue when you return.”

He nods and walks over to his godparents, “What’s up?”

“Stand back,” Sirius says, “and close your eyes.”

“Must you do this in front of me!” Arthur calls out, “I’d like plausible deniability!”

“Well, we forged your name on the permit, so that might be a little hard,” Remus says. “Besides, like you’re one to talk.” Arthur just sighs.

Harry is so confused, but just does as they ask, and closes his eyes. Sirius places something in front of him, steps back, and mutters, “Finite incantum.”

He barely gets the chance to wonder what spell his godfather has ended when there’s excited gasps, a couple people cursing, and Molly calling out, “Sirius Black, you’re out of your mind!”

“It’s okay,” Remus says, “Open your eyes.”

He does, and his mouth falls open. In front of him is a sleek, dark red motorbike, perfectly polished so it shines even in the weak light. It’s detailed with small golden snitches that go whizzing across the surface. “Bloody hell,” he breathes, “please tell me this flies.”

“We didn’t spend all that time practicing in the sky for nothing,” Sirius says. “Do you like it? Remus did all the fiddly bits of taking it apart and putting it back together, and I applied charms.”

Remus elbows Sirius in the ribs. “We both took it apart to apply the charms. If Sirius hadn’t helped it would have taken forever.”

Harry is dying to get on the bike, but he runs over to Sirius and throws his arms around his neck, then reaches out and pulls Remus in what he doesn’t immediately step in to join them. “Thank you! I love it!”

“He’s not bringing that to school,” Molly says.

“You’re very welcome,” Sirius says, squeezing him almost hard enough to break a rib before stepping back.

Remus ruffles his hair, then pushes him towards the bike. “Take it for a spin.”

“Why do I feel like no one is listening to me?” Molly asks.

Arthur looks down at her and asks, “What? Did you say something?”

Harry snorts at Molly’s look of outrage, then gets on the bike, and it’s perfect, it’s wonderful. He turns the key and looks to Ron and Hermione. “Want a ride?”

“Yes,” Ron says, even while Hermione shakes her head and eyes the bike like it might bite her. Ron sits behind Harry and puts his arms around his waist. Everyone, even Molly, cheers as he drives around the garden, shooting Neville an apologetic glance about messing up the grass before flipping a switch and flying into the air.

It’s a really good birthday.
Time seems to pass quickly after that, the second half of the summer slipping through his fingers. It’s more of the same, the delicate balancing act of what exactly he’s telling the Order from Draco’s letter, and then spending the rest of his time learning Tamil, finishing up his schoolwork, and hanging out with his friends. He and Sirius spend a lot of time riding their motorbikes in the sky. Neville still comes over all the time to do maintenance on the greenhouse, and has started showing Kreacher how to take care of it while they’re in school.

Kreacher is delighted by the greenhouse, and also just seems generally happier now that’s he’s managing the house. Sirius still double checks that a room has been cleared of curses before unlocking it to everyone else, but so far they’ve all been safe, and his godfather seems tentatively pleased with Kreacher’s new role in the house.

By the time he has to go to his trial, it feels like almost no time has passed at all. “Are you nervous?” Remus asks over breakfast, which has been prepared by Kreacher. Harry kind of misses cooking, but they have to explain to Kreacher when they want to cook for fun, otherwise he gets upset.

He shrugs. “Not really. I mean, worst case scenario, we just move to France, right?”

“Right,” Sirius says. “Is Zaira coming here, or are you meeting at the courthouse?”

“Meeting at the courthouse,” Harry answers, “Ron said it would be more dramatic that way, whatever that means. Pansy offered to make me a formal robe for it, and Ron told her to stuff it. I’m to wear muggle clothes and look kind of confused, which is easy, since I’m kind of confused most of the time.”

Remus snorts. Kreacher appears with a crack. “Mr. Weasley here to see you.”

He’s barely finished talking when Arthur into the kitchen and shouts, “Percy just sent word, they’ve changed the time of the hearing!” He grabs Harry’s elbow and drags him towards the fireplace.

“My breakfast!” he cries, “Also that seems illegal.”

“Good luck!” Sirius calls out, but Remus is too busy laughing at him.

Harry twists around to stick his tongue out at them before Arthur yanks him out of the kitchen and pushes him towards the fireplace and into the green flames. He stumbles out into a candy shop, and he already resigned himself to missing his hearing and having to learn French when Arthur walks out behind him and grabs his hand, pulling him out of the shop and onto the street. “Come on, we have to hurry!”

“Why didn’t we just floo into the ministry?” Harry asks, running to keep up with Arthur.

“Because my son threatened to disown me if I didn’t follow his instructions, and assuming his media campaign has been half as effective as he was hoping – oh,” Arthur cuts himself off. Harry looks up and his mouth drops open.

Surrounding the front steps to the ministry are hundreds of people shouting while a line of aurors holds everyone back. They’re yelling, and some are holding signs, but he can’t really make out what anything says. “What’s going on? Why is everyone so upset? Did something happen?”

“Ron will be happy,” Arthur says, putting his arm around Harry’s shoulders and pushing him forward. “It’s for you. People are pretty upset about the charges being brought against you. You saved more than their lives. You saved their souls.”
He swallows. He hasn’t really been in public all summer, not since that disastrous trip to Diagon Alley, and everyone kept saying that people were mad, that it was unfair, but it’s an entirely different thing to see all these people showing up and causing a fuss because of him. He’s not sure how they’re going through to the steps with so many people, but it doesn’t end up being a problem. People start to notice him as he gets closer, and a whispered hush falls over them, then more yelling, and he prepares for a second to run in case this mob turns on him. But everyone parts for him, and some people are crying. They’re yelling out their praise, and people trail their hands over him as he walks past, which is incredibly uncomfortable, but they’re smiling and thanking him, and he doesn’t want to seem rude or ungrateful, so he tolerates it.

It’s a relief when they get to the end, and two aurors he doesn’t recognize shift to let him past.

Standing at the top of the stairs are Blaise and Zaira, who has her hand tucked into the crook of her son’s elbow. Blaise isn’t as tall as Ron, but he’s close, and he must have enjoyed the Italian sun, because his skin is even darker than when Harry saw him last. He’s in a set of pure white dress robes that give Harry anxiety just to look at. Blaise is pristine, and he wonders if it’s because of a spell, since Harry knows he wouldn’t be able to take more than two steps before getting something on them. He’s looking out at everything with a look of bored disdain, his perfectly tailored robes emphasizing his broad shoulders, and Harry has to admit that of all his friends, Blaise is objectively the coolest.

Zaira smiles as he approaches and runs her hand through his hair. “Harry, dear, we worried you wouldn’t make it.”

Her braids are pulled into a bun on top of her head, the gold clasps that are dotted throughout glinting in the sunlight. She has on a bright red trench coat cinched at her waist, white strappy heels that make her tower over the rest of them, and a shade of lipstick the same color as her trench coat, along with matching nail polish. She’s still the most beautiful woman he’s ever seen, but Harry’s pretty sure he’d still feel that way if she’d shown up wearing a garbage bag. “Sorry,” he says.

Arthur has his head tilted to the side. “Why is your son here?”

“Well, I couldn’t possibly leave my home unescorted,” she demurs, and Arthur rolls his eyes so hard Harry almost expects him to strain something. “But I suppose now that Harry’s here, he may be released.”

Blaise gives the impression of sighing without actually moving. He shifts and goes on his tiptoes to kiss his mother’s cheek, then looks to Harry and says, “Take care of my mother, Potter.”

He’s pretty sure it’s supposed to be the other way around, what with Zaira being his lawyer and all. There’s a crack, then Blaise disappears.

“He’s too young to have his apparation license,” Arthur says immediately.

Zaira’s brown eyes go wide, affecting a look of complete innocence that would almost be believable if Harry didn’t spend so much time around Luna. “Oh, the age requirement is different in Italy.”

“No it’s not,” Arthur says. “But we don’t have time to argue about it. Do you want me to escort you there?”

“And ruin the full effect? Of course not.” She winks at him, then pulls Harry along with her into the Ministry. She somehow makes it look like Harry is the one leading even though he has no idea
where he’s going or what’s going on. People stare and whisper as they walk past, and Harry does his best to ignore it. People are always pointing and whispering at him. He doesn’t see why this should be any different. They arrive at an ornate set of double doors. “Darling, just follow my lead and everything will be fine.”

“Okay,” he says.

She waves her hand and the doors pull themselves open. While all the magic Harry’s seen her perform has been relatively simple, he’s still never actually seen her use a wand. She must have one, right? They walk inside and Harry glances around. The room isn’t that big, but the Wizengamot are sitting in a half circle in a balcony above them, which he personally considers to be a cheap shot at intimidation. Fudge is front and center, with Percy sitting just behind him, his face carefully blank, but Harry doesn’t really recognize anyone else. There’s a woman in violent pink on one side of Fudge, then a plump woman in muted silver robes on the other with dark auburn hair streaked with grey. She looks familiar in a way Harry can’t immediately place.

“You’re late,” Fudge says, voice echoing in the chamber. It takes a considerable amount of willpower to keep from rolling his eyes. He’s fought Voldemort multiple and been friends with Ginny for years. Do they really think these types of tricks are going to work on him?

Zaira walks across the room to the simple table and two chairs placed in the center, the sound of her heels hitting the floor echoing with her every step. He thinks she might be using magic to do that. “I do believe we’re early, dear Minister.” She unties her red trench coat and shrugs it off her shoulders, letting it fall. Before it can hit the ground, it disappears in a shower of golden sparks. Instead of sitting in the chair, Zaira sits on the edge of the desk and crosses one long leg over the other, leaning to the side and propping herself up with one arm while the other is draped across her knee.

She’s wearing a tight, short bandage dress that hugs and emphasizes all of her curves. It falls off her shoulders, but has long sleeves, and he’s never seen her wear something without a high collar before. Right below her collarbone is a black circle, barely darker than the rest of her skin. It’s a soulmark.

It’s definitely not the sort of dress a lawyer should wear to court, but there’s a good half minute where everyone in the room forgets to breath, which he’s pretty sure is her intention. The silence is only broken when she pulls a long pin from her hair, causing it to unravel from its bun so her braids fall out and over her shoulder in a graceful waterfall.

“Zaira,” Fudge starts, and then has to clear his throat to start again, “Zaira, what’s the meaning of this?”

“That’s Barrister Zabini to you, Minister,” she says, and okay, it’s so obvious where Blaise gets his coolness from. Harry understands how Draco had a crush on her when he was a kid. If he wasn’t stupidly in love with his boyfriend, he might have a crush on her now. “I’m representing Mr. Potter. I assume that’s not a problem?” Fudge sputters, and the woman in pink wrinkles her nose. The woman in silver raises an eyebrow, but Harry thinks there might be a smile hovering around the corners of her mouth. He can’t really see anyone else, only that it looks like there are about four dozen of them. The lighting in here is really awful. “I assume you’re aware of section seven, paragraph thirteen of the Proper Procedures in Criminal Trials Act that was passed in fourteen eighty three? Which, of course, stipulates that the accused must have at least a moon cycle’s warning of the date and time of their hearing. Minister,” she says, eyes half lidded and a smile that looks like she’s eating something sweet, “I could move to have this whole case dismissed on your ill thought out decision to move the time of this trial alone.”

“This is preposterous!” he shouts, face turning an interesting shade of red.
“I won’t, however,” she says, as if consoling a small child. This is the best thing Harry’s ever seen. If he gets his wand snapped, it’ll be worth it. “Would you like to read the charges against my client, Minister?”

“Harry Potter used magic during the summer in spite of being underage,” he snaps. “He broke the underage magic law, and must be punished! Hundreds of witnesses saw the boy’s ridiculous patronus, there’s no denying it!”

She shrugs, “You’re correct, Minister. He did use underage magic, and in front of hundreds of witnesses. He broke the law. Those who break the law should be punished.”

Wait, what? He glances at her, but she’s not looking at him at all, instead staring serenely at the Wizengamot. Well, she said to follow her lead.

Fudge’s mouth falls open, then snaps shut again. “So he pleads guilty?”

“Yes,” she answers, and Harry trusts Ron, which means he trusts Zaira, but he kind of wishes he knew what was going on. “My client pleads guilty to the crime of underage magic, and offers no defense for his actions. Sentence him to the fullest extent of the law.” Fudge’s grin looks like wide enough to break his face. ‘There are so many very eager people waiting outside to hear the outcome of this trial. I do hope you were generous with your aurors’ holiday bonuses, Minster. They’ll have quite a task controlling the crowd.’

People begin shifting awkwardly in their seats. The woman in pink demands, “What are you talking about?”

“Why, those hundreds of witnesses are waiting outside the ministry steps,” she says. “My client’s illegal use of underage magic saved their lives after all, from the very creatures the ministry was supposed to be controlling. But of course, there are no extenuating circumstances under the law. My client broke the law, and he must pay the consequences. We must all pay for the consequences of our actions. No one is exempt from this, not even the Boy Who Lived.”

Nor you, she doesn’t say, but it’s implied clearly enough that she might as well have shouted it.

Fudge runs his sleeve over his face to wipe away the sweat. “How – how many people, exactly?”

“Oh, it was so hard to count,” she murmurs. “Still, we can’t allow something so little as citizen opinions sway the might of the law, can we? You’re elected officials, after all. You must uphold the law.”

The woman in pink looks like she’s sucking on a lemon, and Fudge keeps patting his face, eyes so wide that they look a little crazed.

The other woman slaps her hand down in front of her, and everyone jumps at the sound. “Well, Cornelius, pronounce him guilty and give him his sentence. This is what you wanted, isn’t it?”

“I – yes, that is, I mean,” he stutters.

“Perhaps you should refrain from admitting bias in the middle of a trial,” Zaira suggest gently, then adds, “and might I recommend taking the floo home today? Hopefully they’ll calm down soon enough. Surely public anger won’t last more than a week or two, a couple months at most.”

The Wizengamot elections occur on Samhain, meaning the two months before Halloween will be very busy for them.
“Enough of this!” calls out a gruff voice, and all Harry can see of the man speaking is that he has white hair. “I’m too old to be called to trial for a teenager casting a spell, even if that teenager is Harry Potter. Shall we allow this case to set a precedent, and have our hours and days filled with passing down punishments to overeager children?”

“I’d rather not,” sniffs a woman with a reedy voice. “I move to dismiss the charges against Mr. Potter. Those who agree with me say aye.”

“Now hold on a minute,” Fudge starts, but is quickly drowned out by a chorus of “Aye!” from the other members.

The redhead in silver stands, “Well, that seems clear enough. The Wizengamot has spoken. Will you oppose the will of your peers, Cornelius?”

For a moment Harry thinks he’s going to veto the ruling on principle, but then his shoulders slump and he mutters, “The motion is passed.”

She waits a beat, but then he makes no other move to continue speaking, the woman turns to them. “Harry Potter, the charges against you are dismissed and you are free to go.”

“Uh, thanks,” he says, then looks to Zaira, uncertain of what to do next.

She snaps her fingers and, in a shower of golden sparks, her trench coat settles around her shoulders. “Lovely seeing you all. We should do this again sometime.” She places her hand on the middle of Harry’s back and pushes him towards the doors, which once more open with a wave of Zaira’s hand.

The doors close behind him and he looks up at her. “Thank you.”

“Oh, it was my pleasure, I assure you.” She slips her arms through her coat and cinches it around her waist, then reaches into her pocket and pulls out a delicate silver pocket watch, flicking it open with one red nail. “That was over more quickly than I anticipated. We can either venture into the throng of your adoring fans to inform them of your freedom, or we can go get an early lunch.”

He’s still hungry from this morning’s interrupted breakfast, and he hates adoring crowds. “Lunch, please.”

He’s a little worried about being ambushed at the Leaky Cauldron, but that’s not where they go. Instead they end up at the small, tucked away restaurant with polished marble floors and all the attendants in dress robes. Harry feels very out of place in his jeans. Zaira doesn’t so much have to open her mouth, as soon as they see her approaching they’re whisked away to a corner table covered in a navy table cloth next to a window. One of the attendants offers to take her coat, and she undoes the tie, but when she slips it off Harry’s surprised. Her dress is the same color, but now it hugs her thighs and falls to just above her knees. It’s sleeveless with a high collar that hides her soulmark, and he wonders if it was her cleavage or her soulmark that was supposed to be distracting. Maybe both.

The attendant steps back, and Zaira says, “My usual, and the same for Mr. Potter. My normal companion should be joining as momentarily.”

“Oh, of course, Mrs. Zabini,” he demurs, head lowered as he steps away without turning his back to her.

“It’s delicious, don’t worry,” she says, giving him a warm smile. “I wouldn’t feed you something awful, and if you hate it, we’ll order something else.”

He flushes, “Oh, no, that’s fine! I’m sure it’s great. I’m not a picky eater. Um, did you say someone would be joining us?”
“That would be me!” The voice sounds familiar, and he turns around to see the auburn haired witch from the Wizengamot in the same muted silver robes. “Really, Zaira, you almost gave half of them aneurisms, was that really necessary?”

“Yes,” she answers as the witch takes a seat at their table. “Amelia, meet Harry Potter. Harry, this is my dear friend, Amelia Bones. We attended law school together, and sat the same barrister examination.”

Oh, that’s it! “You’re related to Susan Bones, right?” he asks, “You look like her.” Then, worried he might be being rude, he holds out his hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Her handshake is warm and firm, and she looks him in the eye when she speaks. “I believe she’s the one who looks like me, as I was around first, but yes. Susan is my niece. She speaks well of you.”

Well, that’s surprising, since he mostly only knows anything about Susan because she’s friends with Draco. He complains that she bullied him into it, but he doesn’t really do anything to discourage her, so Harry doesn’t buy that. “She’s nice,” he says, because he likes the way she doesn’t judge Draco for his family, if nothing else.

“She’s ambitious and sharp and needs to learn to hold her tongue if she ever expects to take my job,” she says, eyes sparkling. “But yes, I suppose she’s nice.”


Amelia’s eyes narrow, but at that moment the attendant arrives with a basket of bread and a bottle of mulled wine. Harry gets the impression that it wasn’t a coincidence. To his surprise, he gets a glass poured for him as well, and it’s not like he hasn’t drank before, or that he thinks Zaira cares about that sort of thing, but they are getting lunch with a member of the Wizengamot, and assuming she’s the same Amelia Bones that Ron is talking about all the time, she’s also the head of the law enforcement department. He’s having lunch with Kingsley’s boss. She must catch his hesitation, because she winks and says, “I won’t tell if you won’t.”

Harry ends up having a wonderful lunch with both of them, even though he can’t really name any of the many small and delish courses that waiters keep bringing over. They both somehow manage to keep him from feeling excluded from the conversation, even when they’re speaking about things that he knows nothing about, and at no point does he feel like a dumb tag along kid.

They finish up their lunch, and Amelia pays for all of them over Harry protests. Zaira only thanks her for the meal, and from Amelia’s eyeroll, he gets the impression that this happens often.

All the Weasleys, Hermione, Fleur, and Neville are waiting for him when he steps back through the fireplace into his living room. He doesn’t get a chance to say anything before he’s mobbed and people are hugging him and ruffling his hair, and he sees his godfathers hanging back and grinning at him.

The next Order meeting, everyone congratulates him, although both of the Flamels express their disappointment that he won’t be relocating to their home country.

Summer is nearly over. In one week, he’ll be back within Hogwarts’s walls once more, and he’ll be able to have all his friends back. He can’t wait.

~

Voldemort is in a terrible mood, which Draco takes as good news. He’s proven right when he hears that the charges brought up against Harry were dismissed, and it’s like a weight is lifted off his chest.
He thought it would be fine, especially after Blaise’s mom got involved, but he couldn’t help but worry that Fudge’s desire for an artificial sense of control would outweigh his desire to keep the Wizengamot on his side. His position wasn’t up for reelection, of course, but the positions of a bunch of his supporters were, and it would be hard for Fudge to keep order in a Wizengamot when all the people in his pocket had been voted out of office.

Actually, maybe it would have been for the greater good if Harry had been convicted. But then Draco would have missed him, and he doesn’t really care about the greater good in the face of that.

The Dark Lord stays in such a sour mood that his father tells him to go make himself scarce, which he obeys eagerly. He only has to deal with this stuff for two more days, and at Hogwarts there’s a different type of lying and sneaking around, but at least there he gets to see his boyfriend. He goes out to the forests lining the grounds, and sure enough he’s barely made it to the edge before Nagini comes rushing up behind him. She whacks him in the legs and he falls face first into the grass, barely having time to break his fall. “Was that really necessary?”

He doesn’t speak Parseltongue, obviously, but he’s pretty sure that’s her offended hissing.

The original plan was to get some dueling practice in. His mother didn’t let him get away with anything, and wiped the floor with him every night. He’d be discouraged, except last week Narcissa had him face his father again, and he’d actually won. He’s pretty sure he just got lucky, but Lucius has been surprised to find himself helpless on the other end of his son’s wand, so at least Lucius hadn’t let him win on purpose. But his dueling lessons are a secret, which means he can’t do any practicing in front of Nagini, who gets furious at him whenever he goes into the forests without her, which he doesn’t get. It’s not like she’s around all the time anyway! Voldemort has her by his side at times, or sends her off to do things, either spying or killing people he assumes, although what precisely Nagini is doing has yet to come up in any of the Death Eater meetings, which seems odd to him, but it’s not like he can just walk up and ask Voldemort about it.

“Do you want to hunt or are you just here to keep me company?” he asks, getting to his feet and brushing dirt from the front of his robes. She curls around his feet, then slithers off them, but doesn’t go more than five feet in front of him. “Company,” he sighs, which is probably for the best, the elves are getting really annoyed with him showing up to the kitchen with a bunch Nagini’s kills. Apparently it upsets their standing grocery order. Nagini only eats every couple of weeks, so aside from the occasional rabbit as a snack, most of her hunting is for sport.

He’d expected her to eat less often than that, but it had only taken him about a month of watching her and Voldemort to figure out it was probably on his orders. If Nagini ate until she was full, then she’d be slow and tired and not useful to him for several days after the fact. She ate less more often so that, if necessary, she could go and murder someone for him.

He’s a little concerned that all of those rabbits have been contraband and Voldemort’s going to murder him for giving his snake treats, but he’s not going to tell him, and he can’t imagine that Nagini is either, so he tries not to worry about it.

He talks aloud about his current charms problem, which is trying to figure out how to get his portable sky to show more than one location. What he really wants to make is a portable version of Harry’s bedroom ceiling, but setting it to just one location was tricky enough. “Adding one or two more is going to be easy, comparatively speaking,” he says. Nagini probably knows a lot about charms now, considering how often he gives her lectures about it. He’s still been working on the ghost summing charm, but has been careful not to mention any of his research on it in front of Nagini, just in case she recognizes it from Harry’s attempt to use it in the graveyard. “But the way the math is working out, in order to get what I really want, I’m pretty sure I’m going to have to entirely reconceptualize
how I minimize and contain the spell, so I don’t know if it’s worthwhile to spend time on baby steps if I end up having to do something completely different anyway.”

Draco lets Nagini lead the way, because she’s been here long enough to know where she’s going. They veer off their usual path, but they’re still on one of the trails, so he doesn’t worry about it. He’s still talking about the different equations and experiments he’s planning to do when he realizes she’s taking him to the pond, which surprises him. He doesn’t go there often now, although his mother had taken him there all the time when he was kid. It’s where she taught him to swim. It’s not very large, maybe a hundred feet wide, and only about ten feet deep at the center.

There are large, flat rocks surrounding it, and he’s still talking as he takes a seat. The rocks are hot to the touch, which makes him wince, but now he understands why Nagini wanted to come here. She moved on to complaining about the potions stocks in the dungeons, although not specifying they’re healing potions, just in case. They’re full to bursting, but he can’t help but worry that it won’t be enough, and it’s not like he can trust his parents to tell him if they need something, they’re too worried about protecting him. He could send Winky back during the school year to check on the stores and bring more if there’s a need, or even ask one of the family elves to do it. As long as his parents don’t order the elves not to do it, there’s no reason they can’t. Which they might if they know about it, but there’s no reason to tell them either, and the family elves can be sneaky if they want to be.

He hears a splash and looks over just in time to see Nagini slipping into the pond, and huffs. Rude. It’s not like she’s adding anything to the conversation, after all. Or it’s possible she saw a fish. He doesn’t think there’s anything big enough to interest her in there, though, so trying to get away from his conversation topic is more likely. What else is there to talk about? What does Nagini care about? Besides annoying him and goading Abigail into hissing at her, nothing, as far as he can tell. Well, she likes hunting, but again, the pond isn’t big enough to hold anything interesting. Unless small game is more interesting than him which, again, rude.

He tilts his face up to the sun and waits. Then waits his some more. He’s not sure exactly how much time has passed, but he’s starting to get a little worried. Has it been longer than ten minutes? Because that’s about how long a snake like her can go before they need to come up for air. It feels longer than ten minutes. Maybe she poked her nose up out of the water, and he just wasn’t looking.

Regardless, he’s looking now. He scans the surface of the lake, searching for any sign of her, or of something gone wrong, some sort of thrashing or splashing, but there’s none of that. She’s a twenty foot long snake, and the pond is not that big, she has to be in there, but there’s not even a ripple across the water.

He notices something dark rising from the center of the pond, and he relaxes, waiting for her head to break the surface of the water. It doesn’t, instead the dark spot reaches the surface, and spreads, and it takes him a long moment of confusion before he understands what he’s seeing.

It’s blood.

“WINKY!” he cries, pulling off his robe and shoes. There’s a crack, and he doesn’t even look over as he says, “Nagini is hurt, get help.” He casts the bubblehead charm on himself, and dives into the lake.

The water is mostly clear, and it’s not deep. He should be able to see what’s wrong as soon he’s underwater, but he can’t, instead he just sees the trail of red blood floating up from below. Something is wrong, more than just the blood. He should be able to see the bottom of the pond, and he can’t, it’s too far for him to see. Which means, somehow, that it’s deeper than ten feet. Something has made it
deeper, something with the power to get past the Malfoy family wards, which means it’s something he shouldn’t mess with.

But Nagini is missing, and probably hurt. She’s an annoying murderous snake, but that doesn’t mean he can just leave her to die. Besides, what would Voldemort do if Nagini died while she was out with Draco? Nothing good, of course. So he has to go help her. For his own self interest.

He follows the blood trail down, swimming deeper and deeper. At a point the sunlight doesn’t reach him anymore, which is another thing that doesn’t make any sense, the water is clear enough that the sun should still be able to reach him, but he doesn’t have the time to question it. He pulls out his wand and casts, “Lumos!”

A bright beam of light shoots out his wand and illuminates the cloud of red in front of him. He can finally see Nagini trying to push herself to the surface, but unable to. Draco doesn’t know if it’s because of her injuries, lack of oxygen, or if something is holding her back, but he doesn’t care. He found her, and he’s going to bring her to the surface. He ends the light charm and casts wingardium leviosa blind, but she’s twenty feet long and right in front of him, he has to hit at least some part of her. He knows he has when he feels the strain of levitating several hundred pounds of snake, and raises his wand upwards and starts swimming. He doesn’t know if whatever hurt her is still around, and he doesn’t want to find out. He ends up having to levitate her at angle away from him, otherwise all the blood makes it impossible to see.

They’re about halfway there when he sees something moving out of the corner of his eye, and he panics, but when he looks over it’s just his dad. Lucius grabs his arms, eyes wide and frantic, but Draco can’t explain now. He pulls himself from Lucius’s grip and jerks his head towards the surface, and he must get the idea, because Lucius lets him go and just swims beside him instead.

Because he’s levitating Nagini in front of him, she breaks the surface first, and when he and his dad catch up, his mum is still screaming at Nagini bleeding and limp in the air. “It’s okay,” he says, cancelling his bubble head charm, unsure if he’s speaking to his mother or Nagini. Why isn’t she moving? She was moving before. Wait, no, she’s still twitching, more like small muscle spasms than anything else, but she’s still alive. That’s what matters. He carefully lowers her to the ground and goes running for her, but Lucius grabs his elbow, holding him back. “Let go!”

“Don’t,” Lucius says, soaking wet and terrified. “If she lashes out–”

He’s already gone through so much trouble to save her, he’s not going to stand by and watch her die. “No one’s asking you to do it,” he retorts, tearing his arm away from Lucius’s prying fingers and falling beside her, wand in hand. The wounds are obvious now, three large puncture wounds in the center of her abdomen, each one large enough for him to put his fist through. He grips his wand, but freezes, not sure what to do. All the healing spells he knows are for people, he doesn’t know anything about snake anatomy, or what spells will be effective on a massive reptile.

As he stands there, frozen in his indecision, she stops moving at all. He looks towards her wounds, and they’re not bleeding anymore, not really. Which means her heart isn’t beating.

“There’s nothing you can do,” Narcissa says softly, “Please, come here.”

No.

All this means is that he has nothing to lose by trying.

“Ementur lignum carnium!” It’s the same spell he used on his father to repair the worst of the damage to his stomach.
“Stop it!” Lucius shouts, but Draco only waves his wand and pushes both of his parents back to the edge of the forest. He can’t deal with them right now.

Slowly, the wounds close, and they don’t look entirely healed, but they’re closed, they’re better, it’s good enough. “Magis sanguis!” The blood replenishing potion is more effective, but he’s not quite stupid enough to try and force a potion past Nagini’s fangs, even if her heart isn’t beating right now, even if she’s dead. He’s not going to let her stay that way. “Parva fulgar,” he casts, his only hope. It’s an electrocution hex, and if her heart has completely stopped beating, then it won’t work, there’s no use. But if it’s beating irregularly, or softly, if there’s anything left to react to the electricity and maybe set her heart beating again at a normal rhythm – it might work. And if not, at least he tried, at least he didn’t stay frozen and doing nothing.

There’s a crack, and he assumes it’s Winky. It’s not.

“WHAT HAPPENED?” Voldemort roars, grabbing Draco by the front of his shirt and pulling him up so he can glare at him with furious red eyes. He doesn’t even know how he knew Nagini was hurt. It’s not like Winky would have told him.

“I – she went in the pond,” he stutters, “and something attacked her. I didn’t see what it was.”

Voldemort pushes him to the ground and takes out his wand. Draco tries raises his own, but he’s not fast enough. “Crucio!”

He tries to hold back his screams as the pain rips through him, setting his nerves on fire, and he manages it, his mouth fills with blood from biting his tongue, but he doesn’t scream. Then he remembers Voldemort asking his mother to scream for him, and it occurs to him that his silence won’t do him any favors, so he drops it. He’s on his knees and screaming, and everything hurts so much more than he ever thought anything could hurt.

“My lord, please,” he hears his father beg, and no, this can’t be happening, it’s one thing if Voldemort hurts him, and it’s another entirely if Voldemort hurts his parents.

The pain stops, and he’s panting, forcing his eyes open so he can see. His mother is standing back, but her wand is in her hand, and he wants to shout for her to run, to not do something stupid. His father is to the side, his hands raised. “I thought your son might prove useful, but I was wrong,” Voldemort says, cold. “I don’t keep useless things around.” He raises his wand once more. “Avada–”

He flinches and tries to step back, but there’s nowhere for him to run. Lucius jumps in front of him, and he’s not going to have enough time to push his father out of the way, what is he thinking –

Something knocks into Voldemort, and he stumbles, losing his grip on the spell. Lucius pushes Draco behind him, but he twists out of his grip enough to look around and see what’s happening.

Nagini is coiled in front them, head raised and poised to strike, in the way of whatever spell Voldemort might try and throw at them. They’re staring at each other, and angry hissing is leaving Nagini’s mouth. Voldemort responds in Parseltongue, and Nagini strikes at him, but he doesn’t move and she misses, so it looks like it was a warning, and one he knew was coming.

“You see, my lord?” Lucius asks, and his voice is shaking. “Nagini is fine. Draco saved her.”

“He saved a snake,” he sneers, and Draco doesn’t understand what that’s supposed to mean. “That’s not the part that matters.”

What? He’s so confused. Is this how Harry feels all the time?
Nagini hisses again, and Voldemort’s eyes narrow. He tucks his wand up his sleeve and walks away, and with one more pointed comment in Parseltongue over his shoulder, Nagini follows him. As soon as Voldemort apparates himself and Nagini away, his father turns and crushes him to his chest, kissing his cheek and cupping the back of his head.

“Why did you jump in front of me!” he shouts, hitting his father on the back and trying to pull away, but Lucius doesn’t let him, holding him even tighter. “That was stupid, you could have died!”

“I’d rather die protecting you than live without you,” he says, and Draco stills. It sounds like his dad is crying.

He only has a moment to panic about that when his mother pulls him out his father’s arms into her own, and he’s taller than her now, but she pulls him down so she can press her cheek to his. She’s not crying, thank Merlin. “Draco, darling, are you okay? I saw Nagini, so I didn’t move, I had my wand but I didn’t do anything, and what if she hadn’t saved you like I thought she would, what if I was wrong and I watched you both die in front of me–”

This is awful. Maybe he would prefer her crying to hysterical. His mum doesn’t freak out, not like this, not even when Voldemort’s torturing her or her husband is bleeding to death in front of her. “Mum!” He pulls back enough to press his forehead to hers, and she looks so scared. He hates that he made her scared. “Everything’s okay. Dad’s okay. I’m okay. You did the right thing. You made the right choice.”

She stares into his eyes for a long moment, then nods, taking a deep breath and visibly composing herself, pulling herself back together like closing a curtain. She kisses his forehead, then steps back. He doesn’t understand until she grabs his shoulders and turns him around.

His father is definitely crying, and he’s standing tall with his hands clasped behind his back, trying to control himself, but he’s not Narcissa, and he doesn’t work like that. Draco has absolutely no defense against his parents’ pain. He hugs his dad again, because he doesn’t know what else to do. There’s a moment where Lucius is stiff, but then he crumples, crushing Draco against him once more.

Somehow, he feels worse because he didn’t do anything wrong, yet they’re still upset. Saving Nagini was the right thing to do, and the smart thing to do, because if he hadn’t Voldemort might have killed all of them. But that doesn’t matter, because he almost died, and now his parents are upset, which is more upsetting to him than the whole almost dying bit, personally speaking.

~

Harry holds Draco’s letter in his hands, and he realizes he’s crumpling it and has to take deep breath so he can unclench his hands and smooth out the parchment. “Winky, what happened?”

Everything’s fine. Nothing to report. Don’t worry.

Forever yours,

You-Know-Who

In the dozens and dozens of letters Draco has sent him, in the nearly two months that he’s spent under the same roof as Voldemort and his followers, not once has Draco told him not to worry. If he’s saying it now, then that means Harry has a reason to worry.

“You will be seeing Master Draco tomorrow,” she says, “You should be asking him that then.”

“Is he alright?” he asks. “Nothing awful has happened, has it?”
Winky curtseys and says, “I will be seeing you later, Mister Harry,” before disappearing.

Well, he’s definitely worried now. But it can’t be too bad, he can’t be seriously hurt or anything like that, because then Winky wouldn’t be so calm. She loves Draco, and if he were hurt, she wouldn’t be able to hide it. He thinks. He hopes. He’s at least okay enough to write the letter, and she said that he’ll be on the Hogwarts Express tomorrow, so everything’s probably fine.

He’s distracted the rest of the day, but when his godparents ask he just says he’s excited to start school again and see all his friends. He doesn’t want to admit that he’s worrying specifically because Draco told him everything’s fine and not to worry, because that sounds ridiculous.

They’ve all just sat down to dinner when Kreacher appears next them. He’s wearing a black robe with little constellations stitched on it, and Harry knows immediately that it’s Winky’s handiwork. She must have decided that Kreacher is a good elf if she’s giving him clothes. “Mister Ron and Miss Hermione are here,” he announces.

He’s barely finished speaking before they both tumble into the dining room and Ron blurts, “Dumbledore’s lost his last marble!”

“I’ve been of that opinion for some time now,” Sirius says, “but what did he do?”

They both hold out their hands, something shiny and silver in each of them. Harry blinks at them a moment, surely he must be seeing things. “That’s just not possible.”

“Mum owled him to confirm,” Ron says. “We just got the reply. He’s serious!”

Harry snorts, then tries to turn it into a cough. He covers his mouth with his hand, but they’re both glaring at him, so he turns so at the very least he’s not laughing in their faces.

“Congratulations?” Remus says, but he sounds just as dubious. “Not that you’re not both lovely, accomplished students, of course, but, well.”

“You’ve broken even more school rules than we have,” Sirius says, “and several laws.”

Harry takes a deep breath, turns back around, and says earnestly, “I’m very proud of both of you.”

Hermione throws her prefect badge at his face. He catches it, and she scowls, but what was she expecting? He is a seeker. “I don’t have time for this! Keeping up with my studies and our midnight meetings is hard enough, I don’t have time for prefect duties on top of it!”

“I flew a car into the whomping willow when I was twelve,” Ron says. “How am I supposed to discipline students? As long as no one dies, it’s like, fine, right?”

“Who was prefect in your year?” Harry asks, turning to his godparents. “You were all disasters.”

“Kingsley,” Remus answers.

He blinks. He hadn’t known that the head auror has been in the same year as them. “How did he manage any of you?”

“He didn’t,” Sirius says, “His cousin was a year older, so he moved into his dorm in the middle of third year because he was sick of all of us, and he was Head Boy our last year, so he had his own room. We never pranked him.”

“But we were constantly pranking each other, and he often got caught in the crossfire,” Remus
points out. “Anyway, you two should be proud, being named prefect is an honor.”

“I’m busy,” Hermione snaps at the same time that Ron goes, “No thanks.”

Harry laughs so hard his stomach hurts, and doesn’t stop even when Hermione threatens to set him on fire. It feels good to laugh, and whatever’s gone wrong, he’ll find out tomorrow.

He’s going back Hogwarts tomorrow, he’s getting his all his friends and his soulmate back tomorrow.

It can’t come soon enough.

Chapter End Notes

i hope you liked it!

megalania-prisca has done several gorgeous pieces for siat that you can view here (she's added more since the last chapter!)

a-side-of-fries did an adorable sketch from the last chapter that you can view here

also, to the person who offered to translate tamil things for me and who's comment i couldn't find again after searching through my inbox because my inbox, like my life, is a mess: someone else offered to fix my horrible google translations, but merrier the more, so if you're still interested i'd love to take you up on it, pls drop me a line on tumblr where i'm slightly more organized and i'll try and be less of a disaster <3

as always, feel free to follow / harass me at: shanastoryteller.tumblr.com

i post writing updates in my 'progress report' tag if that's something you're interested in knowing :)


Draco arrives late to the platform, which means he’s among the last of the students to get on the train, barely taking the time to say goodbye to his parents before rushing onto the Hogwarts Express. Winky is taking care of his trunk, so at least he doesn’t have to worry about loading it onto the train.

He assumes the Gryffindors are in their customary seats at the back of the train, but he glances into each of the compartments as he passes. He exchanges nods with the Slytherins and blank looks with everyone else, not sure where exactly they all stand now that the war is underway. They all seem equally cautious, except for Susan, who greets him enthusiastically, as if nothing has changed. He passes Blaise, Pansy, and Millie, but only shakes his head at them when they gesture for him to join them. They look good, tan and taller and different than when he saw them last, but he has to do something first.

He doesn’t have much time until everyone meets in the Gryffindor’s compartment, and he wants at least a few minutes before everyone’s looking at them.

The train is moving by the time he makes it to their usual compartment, knocking twice against the door. It opens just enough to let him in, and then he’s yanked inside. The door slams shut, and he only has a moment to look at furious green eyes before he’s being kissed. Harry cups his face and presses him up against the door, and Draco grabs onto his boyfriend’s hips, trying to pull him impossibly closer. Harry’s taller. And thicker. There’s more muscle on him than there was the last time he had Harry in his arms.

His lips are chapped and he tastes like chocolate. Maybe he should have sent lip balm along with his birthday present. Harry’s moved to running his hands through his hair, impatiently pulling out the tie holding it back so his hair is loose. “It’s longer,” he murmurs, pressing smaller kisses along Draco’s jaw line, like he can’t bear to have his lips away from Draco for more than a couple seconds.

“Do you like it?” he asks, and only feels a little embarrassed by how breathless he sounds.

“Yeah,” and then Harry is kissing him again. He grabs Draco’s thighs and hoists him up so he can wrap his legs around Harry’s waist, which is fantastic, but it’s at that point that a stream of cold water falls on both their heads.

Harry yelps, and he curses, looking over Harry’s shoulder. Hermione still has her wand raised, and Ron’s hands are on his hips. “We’re right here!” he says crossly. Then he meets Draco’s eyes and grins. “Hey mate, happy to see you’re still in one piece. Not as happy as Harry, obviously.”

“We would have left, but you’re blocking the door,” she says, dry.

Harry flushes a bright red. “Sorry,” he says, although it comes out kind of muffled since he’s hiding his face in Draco’s neck.
Draco rolls his eyes and pushes on Harry’s shoulders until he puts him down and steps back. Ron grabs him in a hug and Hermione kisses his cheek, which is rather nice. He waves his wand to dry both himself and Harry and sits down. Harry hesitates, then sits on his lap, looping an arm around Draco’s neck. They’ll have to move before anyone else comes, but for now there’s no reason he can’t sit with his soulmate on his lap. “How was your summer? Did I miss anything interesting?”

“You first,” Harry snaps, and now he’s back to looking angry, which Draco feels is a little unfair. “What happened? What didn’t you mention in your last letter?”

On one hand, it’s very bad form to lie to his boyfriend, and Abigail knows, so all Harry would have to do is ask Draco’s snake, and then he’d know that Draco lied to him, which he’s sure would be rather disastrous. On the other hand, he doesn’t want anyone to freak out. “You’re not allowed to be weird about this.”

“I’m not weird about anything,” Harry says, and doesn’t look away when Hermione snorts. “Tell me.”

Draco rolls his eyes, but clearly he’s not getting out of this, so he tells them all about what happened with Nagini, not leaving out anything because, well, they’re his friends. He’s going to have to repeat this all to the others when they arrive, which is kind of annoying, but at least as long as it’s the four of them, there’s no reason for Harry not to hold him extra tight, which isn’t something he can’t do around the others.

“That is very strange,” Hermione says, frowning. “I didn’t think anything could get past your wards.”

“I didn’t either,” he says, “Whatever it is, I don’t like it.” He pokes at Harry, “See it’s not so bad, just some light torture and almost getting killed.”

Harry shifts enough to glare at him.

“To be fair, Harry,” Ron says, “Voldemort also cruciod you, and you were almost hit by the killing curse, so really, the two of you are even.” He pauses. “Actually, maybe you both should stop living this lifestyle. It doesn’t seem healthy.”

“But it doesn’t bother me when I almost die,” Harry complains.

Draco pinches him in the side. “It bothers me. Maybe we can just both not almost die this year, wouldn’t that be nice? A year where no one almost dies, not you or me or any of our friends, how does that sound?”

“You’ve kind of already ruined that,” Hermione points out, and Ron laughs.

“Starting now,” he amends. “No one almost dying during the school year. Considering you lot faced off against a couple hundred dementors, this seems vaguely hypocritical.”

There’s a knock on the door before they can reply. Harry slides off his lap and scoots down a couple inches. The door opens, and Pansy practically throws herself at him, taking up the spot Harry had been occupying on his lap. “We’ve missed you!”

Blaise and Millie sit on either side of him, talking over themselves to both ask about his summer and to tell him about their summer. Hermione casts an expansion charm on their compartment, because it’s only a matter of time before Neville, Luna, and Ginny show up, although it’s a toss up if Fred and George will make an appearance, since they’re probably busy with their girlfriend and boyfriend respectively.
It’s really good to be back at Hogwarts.

The Slytherins, even the new ones, keep quiet until they make it back to their common room. But as soon as the portrait swings shut behind them, there’s an explosion of noise.

“Umbridge?” Cassius demands, scowling. “Really?”

“The board is going to be pissed,” Blaise says grimly. “Your dad really didn’t know about this?”

Draco shakes his head. “Fudge overruled them without getting specific. At least now we see why.” There are way too many eyes on him right now, everyone half turned towards him even if they’re talking to someone else, which is – weird. “She’s not going to make this year easier for anyone, and she’s certainly not going to teach us anything.” She can’t teach what she doesn’t know, after all. Umbridge is notoriously awful at defense.

“At least the Flamels are here to teach alchemy,” Millie says, “that’s kind of cool.”

One of the seventh years scowls. “I wonder where Hagrid is, though? He may be a half breed, but he knows what he’s talking about, and I’m taking the Care of Magical Creatures newt this year. Plank is fine, but Hagrid’s better.”

Draco pointedly doesn’t trade glances with his friends. They’d all noticed how very not surprised those who had spent the summer at Order headquarters had looked, meaning they already knew, so it’s easy to assume that the reason Hagrid is missing has something to do with Order business. They’ll get the full story tomorrow night. Draco has a lot to catch up on.

“Enough.” They all fall back as Snape walks into the room. “Mr. Malfoy, why aren’t you wearing your prefect badge?”

He grimaces. “You sure you don’t want to take that back? It’s not too late.” He’s really far too busy to juggle prefect duties, and he’s pretty sure Dumbledore only gave it to him to he could keep a closer eye on him, or something else equally creepy, so he’s not even sure he deserves it, which is … annoying.

“Positive,” Snape drawls, “You might as well have some official reason for the authority that you wield so casually.” He really has no idea what Snape is going on about. “Make sure you’re wearing it from now on. Are you and Miss Greengrass aware of your new responsibilities, or do I need to give you a refresher?”

Draco looks to Daphne, but she shakes her head. The silver badge is pinned to her chest, exactly where it should be, and she smiles at him before smoothing her face into blankness. He doesn’t really hang out with Daphne, but he appreciates her restrained neutrality if nothing else. “No, we’re good.”

Snape nods, sweeping his gaze over all of them before sneering, “If you embarrass your house, I’ll embarrass you. Listen to your older house members. Only cause worthwhile trouble, and don’t expect me to get you out of it. Try not to waste too much time catching up.” He turns and leaves the common room without even saying goodnight.

“He’s feeling loquacious,” says one of the third years, Daphne’s younger sister. She’s not even being sarcastic.

Draco sighs and looks over the first years. “Are any of you muggleborns?” Everyone shakes their heads. Well, at least there’s that. Now would be a particularly awkward time to try to explain
wizarding society to someone, considering they’re on the edge of a purity war. Although, actually, that brings up another good point. He catches Daphne’s eye and jerks his head over to his side, and she moves to stand beside him. “Listen up!”

Everyone quiets with alarming quickness. He hadn’t been expecting that.

“House allegiance matters more than blood status. We have muggleborns and halfbloods in our house, but that doesn’t matter. A Slytherin is a Slytherin first, and all else second. If I hear or see of anyone forgetting this, I won’t be pleased.” He doesn’t look at Millie. At least some people are going to think he’s only saying this because he’s friends with a half blood, but he doesn’t actually care why they listen, so long as they do. “If there’s some sort of external reason that you’ll have difficulty following this rule, speak to me privately.” External reasons being needing to put on a show for Voldemort and his supporters.

Daphne breaks the heavy silence by clearing her throat. “We’re here if you have any questions or concerns. These are uncertain times. But first and foremost, this is a school, not a battleground. If you have any social or personal concerns, or even if you just need some help with your coursework, we’re here to help.”

“And if we’re busy, we’ll throw you at the senior prefects,” Draco says, jerking a thumb at the sixth and seventh year prefects, who pretend to look outraged. They’re supposed to act in a smaller role after fifth year, but Draco has no problem with tapping them to do things. He really is too busy for this.

That gets rid of the last of the awkward tension, and Draco trades a grin with Daphne. He doesn’t have anything close to the necessary free time to deal with this prefect crap, but whatever, it might be okay.

Maybe he should start skipping charms? It’s not like he learns anything in class anyway, and Flitwick won’t let him help with grading in front of the other students.

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“Is this a joke?” Lavender asks, and Harry has to bite on his knuckles to keep from laughing out loud.

McGonagall glares, even as there are general murmurings of agreement from the rest of the house.

“I’d be offended,” Ron says, “except we asked the same question.”

“No offense,” says one of the fourth years, Romilda, “but why should we listen to you? You guys are the worst rule breakers in the whole school! You broke into the forbidden corridor and faced You-Know-Who when you were eleven.” She points to Ron and addresses the rest of the house, “He drove a flying a car into the whomping willow in his second year!”

“To be fair, Harry was really the only one to face Voldemort, technically,” Hermione points out.

Everyone turns to him, but he just holds up his hands. He wants no part in this. “Technically, everyone in our year and above faced Voldemort, since he was living in the back of Quirrell’s head and all.”

“Everyone,” McGonagall says sharply, “Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley were chosen for a reason.” She doesn’t say what those reasons are. Harry can only assume it’s because they’re flimsy and full of favoritism.
“If Hermione Granger scolds me for being out after curfew, lighting will strike this whole castle,” Parvati says.

McGonagall scowls, then turns to his friends. “Don’t you have anything to say in your defense?”

“I won’t have to scold anyone for anything if they don’t get caught,” Hermione answers. “Perhaps everyone should take this as an opportunity to brush up on their invisibility and silencing spells?”

Ron scratches is nose. “The whole flying car thing made sense at the time, and no one died, so. Could have been worse.”

McGonagall stares at them for a long, uncomfortable moment. Most people would fold under that, but Ron and Hermione have gotten angrier stares for worst things. Nothing’s even on fire.

She turns and walks out of the common room. Harry’s almost positive she’s trying to stop herself from smiling, but it’s possible that’s just wishful thinking.

As soon the door swings shut, he’s surrounded by people wanting to know about this summer’s dementor attack. They’d held back in the great hall, but now that they’re behind closed doors, there’s nothing to stop them from harassing him for details.

Lucky for them, he’s missed them all just enough to put up with it.

~

He’d used Draco’s present to set up a slice of the Indian sky in his bed last night. It’s cloudy and damp outside, but he’d woken up to a bright sun, so he’s in an excellent mood when he goes down to breakfast with Ron and Neville. They’re on their way to the Gryffindor table when he notices someone waving at him, and he ends up walking to the Ravenclaw table instead, Ron and Neville following him after realizing he wasn’t behind them anymore. Cedric had been the one waving him over, Cho sitting next to him one side, and Quinn on the other. Harry mostly only knows Quinn through reputation, thanks to Draco and Seamus. Draco because he’s gotten pulled into zir latest crazy idea, and Seamus because apparently he and Quinn blow things up together.

It’s early enough that the tables are still mostly empty, so there’s plenty of room for them to sit down. “Hey guys,” Harry greets. “Did you have a good summer?”

“My dad threw a fit when I accidentally melted the shed outside,” Quinn complains, “Like we all haven’t accidentally liquified a building or two.”

“That is definitely just a you problem,” Neville says.

Ron leans across the table and grabs Cho’s hand, and Harry’s confused until he sees the sparkling ring on her finger. “Cho Chang!” Ron says, grinning wide, “Are you engaged?”

Cedric flushes and Cho beams. “Yes! He asked me last month. I turn seventeen this year, so we’ll get married this summer, before Cedric goes off to auror training.”

“I might not get into the auror program,” Cedric says, but Harry rolls his eyes right along with Cho. Tonks is his soulmate, and Tonks is dating Percy, who has more than enough pull to get someone way less qualified than Cedric into the auror program. Harry’s confident Cedric can get in all on his own, no nepotism needed, but if for some reason he can’t – well, Percy is a stickler for the rules, but he’ll definitely help out his girlfriend’s soulmate if she asks. “The Triwizard Tournament was good for something. Dad finally gave me Mom’s ring when I got home.”
“Finally?” Neville echoes. “When did you ask for it?”

Cedric turns an even deeper shade of red. “Uh, well, just, you know. A couple years ago. About six weeks after we started dating. Give or take a day.” Cho kisses his cheek, and he looks slightly less embarrassed. “He didn’t think I was serious. Said I was too young. But sometimes you just know, you know?”

It had taken over a year of friendship with his soulmate before Harry had been ready to date him, so even though he can’t really imagine being with anyone else now, it definitely took him way longer than six weeks to get there. Neville looks a little lost. But Ron just smiles, quick and small and looking almost foreign on his face and goes, “Yeah,” before saying, “Well, congratulations to you both. Maybe try and not to let planning the wedding addle your brains too much. Cedric, you’re wearing the wrong badge.”

“I’m not, actually,” Cedric says, and it’s only then that Harry notices the Head Girl badge on his chest.

Quinn rolls zir eyes, and points to the Head Boy badge on zir own chest. “They offered to make me a Head Student badge, but I like the tradition of it, and said I didn’t really care which badge they gave me, since the position is the same. But Mr. Hufflepuff over there said that if my badge wasn’t going to match my gender, then it was only fair that his didn’t match either. So I’m Head Boy, and he’s Head Girl.”

“It’s only fair,” Cedric says, in a tone of voice like they’ve had this conversation a couple dozen times before.

Neville blinks. “How did you manage to be made head anything? They practically had to redo the dungeons thanks to all the potions you’ve exploded.”

“Blowing things up isn’t against school rules,” Quinn says, “and I have the highest grades in my year, and zero detentions or disciplinary issues.”

“How is that even possible?” Ron asks. “Haven’t you ever been late to class? Forgotten your homework? Doesn’t Snape want to murder you for destroying his classroom?”

Quinn waves zir hand. “Severus is all bark and no bite.”

Harry disagrees with that, very strongly. He has a lot of anecdotal evidence to back him up. Neville clearly can’t decide between being offended at that statement or breaking down into hysterical laughter.

“He could be worse,” Cho says, clearly deciding to head off an argument before one can start. “At least he’s not a Death Eater.”

She says it as a joke, but now the air around them is very awkward, and Quinn is starting to look outraged, and he really doesn’t want them to get in a fight in the middle of the great hall about Snape’s political leanings. Because he is a Death Eater, but he’s a Death Eater for Dumbledore, so it’s. Fine. He thinks.

Quinn opens zir mouth, but Harry really doesn’t want to do this right now. “So, that dementor attack, that was wild,” he says, too loud and too bright.

Everyone knows he hates talking about this stuff, meaning it’s a very obvious distraction, so he’s assuming it won’t work.
Ze sighs, shoulders slumping. “Did you have a good summer besides all that?” ze asks, dropping the Snape line of conversation and also sparing Harry from having to describe the battle in Diagon Alley for the thousandth time.

Okay, he gets why Dumbledore picked zir. Quinn is awesome.

~

Considering how late he went to bed the night before, it’s way too early for him to be awake, but he can already tell that this is going to be another school year full of sleep deprivation, so there’s no reason not to get a head start.

If he was smart, he’d have brewed a batch of pepper up potion on his last day of summer, but he’d had a few other things on his mind at the time, so.

“Mr. Malfoy!” Madame Pomfrey says, alarmed at his presence in her hospital wing. “Are you hurt?”

“No,” he says. “I want you to teach me healing.”

She stops, looking at him with wide eyes. He’s managed to catch her off guard. That’s a first.

She doesn’t say anything, so he keeps talking. “It can be an independent study. Or an apprenticeship. Or I can just be a student aide. I don’t really care how we spin it or what you call me. I just want to learn.”

“Why?” she asks. She hasn’t said no yet, so he thinks this is going well.

“Because we’re going to war,” he says, “and I want to be prepared.”

Her face darkens, but she doesn’t deny the truth of what he’s just said. “In that case, shouldn’t you be learning dueling?”

“I am,” he say, blinking. He wouldn’t have expected that response from her. “I was. I did that over the summer. But it’s not enough to know how to fight. Leaving the battlefield isn’t just about winning. It’s about literally being able to leave the battlefield. Teach me how to heal.”

She’s rubbing at a spot on her wrist, her eyes narrowed. “If you’d asked me last year, I’d have said no without even having to think about it. Healing is difficult, and it requires that someone have a – a particular combination of attributes to be any good at it, even before taking into account the strain it takes the user’s magic. You already have a house elf depending on you, and you do more magic than the average student on top of that.”

“You said you’d have said no if I asked last year,” he says, eyes narrowed. “What’s different this year?”

Pomfrey is quiet for a long moment. He thinks he’s going to have to ask again when she says, “I saw the healing you did on Miss Delacour. It was very impressive.”

“But it wasn’t my best work,” he says, because it wasn’t, and Pomfrey’s eyes narrow. She’s curious. He can work with her curiosity.

She asks, “If I say no, you’re just going to continue to study on your own, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” he says, because he is. This is important, it’s something he can do that the rest can’t. Ron would be a pretty good healer, Draco thinks, but he’d have to put in the time and effort to memorize
Pomfrey stares at him for a long time. He stares back, not sure what she’s looking for, but hoping she finds it, because this will all be a thousand times easier if he can do this with her help instead of on his own. “Fine,” she says. “Come here for your study hall twice a week.”

“Three times a week,” he counters, and he’d push for every day, but with his current schedule, he just knows that that’s not feasible.

“And how often are you with Filius?” she asks.

“I work with him at night,” he says instead of answering the question, “There won’t be a conflict.”

She makes an aborted gesture, like she wants to roll her eyes, but doesn’t. “You know that’s not what I’m concerned about, Mr. Malfoy.”

Draco glares. “I’ll handle my own schedule. Don’t worry about it.”

Pomfrey is obviously intending to worry about it, but that’s a later problem. “Fine. Be here tomorrow morning. We’ll start immediately. Eat a big breakfast. I’m going to put you through your paces to figure out what level you’re at, and how to go from there.”

He shakes her hand, as if that one act can make this very unofficial meeting seems slightly more official. “You got it.”

This promises to be at least, if not more demanding of his time than working with Flitwick. But the outcome is going to be so, so worth it.

~

Harry was sure that he would never meet anyone as infuriating as Rita Skeeter. He was wrong.

He hates Umbridge with everything inside of him. He thumbs through the syllabus, and calls out, “You left some parts out.”

“Hand, Mr. Potter,” she says, voice sugary sweet. He raises his hand, not breaking eye contact. She shifts on her feet, uncomfortable and trying not to show it. “Yes, Mr. Potter?”

“It doesn’t say here when we’ll be practicing the spells, not just learning about them,” he says. Susan is gesturing at him to shut up, but he ignores her. The Hufflepuffs are very careful about when they cause a fuss. Or, well, Susan is careful about when she causes a fuss, and they tend to follow her lead.

Umbridge tilts her head to the side as if she’s confused. “Why would you need to practice defensive spells, Mr. Potter? They’re very dangerous. It wouldn’t be responsible to allow young witches and wizards to perform these spells.”

Hermione is kicking the back of his chair, clearly agreeing with Susan. He looks sidelong to Ron, who shrugs and grins, tilting his head forward in a subtle ‘go ahead’ gesture. From Ron’s irritated glance behind him and the lack of Hermione kicking at his chair, Harry assumes she’s changed her target from him to Ron.

“Well, we have our Owls this year,” he says in a reasonable tone of voice. Susan slumps in relief, and he almost feels sorry for her. Doesn’t she know him at all? Obviously he’s not going to leave it there. “Plus, Voldemort’s back and looking to start another war, so there’s that.”
Hermione mutters, “Bloody hell,” and Susan drops her head into her hands. He’s not sure what they expected.

“Mr. Potter!” Umbridge begins, outraged.

“Or maybe if we’re attacked by a swarm of rogue dementors? Although that’s less likely now, considering I killed most of them.” She gapes, mouth opening and closing silently. “You’re welcome,” he adds, because there’s really no point in doing this halfway.

There’s smattering of horrified laughter. Umbridge’s eyes narrow. “Mr. Potter, that’s quite enough. You-Know-Who is dead, I won’t have this sort of fear mongering ridiculousness occur in my classroom.”

“I suppose the dementors just and up and left for no reason?” he asks. “And all the prisoners, they what? Disappeared into thin air?”

“The security breach of Azkaban over the summer was unfortunate, but it had nothing to do with You-Know-Who. Really Mr. Potter, I have no idea where you get these ideas. All the prisoners are back behind bars. No one has disappeared.”

Um, what? No. “You’re lying,” he says, because she is. The prisoners are very much not back behind bars, because they are very much hiding at Malfoy Manor.

She goes so pale that it really can’t be healthy. “That’s a completely inappropriate way to speak to me. Detention for the rest of week. Get out of my classroom, and report to your head of house.”

Just for a week? If he’d done that in Snape’s classroom, he’d be scrubbing cauldrons until Halloween. At least. Whatever, she’ll learn. He picks up his bag, and Hermione looks like she wants to strangle him. He winks at her before leaving, which he’s pretty sure just makes her angrier. Oh well. Despite her best efforts, Hermione can’t actually kill him with the fury in her soul alone.

He hadn’t ended up eating much at breakfast, and half considers going to the kitchens first to see Dobby and grab a snack. But he’s pretty sure if he does that, he won’t have to worry about Hermione killing him, because McGonagall will do it for her. He sighs and walks to his head of house’s office. He should really get Draco to tell him how he manages to summon food from the kitchens, but he suspects the answer is Winky, which doesn’t help him personally.

He doesn’t even have the chance to knock before the door swings open, and wow, McGonagall looks really angry. A lot angrier than he was expecting her to. He’s so confused. He’s done way worse things than talk back to a professor, and she’s never looked this mad. She steps back and he walks inside, hoping she isn’t actually planning on killing him. He doesn’t want his last meal to be an unbuttered muffin and two strips of slightly too crispy bacon. If he’s going to die, he really regrets not swinging by the kitchen first to have a proper final meal.

She closes the door and sits behind her desk. Continuing to stand seems awkward, so he drops into one of the chairs in front of her, waiting. They just continue staring at each other in silence, but he refuses to be the one to break first. He has a lot of experience in being quiet and doing nothing thanks to the Dursleys, and McGonagall has a class to teach in thirty minutes, so there’s no way he can lose.

She sighs, breaking first just like he thought she would. His triumph is incredibly childish, and he’s not the least bit ashamed of it. “Mr. Potter, are you trying to make things more difficult for us?”

“Not in particular?” he says, taken aback. “Why?”
“Did you pay attention to Professor Umbridge’s speech at the opening feast?” she asks. She says professor like the word has personally offended her.

Not even a little bit, why would he subject himself to that? “She’s here because of the ministry, and she’s going to cause problems.” He doesn’t have to pay attention to figure that out. Draco had already told him that Fudge had overruled the Board of Governors on her appointment, and Ron had kept up a string of uncomplimentary things about her during the train ride that Harry’s pretty sure he heard from Percy. Plus, Hermione had listened, and then gone on a rant about it at the table. His friends have a lot of feelings about politics, which is great, because that means he can get away with not having to pay that much attention to it all himself.

McGonagall doesn’t look as angry anymore, instead just tired and amused, although she’s doing her best to hide the latter. “Which of your friends told you that?”

“Does it matter? As long as I know, that’s the important part, right?”

She ignores that, which is basically an agreement. “Professor Umbridge is just looking for a reason to exert the ministry’s power over Hogwarts, and to get back at you in particular. I realize it goes against your nature, but consider keeping your head down. I’ll speak with her and try and convince her let your behavior go this time, but you have to be more careful.”

“Don’t,” he says, and she blinks. “Don’t say anything to Umbridge. Or, I don’t know, talk about how I’m an unmanageable disaster of a student or something, that’s fine.”

“Mr. Potter?” she asks, eyebrows nearly to her hairline.

“I’ll do the detentions, it’s fine. It’s not a problem, and I don’t want you trying to defend or help me, because I’m not planning on stopping,” he confesses. “She’s going to be awful no matter what, you have to know that. So I’m going to give her someone to be awful to. Better me than anyone else, better she focuses all her energy on me than sticking her nose into different parts of Hogwarts. Besides, getting to yell at a ministry stooge for being awful is probably good for me, or something. Cathartic.”

McGonagall frowns, and what the heck, he doesn’t deserve a frown, this is not a frown type of plan, it’s a great idea. “Mr. Potter,” she starts, then stops. He waits, and she continues, “You know, you don’t need to continuously use yourself as a shield for all those around you. We can take care of ourselves. Even if we can’t, it’s not your job to protect everyone. It’s okay to just – let things fall where they may.”

He smiles, slowly at first, but doesn’t stop until it’s so wide it’s almost painful. “Thanks. But it’s okay. I want to do this. I’m not going to be able to keep my head down anyway, you have to know that. I might as well cause a useful disaster.”

“Maybe, just this once, you could have a quiet year and you and your friends can not cause any disasters or get in the middle of trouble that doesn’t concern you?” she suggests, but she already seems resigned.

“That doesn’t sound like us,” he answers, and she finally cracks, lips twitching up at the corners. His stomach grumbles, and damnit, he’s properly hungry now. She raises an eyebrow. “It’s okay, since I got kicked out of class I have time to stop by the kitchens.”

“The kitchens you shouldn’t know the entrance to?” she clarifies, but she doesn’t even sound irritated now. He’s totally in the clear.
He says, “Those are the ones. Unless there’s another set of kitchens I don’t know about, in which case feel free to tell me about them.”

“Mr. Potter,” she sighs, lowering her head like that will hide her smile. “Get out.”

“Gone,” he says, standing and walking backwards out of her office. He’s back in the hallway, and the door doesn’t quite shut fast enough to hide the sound of her laughter.

~

In between his work as Flitwick’s unofficial aide, his lessons with Pomfrey, quidditch practice, his prefect duties, and the midnight meetings with his friends, all on top of a rigorous course load with Owls looming at the end of the year, Draco doesn’t think it’s physically possible for him to take the alchemy class. He’s courting disaster as it is.

But it’s super cool and he wants to so badly he can taste it. When he shows up to the informational meeting and sees Hermione there, he has to bite back a grin. She’s probably also too busy to take this class, but he’s pretty sure she’d murder anyone who tried to stop her.

The classroom looks way better than the last time he was here. He wonders if they thought it was strange when they stepped into their office and found it organized and clean, but he doubts they thought much of it. The house elves had probably cleaned everything before they arrived anyway, so if anyone was confused, it was probably them.

The Flamels don’t look like what he expected, although he hadn’t really had all that much in the way of expectations to begin with. They look like they’re in the sixties, although they move like they’re much younger. Perenelle has dark hair and eyes, and a thin body that seems almost out of place with the dangerous way she’s carrying herself. Nicolas is handsome, with golden skin, thick black hair streaked with grey, and a smile that could easily land him on the cover of Witch Weekly.

Everyone here is a fourth year and up, because everyone below that just gets to take the class. But the rest of them – they’re starting older, at a disadvantage, because they don’t have the extra years at Hogwarts to actually get good at this under the Flamels’ teachings. So they have to pass some sort of test, or fight each other to the death, or something. He’s not sure. The announcement wasn’t very specific.

“Hello!” Nicolas greets the assembled students. The classroom is full, but everyone fits easily enough. Alchemy is notoriously difficult and arithmancy heavy, so most of the older students had stayed away even if they found it interesting, because they weren’t interested in doing something that granular. But there’s still a lot of students here, because the opportunity to learn alchemy from the Flamels is too great a chance for them to pass up. Except he’s probably going to have to pass on it, even if the Flamels choose him, because he seriously doesn’t have time for this.

“Hello,” Perenelle echoes, less enthused than her husband, but that’s probably for the best. Draco would have found it pretty disconcerting if she’d been more enthused than Nicolas, who’s bouncing on the balls of his feet. “Alchemy is difficult, even for those who are used to performing advanced magic. On top of that, it’s based on a robust mathematical and scientific knowledge. But that’s not what we’ll be testing today.”

Nicolas waves his hand, as if sweeping all that away. “The math and science of it isn’t the important part. All that stuff can be looked up, can be double checked later. You’ll have an easier time of if you can do those types of equations off the top of your head, but it’s not required, it’s not the important part.”
“Performing alchemy requires a certain adaptability and flexibility of thought,” Perenelle continues. “That’s what we’ll be testing for today.”

They all barely have the time to be confused before Nicolas says excitedly, “We’re going to play a game!” He waves his hand at the board, and a neat set of instructions appears. Desks push themselves together to make a square, and then a small pile of pale tiles appears on them.

“Mahjong?” says one of the Hufflepuffs in Cedric’s year that Draco only sort of recognizes.

“Correct,” Perenelle nods at the tables. “Four to a game. Follow the instructions on the board. We’ll be keeping an eye on you. Don’t play a game with the same people twice in a row.” She does a quick count of everyone. “We’ll be joining you so we have the correct number of players, but don’t think that means that we’re not paying attention.”

How ominous and terrifying. What are they testing, exactly? How quickly they can memorize the rules, how many games they win, or both? He wishes he could grab Hermione for his first game and talk to her about it, but he obviously can’t do that for several reasons.

At least he doesn’t struggle with having to tell the Chinese characters apart, since he’d learned them when he was learning to write in kanji. They all stumble for a bit, but they the hang of it quickly enough, and it doesn’t take Draco long to realize that luck plays an uncomfortably large role in this game. He’s surprised they didn’t just have everyone play poker. He really wishes he knew what the Flamels were looking for. The game is fun enough, but he’s mostly just frustrated.

“A strategy game?” Draco looks up, and Ron is standing in the doorway. What the hell is he doing here? He can’t even ask, since they’re supposed to be enemies, and Hermione’s too engrossed in her game to notice him. “Is there room for me?”

“Take my spot,” Perenelle says, rising from her seat. “Do you know how to play?”

“No,” he says, but he’s not looking at the board with instructions, instead watching a cluster of Ravenclaws and Gryffindors play for a few moments. “But that’s okay, I think I’ve got it.”

Draco is so confused. He has no idea why Ron is here, because it’s clearly not because he’s interested in alchemy. He can’t spend too much time wondering about it, however, because he has a game to focus on it.

He’s been playing for a while, his thoughts starting to run into one another. He’s doing well, winning twice as often as he loses, so there’s that, at least. But then there’s some sort of commotion, and when he looks up, Ron is playing at the same table as Hermione, Nicolas, and Perenelle, who must have rejoined them all at some point. People are crowded in around them, and Draco heads over just in time to see Ron reveal his tiles, beaming. “I win.”

What the fuck.

Perenelle is staring down at her tiles as if she’s not quite sure how this could have happened, while Nicolas is delighted. “How did you do that?” Hermione demands.

Ron blinks, uncomprehending. “Do what?”

“Win!” She glares, “You’ve won almost every game you played! How did you do it?”

He shrugs. “By playing. How else?” Hermione looks like she wants to strangle him for that unhelpful response. In Ron’s defense, he seems to think that he gave a complete answer. He looks out the window and cringes. “It’s getting dark, I have to be somewhere. Thanks for the game, it was
fun,” he tells the Flamels.

“It was our pleasure,” Perenelle says, her dark, heavy gaze resting on Ron, who doesn’t seem to notice. He nudges Hermione with elbow and then he’s gone, seemingly unaware of the weight of the Flamels’ gazes on him.

Draco’s going to sit on him tonight until he explains how he did that. Except, Ron is taller and stronger than him, so he’ll probably need help. Judging by the strength of her scowl, he’s assuming Hermione will go along with his plan.

~

Harry means to join the rest of his friends on time, but gets stopped by Angelina, who seems determined to corner him in the common room. He doesn’t like the way she’s looking at him, and kind of wants to hide, but short of ducking underneath a tapestry, there’s really nowhere for him to go. “Detention?” she thunders, using her extra inch of height to loom over him. “It’s the first day of classes! How do you already have detention?”

“Well,” he says, “Umbridge is a bitch, so.”

One of the second years looks scandalized and thrilled. It always surprises them when he swears, which he doesn’t get at all. He’d say he has more reasons to swear than most people.

“I don’t care that Umbridge is a bitch,” she says, “I care that you’re missing keeper tryouts!”

Oh, whoops, he’d totally forgotten about that. “Sorry.” It’s not like they need him there, he’s the seeker, but he’s not going to say that to her because he enjoys being alive.

“Don’t get detention again,” she orders. He winces. “Harry!”

“I’ll try not to get so many detentions that it interferes with practice?” he offers.

She jabs him in the chest hard enough to bruise. “If you were any less brilliant on a broom, I’d murder you,” she says, then walks up the girls’ staircase before he can respond.

Angelina is less intense about quidditch than Oliver, but is somehow way, way scarier.

Harry hurries to their classroom, and pulls the door closed behind him before saying, “Your girlfriend wants to kill me.”

Fred shrugs, “Well, she’s hardly unique in that desire. Lots of people want to kill you. Bit unfair of you to single her out.”

Pansy snorts, then says, “You know, I think I like you.”

Fred sputters. “You’re just deciding this now? I thought you did like me! We hung out all the time last year!” They spent most of last year tiptoeing around each other, but Harry knows better than to say that.

“You’re alright,” Blaise says, but he’s grinning. “Your brother, on the other hand, is an embarrassment.”

“Can’t you put a little effort into not being seen sneaking into our common room?” Millie complains. “Also, you and Cassius are disgusting.”

George’s face lights up with a besotted grin that, to be totally honest, is a little nauseating. He hopes
he doesn’t look like that when he thinks about Draco.

“Try living with it,” Ginny says, not looking up from painting Luna’s nails. Luna, in turn, is painting Neville’s. “This was such a long summer.”

He frowns, looking around the room. They’re missing people. “Where’s Hermione and Ron? And Draco?”

“Draco said something about murdering Ron and getting Hermione to help, so they might be moving the body,” Blaise offers, like that’s a reasonable thing to say.

His friends suck. It’s unfortunate that he’s kind of gotten attached to all of them anyway.

~

Harry thinks that writing lines is a lame way to spend detention, since usually professors have them clean or organize something, have them do something useful. He keeps thinking that up until pain cuts across the back of his hand, and blood wells in the shape of the words he’s just written. *I must not tell lies.*

There’s no way in hell this is acceptable. Well, they do get sent into a forest full of things that want to kill them for detention, but that only has the *risk* of death and injury, which surely has to be more acceptable than just cutting up students’ flesh?

“Is there a problem, Mr. Potter?” she asks, sugary sweet.

It hurts, it sucks, but he’s dealt with a lot worse than some cuts on the back of his hand. At least it’s not being tied to a gravestone and forced to fight Voldemort and a bunch of Death Eaters. “No. Why do you ask?”

Irritation flashes across her face before she can stop it, and he keeps looking at her as he writes the next line on the parchment, keeps smiling even as blood drips down his hand.

If she’s expecting tears or hysterics, this isn’t going to cut it.

Hours later, his hand is sore and throbbing, but he makes sure that he doesn’t show any discomfort at all as he bids her goodbye, as saccharine as she’d been. It seems only fair that she hate him as much as he hates her, and he hates her a lot, so he’s going to have to work on being extra infuriating to keep things even.

He’s on his way back to the common room, but he’s dragging his feet. He should probably tell his friends about this, he’d be furious if something like this happened to one of them and they didn’t say something. But this seems like the kind of thing they might get a little upset about, which he would like to avoid. It’s possible that, as a group, they’re a little dramatic. But if he tries to keep it a secret and fails, they’ll murder him. Which means he should just tell them. Besides, they’ll probably have a better idea than he will about how much he can push Umbridge before she takes it out on someone else, which he doesn’t want. Hermione’s still awake, she thinks sleep is an inconvenience, but Blaise values his beauty sleep. Draco and Pansy are probably still awake. Ron –

“Harry?” his best friend asks as he turns a corner, nearly running into him. “Are you bleeding?”

- is right in front of him. “What are you doing?” Ron turns as red as his hair, and shoves something behind his back, too quickly for Harry to tell what it is. He leans, trying to get a better look, but Ron turns away from him so he can’t get his eyes on it. “What are you doing? What are you hiding?”
“Nothing,” he says quickly, then, “What happened to your hand?”

“Ron!” He pushes his shoulder with his non injured hand. “What’s going on?”

He shuffles his feet, and his shoulders slump, his whole posture drooping. He rubs the back of his neck. “It’s – it’s stupid. Don’t worry about it. Why are you bleeding?”

“Ron,” he says sternly. “I’m sure it’s not stupid. What’s going on? Why are you out here so late?”

He pauses, and a horrible thought comes to him. “You’re not seeing someone are you?” It’s only horrible because he doesn’t want to have to be the one to tell Hermione.

“What? No!” He’s still blushing, and he says, “Just – just don’t make fun of me, okay? I know it’s silly. It’s just – something I’m doing for fun. It’s not serious.”

“Okay,” he says, even though it’s obvious that Ron is lying. “What is it?”

Ron pulls his hand out from behind his back, and there’s one of the school’s Cleansweeps in his fist. “I – I mean, Cedric uses the school brooms, so they’re not that bad, so I’ve been. Y’know. Practicing.”

“Practicing?” he repeats, confused. He doesn’t know why Ron would be embarrassed by flying. He flies all the time, just for fun, but he still enjoys it. He’s taken Harry’s Firebolt out for a spin more than once, and he’s good at it. Then he puts the pieces together. “You’re trying out for the keeper position?”

“Thought I might,” he says, looking down. “I always play keeper when I play with my brothers, so. Yeah.”

“Ron!” He’d grab him if he wasn’t worried about getting blood on him. “That’s fantastic! I wish we’d played some games this summer. Are you good at playing keeper? I know you’re good on a broom, but how’s your reaction time? Damnit, I’m so mad I’m going to miss the tryouts now.”

He smiles, and it’s full of a little too much relief for Harry’s taste. “I’m okay. It’s hard to practice on my own, but I’m pretty good.”

Wait, that’s a good point. “Why have you been practicing on your own? I could have helped!”

“I know quidditch is your thing,” he confesses, “I didn’t want you to think I was intruding or trying to make it about me, or something.”

Harry stares. “Ron, that’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard. It’s not like you’re trying to take the seeker position! I want you to be on the team, that would be awesome! How would playing my favorite sport with one of my favorite people not be fantastic in every way?”

Ron is bright red again, and he grabs Harry in a headlock instead of expressing his emotions, which Harry is used to at this point, so he tolerates it until he lets him go. Ron’s so aware of what everyone else is feeling all the time, but when it comes to his own emotions he just gets uncomfortable. “Thanks. George and Fred are going to be really obnoxious about it, so, thanks.” He ruffles Harry’s hair then grabs his hand. “Seriously, what happened?”

He sees the exact moment that Ron manages to read the words carved into his skin. His face goes tight and furious, and his grip on Harry’s hand is so tight it’s almost painful. “It’s okay! Really. I’ve gotten worse from quidditch.”

Ron’s eyebrows dip together, still looking at Harry’s hand. “She did this to you?” He takes Harry’s
silence as agreement, and his face smooths out, which makes Harry nervous. “Okay,” he says calmly, “I’m going to kill her.”

He tries to step around Harry, like he’s actually planning to go to Umbridge’s office and commit murder. Harry grabs him around the waist to pull him back and is painfully aware that he’s only successful because Ron is letting Harry hold him back. Why is Ron so large? It’s very inconvenient. “I know Percy is pulling a lot of strings right now, but I seriously doubt he could get you out of a murder charge.”

“He wouldn’t have to. I wouldn’t get caught,” he says, and Harry can feel his anger, in the tenseness of his muscles and the way his voice rumbles in his chest. “I can be creative if I want to be.” Harry’s well aware of that, and it’s one of the many reasons he’s glad Ron is his friend. But it also means it’s possible Ron does how to properly dispose of a body, and just hasn’t brought it up because it hasn’t been relevant. He would kind of like if it would continue to not be relevant, personally.

Harry digs his chin into the middle of Ron’s back just to make him squirm. He really isn’t short, he’s taller than a lot of the boys in their year, it’s just that Ron is so absurdly tall that Harry always feels short next to him. “Maybe that should be a last result and not our first option?”

Ron is finally convinced to not go barging into Umbridge’s office by Harry saying they should talk to the others, but he doesn’t seem happy about it. It doesn’t take long to get everyone down in the classroom, since Hermione had been in the common room and Draco had no problem waking Blaise and grabbing Pansy to meet them, even though it’s late even by their standards.

Pansy wants to tell the other teachers about it, while Blaise supports Ron’s plan for murder. It’s a little bit more disconcerting from Blaise, since Harry knows for a fact that Blaise knows how to kill someone and dispose of the body, and he looks angry enough to go through with it. Hermione seems more inclined to agree with Blaise and Ron than Pansy, which he hadn’t expected.

Draco grabs his hand, gently touching the wounds. “It’s a blood ink quill. That’s what she’s having you use.”

“Those are illegal,” Ron points out. “Dad confiscates tons of them. Lots of muggles will buy quills for fun, and then get a nasty surprise.”

“We have to tell someone,” Pansy repeats. “If she’s doing it to you, she’s doing it to other students. Just because you’re insane and think your pride is worth some disfigurement doesn’t mean anyone else will.”

“Disfigurement is a strong word,” he says, but he’s frowning. He really doesn’t want Umbridge doing this to other students.

“These will scar eventually if you don’t take care of them,” Draco sighs and takes out his wand. “Episkey!”

The cooling sensation of healing magic washes over his hand, and the sharp ache fades completely. The skin on the back of his hand is completely healed, no hint of the words that had been cut into his flesh.

“That was evidence,” Pansy says crossly. “But no matter, nothing to worry about, because Umbridge will probably make him do the exact same thing tomorrow. Isn’t that nice and convenient and not horrifying?”

Draco pulls Harry’s hand up so he can kiss the back of it, pressing his lips to where the cuts had
been. It’s absent minded, Draco turning to Pansy halfway through the motion, but it still sends a wave of warmth though him, the casualness in which Draco shows him affection. One day, Harry hopes that just won’t be behind closed doors. “As much as I would love to tell the teachers or call up my father and insist he take care of this mess, I don’t know how effective that will be. Umbridge has been sent here against everyone’s protests, so I don’t know how much pull the teachers or anyone is going to have on her.”

“This is illegal,” Pansy insists. “It’s illegal and messed up and we can’t just let it happen!”

“Casting the unforgivable on students is illegal too,” Hermione points out. “That didn’t stop Crouch from getting away with it.”

They’re all silent for a long moment, because she’s right. Even if they tell everyone, it’s possible that it will accomplish nothing at all. “Okay,” Harry says, “so we can’t depend on other people to fix it, and we can’t kill her.” Blaise raises an eyebrow, but Harry ignores him. “We have to take care of this ourselves.”

“We can’t stop her from giving detentions,” Ron says. “Or, well, we could try, but it seems pointless.”

“So we need to do damage control. We can’t just let kids get tortured, we need to help,” Hermione insists.

Draco sighs, running his hand through his hair. “I can make a topical numbing balm. That way students can apply it to the back of their hands before detention, and it won’t hurt them. I can heal them after. Or well, I can heal the Slytherins after, at least. We’ll have to figure something else out for the other houses. It’s not a big injury, so it wouldn’t be especially draining to heal a bunch of them, but healing can go wrong if someone’s not used to do doing it.”

“Can you make a healing potion they can take after?” Harry asks.

Hermione and Draco make a face at that. “Yes,” Hermione says, “but on an injury so small, it will be difficult to get the dose right. We’ll have to separate the dosage before giving it to them.”

“The spell is better, but we can make the potion work,” Draco says. “The only potion I can think of is meant for larger wounds, but I can dilute it with, uh, something iron based.”

“Gross,” Ron says. Harry tilts his head to the side, and he says, “He’s talking about blood.”

“Gross,” Harry echoes, and Draco rolls his eyes. “What kind of blood?”

Draco looks to Hermione, who bites her bottom lip and says, “Human blood would be best, but that’s a little unrealistic. Pig blood?”

“You can at least get that from the kitchens,” Blaise points out.

Pansy scowls and crosses her arms. “Fine, if you brew the numbing balm and healing potion, that’s – acceptable, I guess. But how are you actually going to get it to everyone? Just lurk around Umbridge’s door every night?”

“Daphne and I can make an announcement to the Slytherins, so they know to come to me first,” Draco says. “Harry, you too. Just call me on the mirror when you get out of detention, and I’ll come and heal you. Same for you guys, and the twins and Neville and Ginny.”

Hermione nods, “I can’t imagine that George and Fred will manage to go the whole year without
landing in her detention, so you’ll probably be seeing a lot of them. Ron and I can tell the Gryffindors about the potions.”

“We should tell Cedric and Quinn about this,” Blaise says. “Considering they’re Head Girl and Boy and we don’t hate them. Draco and Hermione can brew the potions, and then we’ll have someone in each house who can distribute them.”

Harry thinks that’s a fantastic idea, and ends up cornering the older students the next morning just as they’re coming down for breakfast. They’re both furious when they hear about the blood ink quill, but when Harry says Hermione will make the potions, Quinn waves a dismissive hand. “Don’t insult me. Granger is brilliant, but I’m the best potions maker in this school. I’ll make the potions.”

“What about the Slytherins?” Cedric asks, because as usual Harry had carefully left them out of his explanation. “We need to help them too.”

Before Harry has time to panic, Quinn says, “They’re fine, don’t worry about them, they have Draco. Who still owes me a ghost summoning spell, by the way. He better have made some progress on that this summer.” Zir eyes fasten onto Harry, and he suddenly feels itchy all over. “Heard you fucked that one up, by the way.”

“Uh,” he says, “Yes?” Why is Quinn looking at him like that? It makes him feel like he’s done something wrong. Which, technically, he does a lot of things that are wrong all the time, so it’s not necessarily an unwarranted look. He’s just not sure why he’s getting it. “Sometimes accidental necromancy just happens.”

Cedric snorts, doing a very poor job of turning it into a cough. “Right. How long will the potions take?”

“I can do them tonight and have them ready for tomorrow, assuming I can find enough people to blackmail into giving me blood,” ze says.

“Pigs blood will work too,” Harry feels the need to point out. Why are so many potions so gross?

Quinn is giving him that look again. Cedric glances between them before saying. “Right. Thanks. We’ll let you know when they’re ready.”

“We need to help them too,” Harry says hurriedly.

“Great,” he answers, then flees to transfiguration.

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Draco strides into Flitwick’s office and drops a ten foot scroll on his desk with a satisfying thwack. Flitwick looks up and raises an eyebrow. “That’s the complete arithmancy for the ghost summoning spell. Read it and weep, because I did.”

“I had a lovely summer, thank you for asking,” Flitwick says, already starting to unroll the scroll.

Draco pulls it out of his hands and puts it on the corner of his desk. “Wait, no, ignore that, I have something more important to show you. Open your hand.”

Flitwick obligingly opens his hand, and Draco reaches into his pocket and drops one his modified remembralls into his palm. Flitwick frowns as soon as it touches his skin, no doubt able to tell that something is off by touch alone. “What is this? What are the metal bands?”

“Platinum and copper. I really need to get my hands on some obsidian,” he confesses, momentarily distracted. “That’s not the important part. Run your fingers along the platinum seam.”
Flitwick does as directed, and Draco hadn’t bothered to password protect this one, so there’s a burst of light from the glass ball up to the ceiling, and when he looks up the cloudy sky outside doesn’t match the bright blue one that can be seen from Flitwick’s office window. “It’s Marseille. That’s where most of family’s businesses are in France. Now run your fingers along the copper.” He looks back down and the professor’s eyes are as wide as galleons. He does as directed and the sky obligingly shrinks and grows with the movement. “I can only set it to one location per device right now, but I’m working on adding more. I’m still working out the equations for that, it’s tricky.”

“Tricky,” Flitwick breathes, still looking up at the sky. “Draco. This is magnificent. This is – how did you manage to adjust the perimeter of the spell to be flexible? Usually mapping the correct edges to apply it is the hardest part.”

“It’s ground into the platinum wire, and the spell is attached to the glass, not the ceiling. So what we see is only a projection,” he admits, tilting the remebrall at just the right angle so Flitwick can see the shrunken bit of sky held within the glass. “Really, I just had to shrink the spell. It was so much math. But I tuned the copper against the poles, so the projection is always facing up, even if the device isn’t.” Draco takes Flitwick’s wrist and turns his hand upside down, and the image of the sky is completely unchanged. “Cool, right?”

“You’re writing another paper,” he says, and it’s not a question, it’s definitely an order. He pouts. “But I haven’t even figured out how to add more than one location yet! It’s only half complete, I don’t think the Charms Review will be impressed with something that’s half done.”

“Oh trust me,” Flitwick says, head craned back to look at the slice of sky in his office, “They’ll be impressed.”

On one hand, that’s comforting, and kind of awesome. It’d be great if he could get published two years in a row. On the other hand, he really doesn’t want to have to write another academic paper. “Okay, but I’m writing it during class, I won’t have time otherwise.”

He says, “That’s fine,” and keeps looking up. He’s glad Flitwick likes it, but now that he’s shown him, he’d rather he get to work on checking Draco’s equations for the ghost summoning spell. Maybe he should have let him do that first.

Quinn shoves a box full of potions at Ron and Hermione the next day at breakfast, says, “Let me know if you need more,” and then hurries out of the great hall, still in a bright purple pajama shorts covered in little cauldrons and a black crop top.

“Does ze know ze’s wearing that?” Harry asks. “Ze’s not going to class like that, right?”

“Not a bad view,” Dean says, leaning back to watch Quinn go.

Seamus smacks his shoulder, “Ze has a boyfriend.” There’s a pause where they all stare at him, and then he goes, “Wait, and you have a boyfriend too! Me! No leering at Quinn.”

Dean rolls his eyes and kisses his boyfriend, “Sure, okay.”

“Does anyone know what’s going on with Hagrid?” Lavender asks. She’s addressing the whole table, but is looking at Harry. He knows that Hagrid’s on a mission for the Order, but not where he is or what he’s doing or when he’s supposed to be back. But he can’t tell them that, obviously.

“You know, I think I have to be somewhere else,” he says, getting up from the table and grabbing a
stack of toast before making a hasty retreat.

Draco knocks on Cassius’s door, and is genuinely thrown when the door opens. “I only knocked twice,” he says, pressing the back of his hand against Cassius’s forehead. “What’s with you?”

He pushes Draco’s hands away. “Nothing, what do you want?”

Draco leans around Cassius, and sure enough George is sitting on his bed. He waves, so Draco waves back. “If I skip the beater tryouts do you care? Congratulations on officially being made captain, by the way.” Pomfrey said she’d start teaching him how to use the moon to strengthen his healing spells if he showed up on the night of the full moon, which is way more interesting than the diagrams of the human body that’d she’s been making him memorize. He knows a strong foundation is important and all that stuff, but at this rate he’s never going to get around to actually casting anything.

“Thanks, and yes,” he sighs, “but it’s okay. Don’t miss practice.”

He nods, and only hesitates a moment before saying, “Bye George.”

“Bye Draco,” he echoes, his hesitation so small that he’s pretty sure Cassius didn’t notice. Cassius already knows that Draco’s at least semi friendly with George, so it’d be weirder if he acted differently. Right?

Whatever. He needs to track down Hermione and make her explain the arithmancy homework to him. It looks like Greek, except his Greek is half decent, so it looks like something way more confusing and headache inducing than Greek.

Harry tries to watch the keeper tryouts from his detention with Umbridge, but what little he can see is too far away for him to really make anything out, which is annoying. Actually, thanks to the numbing balm Quinn made, these detentions are mostly just annoying. He’s not alone anymore either, other students sitting with him and silently writing with black quill that Umbridge gives them when they enter and then takes back before they leave.

At least this has given him and Draco a reason to meet up for a bit every night. Draco takes five seconds to heal his hand, and then they spend five minutes kissing or talking or whatever, and then they go back to their respective common rooms. Which isn’t nearly enough time together as far as Harry’s concerned, but is better than nothing.

“Now that you’ve had a week to think it over, have you learned your lesson?” Umbridge asks him, smiling.

Today is his last detention. “No,” he answers, dropping the quill back into her hand and leaving. Angelina is going to murder him, but he should probably pick a fight with Umbridge on Monday. They do have practice on Tuesday though, so if he waits until Wednesday to get in more trouble, Angelina will be happy. Or at least slightly less furious.

Their classroom is too far from the defense classroom to be convenient, so he meets Draco in a broom cupboard and manages to spend a whole three minutes and seventeen seconds with his boyfriend in his lap before Draco sighs and says, “We should get back. Millie and Pansy want us to all sit in a circle and braid each other’s hair, which I think is ridiculous, but apparently my opinion is neither wanted nor needed.”
“Sucks to be you,” Harry says, pressing a quick kiss to his soulmate’s lips, then a slightly longer one. “When all this is over, and everyone knows you’re mine,” because they can’t do this forever, this can’t be their whole lives, “I’m going to kiss you in front of the Daily Prophet and Witch Weekly and whoever else shows up, and I’m going hold your hand whenever we’re in public.”

It’s sounds kind of silly and childish, but he can’t wait until he can just date Draco like a normal teenager. Draco grins and kisses him on the nose, “Yeah, okay. I was personally planning to hex anyone who hit on you or stared at you too long, but I suppose your idea is a little more subtle.”

Harry laughs, and they kiss until he loses track of the seconds.

It’s past curfew, but after so many years of sneaking around, Harry doesn’t need his invisibility cloak or the map to get around. The portrait has barely shut behind him when Ron is right in front of him, grinning. “I did it! I made the team, I’m the new keeper!”

Harry tackles him to the ground, giving him an aggressive noogie. “That’s awesome! Great!”

Ron finally pushes Harry off of him, and collapses on the couch next to Hermione, who doesn’t even look up from her alchemy text book, a stack of other alchemy books on the table beside her. “We can’t go to bed yet, Colin gave this to me at lunch. Said it was delivered to him, but when he opened it this had my name on it.” Ron reaches into his back pocket and hands a slip of paper to Harry.

**Tonight. Common room. Midnight.**

It’s not signed. Harry raises an eyebrow, and Ron explains, “I sent a letter to Percy the first day asking what was going on with Umbridge. I’m not sure what we’re waiting for, though. Another letter maybe?”

“The floo?” Harry suggests, looking to the large fireplace. They’re the only ones in the common room, which is a little surprising. He knows at least a couple of seventh years who are always up until nearly morning. “Wait, no, it can’t be, this fireplace isn’t connected to the floo network. Is it?”

Ron starts to shake his head, then shrugs. “It can’t be. Any student with some floo powder would be able to use it, which would be a security nightmare. I could have sworn only the teacher’s offices were connected to the floo. But I definitely don’t think the common room fireplace’s are.”

Harry looks to Hermione, but she’s still too engrossed in her book to pay any attention to them. “Alchemy class going well?” he asks, but she doesn’t respond. Draco had dropped Care of Magical Creatures to take it. His mum had been furious about him dropping a class the same year that they’re taking their Owls, but he’s determined to take it. Only ten percent of the upper level students who applied were selected to take the class, and after Draco found that out he couldn’t bring himself to say no.

“She’s still mad at me for turning the Flamels down,” Ron says, rolling his eyes.

Well. Ten percent of the people who applied. And Ron.

Nicolas had pulled him aside and offered him a place in the class, but Ron hadn’t been interested. He’d only shown up in the first place because Seamus had mentioned people were playing strategy games in the alchemy classrooms, and he’d been curious. “I mean, alchemy sounds cool!” Harry says, just in case Hermione isn’t as engrossed in her book as she’s pretending to be. He’s seen some of their homework for the class, and it gives him a headache just to look at, never mind do.

“Who wants to do math all the time?” he asks, and Harry silently agrees with him. “I’m going over on Saturday to play chess with them, though.”
“Find a new victim?” he teases. There’s not a student left at Hogwarts who will play a game against
him. It doesn’t help that people still talk about how he beat McGonagall’s chess game when he was
eleven.

“They seem like they’ll play a good game,” Ron says, which isn’t a denial. “Perenelle also
mentioned teaching me a game called go which she thinks I’ll like, so even if they end up not
wanting to play chess with me, I’ll have a whole other game I can try and convince people to play.”
Ron had tried to start a few games of mahjong with people, but pretty much everyone had heard that
Ron had beat the Flamels, so that was one more game that Ron was stuck only playing amongst their
friend group. Draco, Hermione, and Luna like the game enough to play it, and Luna has even won a
few times.

The flames in the fireplace crackles obnoxiously loud, which means Hermione looks up from her
book just in time to watch the flames turn green. “Those aren’t supposed to do that.” Percy’s head
appears in the flames. “Did you connect this fireplace to the floo just so you could do that? Are you
supposed to do that?”

“Hello Hermione,” Percy greets. “Yes, and no. Will you three get down here? This is a terrible angle
to talk to you all.”

Harry and Ron throw themselves to the floor so they’re eye level with Percy. Hermione sticks a quill
in the book to mark her place before setting it aside and joining them in a slightly less dramatic
fashion. “What’s so important you couldn’t just send a letter?”

“Well, fair warning, I’m almost certain that Dolores is scanning everybody’s mail,” he answers, “so a
letter kind of wasn’t an option. Tonks warded the fireplace so she can’t interfere or hear what we’re
saying, assuming she even tries to. Which I don’t think she will, since I sent this to Creevey and not
any of you, but it doesn’t hurt to be careful.”

“What’s Umbridge’s problem?” Ron demands. “Why is she even here?”

Percy winces. “Sorry?”

Ron groans and Hermione snaps, “Percy! You sent her here? She’s a menace! Her detentions—”
Harry kicks Hermione before she can continue, and she glares, but doesn’t say anything else.

“It wasn’t my idea,” he says, “but Fudge wanted to stick his nose into Hogwarts, so he was going to
send someone no matter what. I encouraged him to send Dolores. Again, sorry, but it’s about a
million times easier to manage Fudge without her here to whisper in his ear and breathe down my
neck.”

“So you’re sacrificing Hogwarts to make your job easier?” Hermione demands.

Ron shoots her a dark look, and even Harry winces.

Percy isn’t phased. “Yes. She thinks werewolves should be euthanized. Since Azkaban isn’t secure
anymore, she’s been trying to get Fudge to just give the remaining prisoners the death sentence. She
wants the Ministry to remove all its money from Gringotts, which, in case you haven’t been paying
attention in History of Magic, would absolutely start another Goblin War. Which she wants, because
she wants to kill all the goblins, and she can’t really do that while they’re holding everyone’s
money.” He pauses, taking a deep breath and visibly working to calm himself. “I’m sorry. I know
she’s awful. Believe me, I know, and she’s only going to get worse. I’m sorry. But if she’s being
difficult over there, it means she’s not trying to push forward policy that will end in innocent people
dying.” Percy looks a lot older than he is just then, the flames making the dark circles under his eyes
Harry feels a kind of kinship with Percy just then. He’s too young to be getting almost killed by Voldemort all the time, and Percy’s too young to have to manage a whole corrupt government.

“You’re right, giving her power over Hogwarts is the lesser of two evils. I’m sorry,” Hermione says earnestly.

Percy gives her a relieved smile. “It’s okay. I know she’s terrible, and I was serious about it getting worse. She’s made up a position called High Inquisitor, and it’s basically going to put her entirely in charge of Hogwarts. I fought against it, but the Wizengamot hates her too, and they’re all willing to give her whatever she wants if it means keeping her away from them.”

“She’s going to make this place hell,” Ron says grimly.

His brother nods. “Basically, yeah. Sorry again. It will only be one year, I promise. I’ll figure out how to get her out of there over the summer. But I need her out of here while we – uh,” he snaps his mouth shut. “While something is happening.”

Ron raises an eyebrow.

“I can’t tell you, don’t look at me like that. Just. Trust me, it’s important. I wouldn’t be subjecting you all to Dolores if it wasn’t important,” he promises.

“Hogwarts has faced worse than Umbridge,” Harry says. “She’s not petrifying students or putting them under unforgivable curses, and she’s probably not even secretly Voldemort.”

That doesn’t seem to be as comforting as Harry intended it to be. “You know, I wonder if other schools have these problems. Oh! Ron, congratulations on making keeper, Charlie was talking about it. Are you really a prefect?”

Ron beams. “Thanks! And yeah.”

“You too?” he asks, looking to Hermione. She lifts herself off the floor enough to show him her prefect badge. “Well, clearly Hogwarts was on a downward spiral even before Dolores showed up.”

“Hey!” Ron says, but he’s still grinning. “I think we make really logical and great choices for authority figures.”

Harry twists to stare at him. “A third year got in a fight with a Hufflepuff, and you taught him how to throw a better punch.”

“That’s an important life skill,” Ron defends while Percy looks on in horror. “Besides, he got beaten by a first year. That’s just embarrassing.”

“A first year came to me crying about being homesick, and I conjured her a hot chocolate and then ran away,” Hermione confesses.

“That was Mabel,” Ron says, “she appreciated the gesture, although she was still crying when Lavender threw her at me an hour later.”

Percy slowly slides his gaze over to Harry, who shrugs. “I’m here to serve as an example of what not to do?”

“I have to go,” he says, “and I don’t know, maybe develop a drinking problem or something.”
They’re still laughing at him when his head disappears and the flames fade from green to orange. When they eventually stop, Ron is frowning, and Harry’s own smile slides off his face when he sees it. “Ron?” Hermione asks.

He says, “We can’t tell him about Umbridge’s detentions.”

“I thought we weren’t planning on telling anyone about the detentions,” Harry says. That’s why he’d stopped Hermione when she’d started to talk about it.

“Yes, but I mean – I know Percy. He wouldn’t send Umbridge here unless he had to, unless it was really important. But if he knew she was physically harming students, he’d do everything he could to stop her,” he says.

“Probably at the expense of whatever he’s working on,” Hermione finishes. “And possibly his career.”

Ron nods, “And more than just me not wanting my brother to lose his job – we need Percy with Fudge right now. I hate to say this, but it’s bigger than some kids’ bloody hands.”

“Percy wouldn’t see it that way,” Harry feels the need to point out. “He’d choose to get rid of Umbridge.” Harry agrees with Ron, but it feels wrong to make Percy’s choice for him.

“I know,” Ron says, rubbing the back of his neck. “That’s why we’re not going to tell him. Okay?”

Harry locks eyes with Hermione, and she looks as uncertain as he feels, but it’s Ron, he’s their best friend. And he’s right. “Okay,” they say, and Ron’s relief is worth any misgivings he has about this decision.

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Murder suddenly sounds like a much more appealing option.

“Are you fucking kidding me,” Blaise says flatly, looking at the pronouncement. “I don’t have to deal with this, you know. Italy has three schools of magic, and I could go to any of them. Like, I could just literally walk through the doors, and they’d let me.”

“That’s because members of your family are the heads of all those schools,” Pansy says, chewing her bottom lip. “Also if you leave us to deal with this, I’ll kill you.”

“Who said anything about leaving you? We can all go. You know what they don’t have in Italy? Dolores Umbridge and a power hungry madman.” Millie shoots him a look, and he amends, “Well, okay, they do have several power hungry madmen, but they’re all related to me, and they’re not killing anyone.” Draco snorts. “Not killing people indiscriminately for kicks. Just killing a few people, some of the time, when appropriate. They wouldn’t kill us, is my point.”

“Maybe it won’t be that bad?” Millie offers, but she doesn’t sound very confident in that assessment.

It is that bad.

He’s not Snape’s biggest fan, but, well, Snape is still theirs. It’s one thing for Draco and the rest of them to talk shit about their sour head of house, but it’s quite another to watch Umbridge do it to his face. Even Theodore, who kind of hates Snape for no reason Draco’s ever been able to pin down, is looking at Umbridge like he wishes he could kill her with his glare alone.

She’s sitting at the front edge of the classroom, which puts her right next to Neville and Lavender’s
work table. He feels bad about doing this to Neville, but at least he has a history of messing up potions, so no one will think anything of it.

Umbridge is busy interrogating Snape about why he’s not the defense professor, so she’s not looking their way, which is probably for the best. He takes the dried fire petals and crushes them, rolling them into a small ball, and then rolling that ball in some of crackling sap that they’re supposed to be using as a binding agent for the first and second layer of the potion. Pansy doesn’t know enough about potions to know what he’s doing, but she knows him well enough that she’s grinning. He takes the end result between his thumb and forefinger, aims, and flicks it halfway across the classroom. It lands right into their cauldron, and Draco would cheer if it wouldn’t give him away completely.

Neville twists in his seat to glare at him. Lavender says, “What was–”

Their potion explodes, a fizzing column of blue gunk bursting into the air, holding its shape for an impressive two seconds before falling apart, covering Neville and Lavender, which is unfortunate, but means to an end and all that.

Umbridge screams as the blue goop come crashing down on her. Based on the gurgling sound that soon follows, he can only assume she swallowed some of it. That’s going to give her a stomach ache.

Hermione jumps to her feet, casting a quick scourify on Neville and Lavender. She doesn’t do the same for Umbridge, who’s stood up and is blindly walking around classroom, arms flailing. “It’s burning! It’s burning, get it off of me! GET IT OFF!”

Pansy looks to Draco, and he shakes his head. It is, at best, tingling unpleasantly. He’d just made the base ingredient for fizzing whizbees, not anything actually harmful. He’s not trying to get anyone expelled.

“Dear me,” Snape drawls, and he’s not smiling, but his face kind of looks like it knew how to smile once, which is an improvement. “If only I knew such a spell? Unfortunately, I am just a potions master.”

Umbridge wails, scratching at her face in an attempt to get it off, but it’s already started to harden, so she’s only partially successful. She goes stumbling towards the door, and Daphne magics it open while Seamus calls out, “I think you need to go to the hospital wing, Professor! Let me help. Just a bit more, go a little to the left – there you go!”

She steps out of the classroom, still sobbing and Daphne shuts the door behind her. There’s a horrible crash, which Draco thinks might be her knocking into a suit of armor.

No one says anything. Snape stands at the front of the classroom, arms crossed. “Well, what are you waiting for? Get to work.” He stalks over to Neville and Lavender and sneers down at them. Neville just looks resigned. “Miss Brown, Mr. Longbottom. What a poor excuse for a potion.”

“Professor, we didn’t–” Lavender protests, but cuts herself off when Neville elbows her.

“Pathetic,” he sneers. “You’ll receive an outstanding for the day. Now get out of my sight.”

Neville blinks. “We get a what?”

Now Lavender’s the one elbowing him. “We understand, Professor!” she says, beaming as she stands up, grabs onto Neville’s arm, and drags him out of the classroom. Snape clears their workstation with a wave of his wand, and Draco ducks his head and focuses on finishing the potion,
even though Pansy digs her elbows into his side.

He drops off his completed potion on Snape’s desk at the end of the class, and he doesn’t look up from writing in his gradebook when he says, “I saw that.”

Draco freezes. “Um. What?”

Snape doesn’t say anything, so after an uncertain moment, he moves on, hurrying to catch up with his friends.

That night it’s just the six of them in their classroom. Ron takes him by the shoulders and says, “Draco. That was, without a doubt, the most awesome thing you’ve ever done.”

Everyone is laughing, and he turns to Harry, glaring. He raises his hands in surrender. “I’ve seen you do better things, but I’m working from a different set of experiences than Ron.”

“Gross,” Ron says, letting him go. “I’m so glad I haven’t experienced those things.”

That’s just asking for it, so Draco doesn’t feel bad when he grabs Harry and kisses him, all noise and fake moans and almost no actual kissing. Pansy whistles while Ron threatens to gouge his eyes out. When they break apart, laughing, Blaise and Hermione are holding up score cards.

~

“You have a rather … close relationship, with Albus Dumbledore, don’t you?”

Draco can almost feel all the air go out of the room. He looks up from array he’s charting just enough to catch Hermione’s eye, which they try not to do in public, but this is important.

Umbridge isn’t seriously stupid enough to go after the Flamels, is she? If she tries to say that Nicolas and Perenelle Flamel aren’t qualified to teach an alchemy class, he can’t imagine she’ll get very far.

“I’ve known him since he was thirteen,” Perenelle says coolly, “when he took my class. A bright boy, but no real promise as an alchemist.”

“But your relationship with Dumbledore and your husband’s relationship with him is different, isn’t it?” she presses.

No one in the classroom is working anymore. They’d have to be blind not to see Nicolas flirting with Dumbledore at mealtimes, but none of them are going to say anything about it. It’s hilarious, and Nicolas is over six hundred years old and Dumbledore is over a hundred, which means they’re well over the age when they can make their own choices. There is, however, a rather large betting pool about what the exact nature of their relationship is. But this seems like a rather unsportsmanlike way to get the answer.

“Sorry, I’m having trouble understanding you, English isn’t my first language,” Nicolas says in perfect, unaccented English. “Are you implying that I’m unsuitable for my position because you believe I’m currently fucking Albus, or are you implying that I’m cheating on my wife? Or both? Or perhaps are you attempting to insinuate that I had sex with Albus when he was a child? Because I must say, I don’t really care for any those aspersions on my character.”

Draco’s pretty sure none of them are even breathing.

“Excuse me?” Umbridge demands. “What did you just say to me?”
Nicolas rolls his eyes, “Get out of my classroom, Dolores. You lost the privilege of being in my presence when you decided to be awful.”

She goes white, eyes narrowed, and takes a step forward. “Now listen to me–”

Perenelle steps forward, quiet and small compared to Umbridge, not that it matters. She’s clearly accustomed to being the most dangerous person in whatever room she enters. “My husband told you to leave.”

Umbridge wilts under Perenelle’s steady gaze, which is amazing. Maybe they can just stick Perenelle in front of Voldemort and she can stare him to death. “You’ve made a terrible mistake,” she tells them, but it’s a little hard to take her seriously since her voice is shaking.

“I’m six hundred and fifty five years old,” he says, amused, “I’ve made a lot of them. Get out.” He waits until she’s gone to turn to the rest of them. “Sorry kids, you’re going to have to work harder than that to win the pool.”

“You know about that?” Lisa Turpin calls out, horrified.

He leans forward, his grin so wide that it almost looks manic. “Know about it? I started it.”

Now everyone’s yelling, arrays abandoned as they call foul, or beg for a hint. Draco just leans back in his chair and watches it all, absently sketching another array in the corner of his paper. Could he use alchemy to help him with adding more locations to his sky replication devices? Maybe, but he’d have to get way better at it than he is currently, so if that’s a viable option, it’s one that’s going to have to be on the back burner for a few years.

~

“Let’s kill her,” Harry says, leaving transfiguration and heading to dinner.

Neville rolls his eyes. “Everything else she’s done is tolerable, but being mean to McGonagall is a killable offense?”

“Yes,” he answers, not sure what Neville’s trying to get at here.

Ron sighs and puts his arm around Harry’s shoulders. “Harry, murder is bad.”

“Most of the time,” Hermione says. Ron glares at her. “What? Sometimes a little murder can be helpful.”

He turns to Neville, beseeching, but he only shrugs. “Murder is bad almost all of the time.”

Ron is scandalized, which finally causes Harry to crack a grin. They’ve just stepped into the great hall when Harry sees someone waving to get his attention. His eyes catch on Quinn and Cedric, who are waving at him from the Ravenclaw table. “Go on, I’m starving,” Neville says, clapping Harry on the shoulder before heading over to the Gryffindor table.

Harry shrugs and walks over to the Ravenclaw table with Ron and Hermione, sitting down across from Quinn, Cedric, and Cho. “Have you asked him yet?” Quinn asks Hermione as soon as they sit down.

“Not yet,” she sighs, “although I guess I will now.” She turns to him, and Harry doesn’t like this at all. “Harry, you know we’re not learning anything in Umbridge’s class.”
“I noticed,” he says warily.

“Well, Cedric came up with the idea of having a little study group of people who want to learn defense on their own,” she continues.

Harry relaxes. Is that all? “Oh, okay, great. Sure, that sounds fun. When were you thinking?” he asks Cedric.

He opens his mouth, then closes it, then says, “Actually, Harry, I don’t think I’m the best person to lead it. I was hoping you would do that.”

What?

“What?” he says, “Why? Cedric, you were a Triwizard champion. You’re brilliant at defense.”

“He is,” Cho agrees, “but you’re better. Harry, you’re the best at defense in this whole school. Plus, you have more experience than any of us.”

“You don’t need to be experienced to lead a study group,” he argues.

“They don’t want you to lead a study group,” Ron says, and when Harry turns to him his eyes are narrowed and he’s glaring at the rest of them, Hermione included. “Do you?”

Cedric and Hermione at least look a little embarrassed. Cho shrugs. “No, not really.”

Harry is so confused. “You don’t want me to lead the study group?”

“They want you to lead,” Ron says, “it’s just that study group isn’t really the best word for what they have in mind.”

Quinn leans forward, making sure to look him in the eye. “Tell me Harry. Have you ever wanted to lead an unofficial teenage militia? Because I think that would look great on your resume.”

“Merlin’s balls, Quinn, why would you say it like that?” Cedric asks, horrified. Cho groans and rubs at her forehead.

“No!” Harry says. “Are you crazy?”

“Not relevant.” He feels like it’s a little relevant. “There’s a war coming, and I’d like to survive it. Are you going to help us survive, or not?”

Harry stares, feeling hot and horribly itchy all over. “This is extremely manipulative.”

“Harry, please,” Hermione says. “You really are the best option. You’ve faced Voldemort and Death Eaters before. Multiple times. Who else can teach us that’s done that?”

“That was because of a whole lot of luck! Not because I’m some sort of – combat expert!” he protests.

Ron puts his hand on his arm, squeezing until Harry looks over at him. “It’s a good idea,” he says simply. “Sorry, mate.”

Well, fuck.

“I’ll think about it,” he says, but Hermione’s beaming, because she thinks that means he’s going to say yes.
She’s right, but she doesn’t have to look so smug about it.

Chapter End Notes

i hope you liked it!

megalania-prisca has done several gorgeous pieces for siat that you can view here (she's added more since the last chapter!)

leon1618 did a cute doodle of zaira that you seen see here

renified made an awesome character board that you seen find here

as always, feel free to follow / harass me at: shanastoryteller.tumblr.com

i post writing updates in my 'progress report' tag if that's something you're interested in knowing ;)}
First, there’s the issue of the Slytherins.

Which Harry doesn’t feel like is actually an issue, and he’s not sure why they’re arguing about it.

“Peter Pettigrew was in Gryffindor,” he points out, “as was Crouch Jr. And a whole bunch of other people who serve Voldemort. His supporters come from all the houses, so if we’re not going to put in some weird vetting process in place for the other students, we shouldn’t do it for the Slytherins either.”

“You can’t pretend that most of Voldemort’s followers don’t come from Slytherin just because we’re your friends,” Blaise says, in what he clearly considers to be a reasonable tone of voice.

Ron scowls. “Well, maybe if everyone didn’t act like Slytherins were going to end up following Voldemort no matter what, less of them would do it.” Hermione is staring at him, her mouth hanging open. He doesn’t notice, continuing, “Look. If we’re teaching kids to survive the war, then we’re not excluding a fourth of the school. I’m not going to have some thirteen year old from a Slytherin family end up dead because we wouldn’t teach him protego just in case he was secretly evil.”

“And if that same thirteen year old uses a cutting curse to slice open your throat because maybe he’s not evil, but he doesn’t want to get killed by his family either?” Pansy asks idly, like she does when she’s feeling the most dangerous.

Ron shrugs. “That’s a risk I’m willing to take. Quinn spoke about a militia, but realistically this is more about not getting killed in this war than it is about fighting in it. I’m not standing by and letting the Slytherins get killed, by either side, not if we can do something about it.”

Harry looks to his soulmate, who isn’t saying anything, but his hair is unkept because he keeps running his hand through it. “Draco?”

He flinches, and Harry doesn’t like that at all. He wants to go over and touch him, hold him, but this is too important a discussion to get side tracked just because his boyfriend is upset. “I could – I could run a defense group just for the Slytherins–”

“No,” Hermione says, they first time she’s spoken since the six of them have met up. “No, that’s insane. You’re doing too much as it is.”

His shoulders slump, but he seems more relieved than anything else.

That’s the final straw for Harry. “This is stupid. We’re including the Slytherins. Either we do this with everyone, or we don’t do it at all. That’s going to be my condition to Quinn and Cedric.”

“Harry,” Blaise begins, frustrated.

He shakes his head. “No. No. Together, or not at all. End of discussion.”

Pansy raises an eyebrow, and she’s still got her ice queen face on. “You know that none of us will be able to attend, right?”
“What?” He stares. “Why not?”

Ron lets out a frustrated breath. “Fuck. That’s a good point.”

“What?” he repeats.

“Voldemort is staying in my house with my parents,” Draco says. “I can’t attend. If anyone were to say anything about me being there, if someone sees us together and we slip, even for a second – I have to protect my parents.”

“And we’re his best friends,” Pansy says, gesturing to Blaise. “Millie too. Everyone in our house might know that Draco isn’t the blood purist asshole that everyone expects him to be, but there’s a big leap from conservative moderate to – whatever they hell they’d decide he was if anyone found out that you two were friends, or, even worse, boyfriends.”

Harry stares, betrayed, because she’s right and he hates it. Draco is his soulmate, and Pansy and Blaise and Millie are his friends. He knows they’re going to end up involved in this war one way or another, knows that Draco is already in the thick of it. If they’re all going to be practicing defense, he wants them there. He wants them as safe as he can make them.

“We have them sign a magical contract,” Hermione says suddenly, although considering how confidently she’s speaking it doesn’t sound like this idea has only occurred to her just now. “It’ll be binding. They physically won’t be able to talk about the lessons to anyone who’s not involved with them. Not without magical consequences.”

Draco rolls his eyes, even though Blaise and Pansy look like they’re considering it. “That’s a lot of trouble to go to just so I can get some extra practice in. Pansy and Blaise can go without me, that will be fine. It’ll give me some time to catch up on homework.”

Anger roars through Harry, hot and deafening in its intensity. Before he gets more than halfway through a wordless snarl, Ron has taken two long strides forward and fist his hands in the front of Draco’s robes. Ron always looks bigger when he’s angry, or maybe it just that when he’s mad he forgets to try and make himself look smaller. “Don’t you dare. Don’t act like you’re expendable. You’re not just Harry’s soulmate anymore, understand? You’re our friend. If I have to personally threaten to punch every one of those kids in the face to make sure they keep their mouths shut, fine, I’ll do it. But don’t for one second think any of us will ever let you be left behind. I’m including the twins and my sister and Neville in that.”

Draco blinks, staring at Ron for a long moment, who only glares back, waiting. Finally, Draco cracks a grin, slowly prying Ron’s hands from his robes. “Okay, merlin, you don’t have to be so dramatic.”

Pansy snorts, but Ron seems satisfied, obnoxiously ruffling Draco’s hair. “Good.”

“I wasn’t trying to be a martyr, that’s what we have Harry for,” he says, and Harry sighs. “I’ve spent the whole summer being taught to duel by my parents. I probably need these lessons less than everyone else.”

“Shut up, you’re coming,” Ron insists. Draco shrugs and doesn’t argue any further.

“I have a spell in mind for the binding contract,” Hermione says, and she’s speaking to all of them, but her eyes are still glued to Ron. It’s hard for Harry to tell because of her dark skin, but he thinks she might be blushing, even if he doesn’t know why. It’s directed towards Ron, which isn’t exactly new, but apparently Hermione is really attracted to angry speeches? Or something.
Blaise grins, a truly terrifying sight, and says, “Me too. Let me help.”

Draco, for once, seems content to leave things to Hermione without arguing with her about it, and pulls out one of the massive medical tomes that Pomfrey assigned him. Harry sighs, but goes to sit next to his boyfriend and gets started on outlining some possible things to cover in their study group, which is absolutely not a militia.

~

Harry enters the great hall with Ron and Hermione and sees that Quinn and Cho have moved over to the Hufflepuff table today instead of dragging Cedric to theirs. Cedric has an arm around his fiancé’s waist as he flips through a charms book, scowling. It’s too bad the whole Draco being decent thing is a secret, otherwise Harry would volunteer him to help Cedric study for his newts.

“Hey,” he says, and automatically has three sets of eyes on him. It’s a little creepy. He hopes that he and Ron and Hermione don’t do that, but thinking back on it, they totally do.

“So have you thought about our proposition?” Quinn asks, skipping right past the pleasantries.

“Yes,” he says. ‘I’ll do it, but only if we include the Slytherins.”

Cedric makes a face, then obviously feels guilty about it, and says, “I guess it would be wrong to exclude them. Good call, Harry.”

“They’re not all bad. I never would have found you if Draco hadn’t come with me,” Cho points out. “If it wasn’t for him helping me and Fleur, we might have all died.”

Quinn hums. “Right, exactly. The Slytherins should be fine as long as Harry and Draco can keep their hands off each other.”

There’s a beat of horrible silence, during which he completely loses the ability to breathe, before Hermione snaps, “What are you talking about?”

Ze blinks. “What? Everyone knows that Harry and Draco are constantly going at it. If you both can keep from starting a fight for a couple hours, everyone else with probably follow your lead. The way the Slytherins trail after Draco is adorable, and the Gryffindors are too concerned with presenting a united front to cause trouble if Harry doesn’t.”

_Fighting_. Quinn is talking about them fighting. “Right,” he says weakly.

“I really hate that Susan hangs out with Draco,” Cedric mutters. “They’re enough of a pain apart, if they keep being friends they’re going to end up taking over the school.”

Cho squeezes his shoulder. “It’s adorable that you think Susan would ever be content to just control a school.”

“So, the defense club,” Ron says, in a valiant attempt to get them back on track.

“Teenage militia,” Quinn corrects immediately, and Cedric leans around Cho to flick zir in the side. Ze doesn’t even have the decency to flinch.

“Defense club,” Ron repeats. “Where are we going to meet up?” The most logical place is their classroom, considering how well it’s warded, but none of them are willing to give up their secret meet up spot.
The fact that they want to keep this from Umbridge goes without saying.

“Shrieking shack?” Cho offers.

Hermione shakes her head. “Too hard to get in there regularly, and against the rules on top of it. There’s no reason for us to try and hide something we’re allowed to do with something we’re not.”

“We could use the room of requirement,” Quinn says.

“The what?” Cedric asks, frowning.

“Room of requirement,” ze repeats. “It’s on the seventh floor. You just walk by it three times thinking about what you need, and that’s what it gives you. It’s really cool.”

What the fuck. Harry’s comforted by the fact that Cedric looks as betrayed as he feels. “We have something like that? And you didn’t tell me?”

“You didn’t ask,” ze returns.

Cedric sputters while Ron frowns. “Wait. This room exists, and you’ve known that it exists, and you still keep blowing up the potions classroom?”

They all turn to stare at zir. Ze’s completely unpunmt. “Yes.”

“Why?” Hermione demands.

Ze shrugs. “If I did it in there, then Severus would get bored, or lost in his own head, and then he’d be even more of a bitch than he is now. Besides, the first time I made the castle shake, he came running out of his rooms with shampoo in his hair and only wearing a towel around his waist, so, there’s that.”

Ew. “Are you and Snape—”

“If you finish that sentence I’ll have to kill you, and that will really bum a lot of people out,” Quinn says, and Harry snorts. “Gross, no, he’s my professor, I just thought it was funny. Also, I have a boyfriend, even if he’s busy running around France and digging things up, or whatever archeologists do.” Ze pauses, then adds, “Although, if you were wondering, Severus is surprisingly built under his robes.”

“No one was wondering that,” Ron insists. Hermione’s contemplative look is the most disturbing thing Harry’s ever seen, and he’s including the time he accidentally reanimated a couple dozen corpses in various states of decomposition.

Cho wrinkles her nose. “We can keep talking about this, but, if we do, I’m going to throw up all over this table, so, you know, your call.”

“Tentative yes on the room of requirement, assuming no one can think of anything better,” Cedric says firmly, cutting Quinn off before ze can do more than open zir mouth.

“Spoilsport,” ze sighs. “Let’s all tell our respective houses about the militia.”

“It’s not a militia,” Harry protests. “We’re kids, we’re not soldiers.”

“Considering the current political climate, it’s becoming increasingly likely that we’ll be both,” Quinn says.
The depressing thing is, ze’s right.

~

Draco is laying out on the couch in the common room, alchemy text held above his head as he tries to make sense of the theory of circle layering. It’s not going well, and he has an essay on blood clotting to do for Pomfrey, so he’s seriously considering abandoning his current project. At least he understands blood clotting.

There’s some sort of commotion, and no one’s screaming so it must be fine, but then his book is being pulled out of his hands. “Hey!” he says, cross, but blinks when he sees Quinn standing above him and scowling. “What are you doing here? This isn’t even your common room, you know, how are you even here?”

“Luna told me how to get in.” Draco hasn’t once told Luna the password, and he’s pretty sure no one else has either, but somehow she always knows. “I need to talk to you.”

“If this is about the ghost summoning spell, it’s not ready yet. I got the arithmancy of it down, so Flitwick agreed to teach it to me, but it’s going to be a couple more weeks of practice before he lets me attempt it for real. At least.” He wishes it was less, because he’s pretty good at summoning spells, and thanks to Flitwick’s summer assignment he knows this one backwards and forwards, so he’s almost positive that he wouldn’t kill himself or anyone else.

Quinn frowns. “It’s not about that, but fine. It has to be before the holidays, otherwise my brewing schedule is going to be fucked. I need to speak to you alone.”

Draco is acutely aware of everyone’s eyes on them. “Okay. Maybe we should do this somewhere else, since you’re a Ravenclaw and all.”

“I’m also Head Boy,” ze points out, “I’m not not allowed to be in here, which is the same thing as being allowed.”

“Your logic seems faulty, but I’ve been thinking in mathematical equations for the past few hours so I can’t really say why,” he says. Quinn rolls zir eyes, and Draco pushes himself to his feet. He herds Quinn towards the door, glaring at everyone they pass. “Go on, get back to what you were doing, nothing to see here, do your homework or something.”

There’s a smattering of muffled laughter, and Aiden, one of the first years, grins up at him and says, “You’re not my real dad.”

He flicks Aiden in the side as he passes, “Now that you’ve said that, I’ll be watching to make sure you eat your vegetables at dinner.”

He makes a face, and Draco sticks out his tongue before they leave the common room.

He pretends to be surprised and irritated when Quinn tells him about the defense group that Harry is leading, and the irritation at least isn’t entirely feigned. Thanks to how he spent his summer, he knows that there are some kids whose families are so entwined in Voldemort’s mess that he’s legitimately worried about teaching them to fight, because they just might end up on the other side.

But that’s not his call to make. He couldn’t bear it if something happened to one of his classmates because he purposefully left them out, so they’re just going to have to do their best to minimize the damage. He’s rather impressed with Hermione’s solution. It’s very Slytherin of her.

The initial meeting to see who’s interested has been set up for the upcoming Hogsmeade weekend, to
take place in the shrieking shack. Hermione had initially suggested they meet someplace in the village, but there’s pretty much nowhere they could go where seeing them all together wouldn’t look suspicious. They’ll just sneak from Hogsmeade to the shack, and no one will be the wiser. Hopefully.

When he shows up to his standard meeting with Pomfrey, and the hospital wing is nearly empty. However, she’s not alone. Her head is bent so she can have a whispered conversation with Flitwick, who’s standing on a chair so the height difference between them isn’t so ridiculous.

“Hey!” he snaps. “Who said you two were allowed to talk to each other? I told you I would handle it.” And he has been, spending several of his free periods in the hospital wing, and just as many evenings in Flitwick’s office.

A couple weeks ago, Pomfrey would have given him detention for talking to her like that. But now, she only rolls her eyes, and Flitwick just beams at him. Pomfrey raises an eyebrow. “What makes you think we were talking about you?”

“We were,” Flitwick says immediately, and Pomfrey only sighs. “Poppy was telling me that your healing abilities are quite impressive.”

He grins, and tries to squash it down into a smirk, but doesn’t think he’s successful. “It’s just charms. I’m good at charms, you know that.” Flitwick looks confused for a moment, and glances at Pomfrey, who just shakes her head. Draco doesn’t understand. “I haven’t started in on learning more about healing potions yet, if that’s it? I figure I’ll need some time to properly bully Snape into it.”

“Professor Snape,” Flitwick corrects while Pomfrey lets out a delicate cough that’s clearly a laugh. “Regardless, we were wondering if perhaps Pomfrey and I should start coordinating our efforts in regards to your independent studies.”

He doesn’t like the sound of that at all. “But we’ve been focusing on inanimate material manipulation spells, and I like those. I’m good at them! I’ve even finished the outline on my next paper. I’m doing the ghost summoning spell as a favor to Quinn, and because I like summoning spells, but I want to continue studying what I have been. I might be able to make something really cool one day.”

“I believe you’ve made several really cool things already,” Flitwick says dryly. “I’m glad you have a strong base in material manipulation. I assume it’s helped you in your alchemy classes?”

“Yes,” he says, because it has. Getting the circles laid out properly is a nightmare, but at least he’s already familiar with how magic behaves and feels when its affecting a substance to change its properties, which is subtly but significantly different than transfiguration, since that’s a bit like using a mallet to carve a marble statue. Hermione is doing better in alchemy than he is, but that’s because she has a stronger theoretical base than he does. Once he figures out how to do the reaction, his transmutations have been the smoothest. It’s just that first step that takes him twice as long as it takes Hermione.

“Filius approached me about taking your spellcasting further,” she says, and fantastic, he’s getting really tired of just reading about spells. “Under normal circumstances, I’d refuse, but you’re surprisingly adept at healing. You need to strengthen your application of magic and increase your control. It’s good now, but not good enough if you’re going to be doing things like putting veins back together.”

Draco scowls, but doesn’t argue. He’s good at healing, but not great, and he knows it. It’s why he approached Pomfrey in the first place. “Okay, so how do we fix that?”
“I suggested you shift your focus from where it currently is onto protection and warding charms,” she says. “It’ll focus your magic and train it to be more useful in healing, so we can speed up the pace of your lessons.”

That actually sounds awesome, but he’s not going to tell them that. To be fair, if he wasn’t in alchemy class, he’d probably refuse, because he really likes making stuff, but he is, so he says, “Okay, sure, warding sounds fine too.”

Pomfrey and Flitwick share a triumphant glance, and he narrows his eyes. He feels like he’s missing something, but he can’t think of what it could be.

~

The extended group is hanging out in their classroom tonight, helping him hammer out some of his lesson plans. Harry feels weird calling them that, but he supposes that they can’t be anything else. He kind of wants to harass Remus for tips, but he doesn’t really want to explain that he’s been guilted into leading a teenager militia in his limited spare time, so. He won’t do that yet. Maybe over the holidays.

Neville and Millie are pouring over the scroll of ideas that Hermione and Millie had helped him come up with, whittling his their initial brainstorming session down to something reasonable for him to teach to a bunch of teenagers. The twins are busy whispering to each other over a thick book that no one has managed to get a proper look at, which isn’t comforting.

“I don’t get something,” Ginny says, absently painting Ron’s nails now that she’s done with Luna’s. “Why are we doing this in the room of requirement? If anyone finds out that’s where we’re holding the meetings, we’re screwed. All they’d have to do is walk by the door three times, and we’d be caught.”

“It’s our best option,” Draco says, “unless we want to ward a classroom to hell and back again, which I don’t.”

Ginny is still frowning. “What about the chamber of secrets? The only people who can get in there are Harry and Voldemort. I’m not sure we can get much more secure than that. Granted, Harry would have to hang out in the girls’ bathroom to let everyone through like a total creeper, but I bet Myrtle would keep watch for you.”

“There’s the issue of the giant rotting basilisk corpse,” Neville says absently, scrawling out some comments on the scroll.

Harry freezes. He looks to Draco, who’s turned a truly unhealthy shade of pale. “Right,” he says weakly, which was clearly a mistake, because everyone turns to look at him.

“Guys? What’s wrong?” Blaise asks cautiously.

He glances at Draco, who’s starting to look a little wild eyed and only gives a helpless shrug, so no help there. “We, I mean, so you know, I really must point out that we were twelve at the time, and had just faced Voldemort, so we were a little distracted, and had other priorities right then.”

“You didn’t kill it?” Hermione screeches, because she’s smart enough to know what he’s saying without needing him to actually say it.

They both wince. Everyone else gapes.

“No,” Ginny says slowly, “it was dead when I woke up. It’s dead.”
Draco tries to take a subtle step away from her, but that just brings him closer to Millie’s incredulous stare. “It was unconscious when you woke up. But hey, it may be dead!”

Ron rubs at his temples, which is never a good sign. “Are you guys telling me you left the basilisk down there, alive, and just forgot to mention it for three years?”

“It’s been a busy three years,” he protests, “And, hey, it wasn’t killing people before Voldemort, and it clearly isn’t killing people now, so it’s all fine. It might not even be alive, we don’t know, it’s probably fine.”

Luna stands up and dusts invisible lint from the front of her robes. “Well, you know, we’ll never find out whether it’s alive or not by sitting here talking about it.”

“Yeah, okay,” Ginny says at the same time that Blaise snaps, “Absolutely not!”

They’re glaring at each other, which rather feels like watching an unstoppable force go up against an immovable object. Ron runs his hand through his hair. “As much as I hate to agree with my sister, she’s right. We should go investigate. If it’s dead, we should take care of the body and use the chamber to hold lessons in.”

“And if it’s alive?” Neville asks wearily. “I don’t want to get eaten.”

“Ritualistic cannibalism is my least preferred way to die,” Harry tells him companionably. Pansy cackles and Hermione sighs. He’d thought about it, and even though he hasn’t gotten around to writing it down properly, he had made a list. Right under ritualistic cannibalism has been suffocated by a swarm of bees flying into his mouth, which doesn’t seem a very realistic worry, but then again he would have said that about most of his life, so he feels justified having it on the list.

“Harry and I will go,” Draco declares. “I’ll summon Abigail, and she can tell us if the basilisk is alive and wants to eat us. If it’s dead, we’ll come get you so you can help us clean it up, and if it’s alive, we’ll come get you so we can – I don’t know, kill an millennia old creature in the middle of the night for the hell of it, I guess. If we all try and go down there together, it’ll just turn into a mess.”

Fred opens his mouth to argue, but Ron says, “Fine, but we’re waiting for you in Myrtle’s bathroom, and neither of you are allowed to do anything stupid without us.”

Which is how Harry find himself creeping forward in the chamber of secrets, once again stepping on the tiny skeletons of many small creatures, except this time Draco is walking a step behind him. They’re nearly to the door of the chamber when Draco snorts.

“What?” he asks, trying to tread carefully, but there’s just too many little bones to avoid stepping on all of them.

“Being in a dueling club, going down into the chamber, it’s like we’re back in second year,” he grins, a pale smudge against the darkness. “Like a couple going on their first date again. Want to make out on Slytherin’s statue?”

“Draco!” he laughs, elbowing him in the side. Except his boyfriend grabs his arm and tugs him closer, and then they are making out, in this dark and dank room filled with skeletons. But Draco is solid and warm and it’s been ages since they’ve had any proper alone time together, and Harry would pay all the gold in his vault to just be able to spend the night with his boyfriend in an actual bed instead of hiding in classrooms and broom closets. He’s incredibly jealous of George’s freedom to just walk into the Slytherin common room and see Cassius whenever he wants. It’s a good thing the he and Draco are so flexible, because a couple of those closets are really small.
They have to keep moving, they have to do this, because their friends are waiting for them, probably worried, and it’s wrong to keep them waiting just so he can have a little alone time with his soulmate.

But he likes Draco’s taste and smell and the weight of him pressed against him, and he’s only human.

It takes several long minutes for Draco to pull away, licking his lips and gaze half lidded, which is a new form of torture, because that just makes Harry want to kiss him all over again. “We have to go find the basilisk,” Draco mutters.

Harry’s shoulders slump. “Yeah.”

Draco laughs, and leans in to press a quick, brief kiss to the corner of Harry’s mouth. “Serpensortia!”

There’s a familiar sizzle of magic, and Abigail is wrapped around Draco’s arm with small shower of golden sparks. She’s disoriented for a moment, then she catches sight of Harry. “Speaker! What’s going on? Where are we? I don’t like it here, it smells wrong, let’s leave.”

“Hi Abigail. We can’t leave, we actually need you to do something for us. If I open the door, can you crawl through and tell us if the basilisk is dead or not?”

She bares her fangs at him, which appropriately conveys how much she doesn’t want to do that.

“Come on, please, it’s important. Do it for Draco,” he pleads.

She looks to Draco before making an irritated sound and crawling from his arm and down his body onto the floor, cursing angrily the whole time.

“Not pleased?” Draco guesses, because he doesn’t know Parseltongue, but he does know Abigail.

Harry rolls his eyes and unlocks the door, tugging it open just enough so that Abigail can get through. Then they wait.

They don’t have to wait long.

Less than a minute later, Abigail shoots back through the door, franticly climbing up Draco’s leg. “Alive, alive, alive! She’s alive and she’s BIG!”

Harry doesn’t even have the time to panic before a great booming voice echoes around them. “I know you’re there, children. Come to me. I will not look at you, I will not hurt you.”

Draco blinks, turning his head to look behind them. “Did you hear that? Did a pipe burst?”

He doesn’t speak Parseltongue. To him, the basilisk’s loud voice just sounds like hissing.

Harry shakes his head and pulls out his wand. “She’s alive.” Draco copies him a moment later, Abigail having wound herself around his upper arm and shoulder. It takes him a moment to wet his mouth enough to speak. “Why should we believe you? You’ve killed before. You’ve tried to kill both of us before.”

When she speaks next, she sounds amused. “I am a serpent. We do not lie. We leave that to you mortals.”

Harry can’t think of a snake ever lying to him, now that he thinks about it. He’s pretty sure they can, it’s just that it never ends up being worth their time, so they don’t do it. He thinks. He’s never had an in depth discussion with a snake on the subject before.
He takes a step back and judges the size of the massive door, then turns to his boyfriend. He concentrates to make sure his words are coming out in English, then asks, “Could you summon Payne?”

“Why?” he asks. “What’s going on?”

“The basilisk wants us to talk to her, which seems stupid, but might be less stupid if we have a dragon with us.”

“That’s a stupid plan,” Draco informs him, “and Ron told us not to do anything stupid.”

Harry snorts. “Well, it can’t be helped. We do need to talk to her..”

“Or we could just turn around and leave,” Draco points out.

“Bring the not-serpent child if it pleases you,” she says, and it’s so loud to him, but Draco’s looking behind them, as if he’s trying to find some rushing water.

“She says we can bring Payne if we want,” he says.

Draco frowns. “Then there’s no reason for us to.”

“What?” he asks, but Draco’s not listening to him, instead swishing his wand so the massive door creaks the rest of the way open. He means to step through it but Harry grabs his arm, yanking him back. “What are you doing?”

“I have so much homework to do that I’ve considered taking up drinking to cope,” he says, “If we’re doing this, let’s go.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out his compact mirror, the one he’d charmed the first day back at school so it was connected to Harry’s again. “If she petrifies me, don’t let her eat me, okay?”

“This is a worse plan!” he shouts, but Draco doesn’t listen to him, instead pulling his arm away and running through the door. Harry curses and goes after him, wand first.

He nearly runs into him, and he’s worried for a moment he’s been petrified, but Draco says, “She wasn’t lying.”

Harry doesn’t understand, but then he looks down and in the reflection of Draco’s mirror he sees the basilisk looking down at them. Her eyes aren’t closed, exactly, but they do have a milky white film on them. “Is she blind?”

“Some snakes have two sets of eyelids. I guess basilisks are one of them,” he says, then swallows before snapping the mirror shut and shoving it back in his pocket. They both look up.

She’s hovering over them, and Harry had thought maybe he’d remembered her as being larger than she was, if maybe she’d just seemed larger than she was because he was twelve and terrified.

But no, she really just is incredibly huge.

“That doesn’t look good,” Draco says, and it takes Harry a long moment to figure out where he’s looking, because there’s a lot to look at. There’s a long gash down the basilisk’s head that’s mostly healed, but the skin underneath looks puffy and pink, and the scales aren’t sitting properly on top of it. That’s absolutely from when they destroyed the ceiling and knocked her out, and he feels a stab of guilt. “I can fix that.”

Draco’s tapping his wand against his hand in a way that reminds him uncomfortably of Pomfrey. “Theoretically one giant magical snake is like the other right? I healed Nagini, I can heal her, and she’s not even mostly dead. I wish Hagrid was back from his trip though, if anyone knows anything about the specifics of basilisk biology it will be him.”

The basilisk has tilts her head to the side, looking down at them, something amused in the way her tongue flicks out to taste the air. “You’re a very stupid child. What if I’m planning to eat you?”

Harry shoves Draco back behind him and raises his wand, glaring, trying to focus on the scales of her nose rather than looking at her eyes. “Hey!”

She laughs, an odd breathy sound. “I’m not. Be calm. But he doesn’t know that.”

“If you hurt him, I’ll kill you,” he says coldly.

“Harry! What are you doing, what is she saying? Can you ask her if she has any more injuries? If it’s just the one on her head, I can probably do that now. I’m going to have to hurt her again so I can heal it properly, though,” Draco says apologetically.

Harry twists around to look at him. “Why are you so determined to heal her? She tried to kill us!”

He pauses, opening his mouth for a moment before closing it, “Oh, well, that’s true. Are we going to kill her? If we’re not going to kill her, we might as well heal her.”

“Are you going to try and kill me, little hatchlings?” she hisses, lowering her great head so it’s resting on the damp and dirty floor. It puts her huge eyes right in front of them, but they’re still covered by her inner eyelid.

Harry swallows, and is still trying to think of what to say when Draco steps forward and starts poking at her wound, making a face when it oozes a foul smelling pus. “Draco!”

“What?” he scowls, his face darkening when he pokes at some of the scales near the wound. “Harry, she’s like a thousand years old, and she was Salazar Slytherin’s companion. She knew my house’s founder! And she’s not trying to kill us now, so we should help.”

“What a strange boy,” she mutters, tilting her head to give Draco easier access.

Abigail rears up from Draco’s arm and hisses, “He’s mine! I’m not sharing anymore! You’re even bigger than Nagini!”

“I’m too old to have humans of my own anymore,” she says. “Still, it’s nice that he cares.”

Abigail slumps back onto Draco’s shoulder. Harry has no idea what the fuck is going on. “What are you doing? What do you want?”

“What do I want? You’re the ones that came to my chamber,” she says, and he scowls.

Draco steps back and says, “It’s infected, I’m going to have to take care of the infection before I can heal it. Winky!”

There’s a crack, and then Winky is standing there in very pretty green dress with Draco’s crest stitched into the shoulder. She goes white and screeches, “MASTER DRACO! What is you doing!”

“Can you bring me the disinfectant cream? And the blood purifying potion? Whatever’s left, I know
you put it into doses, but it’s going to take a lot more than that for her.” Winky still looks outraged, but Draco doesn’t appear to notice. “Hey, uh – um, Miss Basilisk, this is going to sting, but it’s for the greater good, so don’t freak out and eat me.”

Winky whirs on her heels and glares at him while she gestures at Draco, but Harry only shrugs back. She throws her hands up before disappearing with another crack. “Draco, maybe this isn’t a good idea.”

“Tell her not to eat me,” he says, blithely pulling off loose and damaged scales.

He just sighs and asks, “Are you going to eat him?”

“Well, not until he heals me, at least.” He growls, but she only laughs again. “I will not eat either of you. Originally, I was planning to tell you to not come back here on pain of death, but, well, I would like to see this boy again, I think. Why are you here? What do you want?”

“She won’t eat you,” he tells Draco, who nods and summons a knife. He begins cutting away her skin, and Harry panics, but she doesn’t even flinch. Harry does, especially once rotted, infected flesh starts hitting the floor in chunks. “We were looking for a place to hold a secret defense club. Someplace where we wouldn’t be found.”

“Well, the chamber of secrets is a good place for that,” she muses. “Very well. I suppose you can bring more children, but only if the bossy one comes.”

“We’re training to defeat Voldemort. Tom. Whoever,” he throws out, which isn’t very smart, but he doesn’t understand her, and he’s trying to figure her out, just a little. Blind trust and bravery are one thing when it’s just his life on the line, but that’s his soulmate who’s currently climbing on top of her.

She opens her jaws, long venom covered fangs on full display. “Good. If that boy ever comes back here, I’ll kill him myself.”

Harry blinks, uncomprehending. He vaguely registers Winky reappearing and Draco rubbing some sort of green cream into her wound. “But – you helped him.”

“I did not apologize for trying to kill you because I did not do it,” she says, mouth still wide, anger rolling off of her. “He used imperio on me once, and I chased him away. Then he returned, but he was wearing the body of the girl, and I did not know it was him until it was too late. I will not be controlled a third time.”

He stares, not knowing what to say or how to react. Voldemort had used her without her consent? Both times? Even back when he was a teenager?

“Great, keep your mouth open wide,” Draco says, and cheerfully sticks his whole arm in her mouth so he can pour the healing potion down her throat, then another, then another.

Winky looks like she’s about to have a heart attack, and Harry isn’t far behind. “Maybe don’t do that.”

“Maybe leave the healing to me,” Draco returns, finally finishing and patting her on the top of the nose. “Does that feel better, Miss Basilisk? I’m going to have to give that and the salve about a day to get the infection out of your system, but then I can heal you properly. You should really eat something, it’ll speed the healing up, if you haven’t eaten in the past few weeks.” He looks around them, eyes catching on all the little skeletons that make up her past prey, and frowns. Clearly even if she has eaten recently, it probably wasn’t a very fulfilling meal. “Winky, can you get some fresh uncooked meat from the kitchen? Harry, ask her if she has a preference.”
Harry has been in a lot of surreal situations in his life, but he thinks that this might be the top of the list.

“I like fish,” she answers. “Also, tell him he can call me Theophania. He can’t pronounce my actual name, and it’s what Godric called me. He couldn’t say my name either, but I rather liked him.”

That’s so much for Harry to deal with right now. “Fish. She says you can call her Theophania. And that we can practice here.”

Draco is ecstatic, probably more at being on a first name basis with the basilisk than anything else, but Winky wrinkles her nose and looks around. “I is going to be needing help to clean this place in time.”

“Ask Kreacher?” Harry suggests, “Uh, can he come help if I say so, or do we have to talk to Sirius?”

“You are Young Master, so he will come,” she says. “I will get Dobby to help too. I will say it is being to help you, and he will come right away.”

“Great,” he says, then rubs the back of his neck. “We should really be getting back. Our friends are waiting, and if we don’t hurry up, they’ll come looking for us.”

Draco frowns and his shoulders slump, but he doesn’t argue. “Okay. Winky, let me know if you need anything. Bye Theophania! No eating the house elves!”

“Too boney,” she says, which isn’t the most confidence inspiring response possible, but this has all been very strange and he would like to leave now, so he doesn’t bother to translate it.

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Draco and the rest of the Slytherins are skipping the recruiting meeting because he doesn’t want anyone that doesn’t sign the parchment to see him willingly listening to Harry. That can only end poorly for him.

Instead, he calls a house meeting. He fills Daphne in first, who gives him an unreadable look that makes his shoulder blades itch, but does agree with his plan, so there’s that.

Usually at least a quarter of people skip house meetings, but the common room is full to bursting. There has to be people missing, but Draco can’t think of who they would be. He stands in front of the fireplace, hands clasped behind his back. “So,” he begins, nearly a hundred pairs of eyes fastened onto him. “As those of you with friends in other houses may or may not have heard, Potter is running a defense group in an attempt to do something about Umbridge’s incompetence.”

“Nice of them to invite us,” a sixth year says sarcastically, and there’s a disgruntled rumbling of agreement throughout the room.

“That’s the thing. They did.” Everyone goes deathly silent, and Draco sighs. “As much as I loathe Potter, we need better practical defense skills if we’re going to survive this war. Quinn approached me and invited the Slytherins. Potter’s in charge, but Quinn and Cedric are helping. I’m the one that decided we wouldn’t be going to tonight’s meeting, because frankly it’s not safe for some of us to be seen as being friendly with Potter and his ilk. Those who join the club are being given strict rules not to mention any Slytherins being involved, no matter what.”

Astoria raises an eyebrow. “So we trust Potter now?”

Daphne glares at her little sister. “We trust Quinn. We trust Cedric. We don’t have to trust Potter to
use him. Like it or not, there are fully fledged aurors who have less experience than he does. We go, we don’t cause trouble, we learn what we can. I don’t know about the rest of you, but I care more about surviving this war than fighting in it.”

Some of the tension finally bleeds out from the Slytherins.

Daphne is wonderful and smart and thank merlin she was made a prefect too, because all this would be a lot harder to for him to juggle if his fellow prefect wasn’t so amazing.

~

“I’m going to strangle her with her own stupid pink scarf,” Angelina says viciously.

Fred takes a step back from his girlfriend.

“Angelina!” Katie scolds, even though she’s angry too. “Don’t admit to murder in front of so many witnesses.”

There’s something wrong with everyone at this school, but it’s probably the same thing that’s wrong with him if it took him five years to notice. “Do you think she knows?” he whispers to Ron, who’s facilitating between fury and despair. The new educational degree has been pasted outside their common room, although he’s certain there’s another in the hallway outside of the great hall.

“It’s an awful big coincidence if she doesn’t,” Hermione says from his other side. “But if anyone had said anything, we’d know about it, since we charmed the sign up sheet. Trust me.”

“Always,” Harry and Ron say as one.

Angelina goes marching away from the decree. “I’m going to talk to her right now! If she doesn’t reinstate the quidditch team I’ll – I’ll – I don’t know what I’ll do, but it’ll be horrible.”

“Should you go with her?” George asks his brother.

Fred shakes his head. “No, absolutely not. No. You go with Cassius. Have fun with that.” He pauses, “Actually, Cassius is a much more chill captain than Angelina is, this isn’t even a little fair.”

“Yeah,” George says, eyes going distant. “Her lecture on not letting plays slip to Cassius when we’re together was horrifying. And more graphic than I really needed, coming from my brother’s girlfriend. She’s scary.”

“Hot, though,” Fred says dreamily.

Ron pulls a face. “I’m leaving now, goodbye.”

Harry’s still laughing when Ron grabs the back of his robes and yanks him along.

~

When Harry gets summoned to McGonagall’s office, he’s annoyed, because he’s supposed to meet Draco in Myrtle’s bathroom in twenty minutes. He’s also confused. He hasn’t even done anything illegal recently. He’s doesn’t think he’s even broken a school rule in a good forty eight hours.

Well, there’s the whole sneaking down to the chamber of secrets thing, but the chamber isn’t technically off limits, it’s just a terrible idea and he’s the only one who can get down there so Dumbledore never bothered to add it to the list of restricted areas. Which was either short or far sighted on his part, depending on how far his dozens of plans extend into the future.
He’s barely had the chance to sit down when she places her hands on her desk and glares at him over the rim of her glasses. “I know you’re up to something.”

Statistically speaking, he’s always up to something. “Can you be more specific?”

She glares at him for few more moments before sighing. “No. I just know Dolores is in some sort of vindictive rage, and I’m sure that ridiculous decree has something to do with it, and with you.”

“In that case, it’s probably best if you have plausible deniability,” he tells her. “It’s nothing bad.”

“You’re never up to anything ill intentioned, it’s what makes you so infuriating,” she says, and he beams. “At least be careful.”

“I’m always careful!”

The silent, judgmental stare he gets in response to that is possibly the funniest thing that’s ever happened to him.

McGonagall shoves him out of her office a minute later, but he’s got a handful of biscuits for his trouble, so it’s not too bad.

He does run to Myrtle’s bathroom, and when he gets there Draco is waiting with his arms crossed. “Finally! Where were you?”

Harry shoves a biscuit into Draco’s mouth. “McGonagall told me that Umbridge made the new decree for me especially, so she knows at least something of the defense club.”

Draco swallows his mouthful of biscuit before answering. “I figured. But unless she’s secretly a Parselmouth, I think we’re good.”

He’s delayed from answering by a cold feeling seeping into his backside. “Hi Myrtle.”

She giggles and floats in front of him, passing through Draco who gives a full body shudder. “Hiya Harry. You don’t visit.”

“Sorry,” he says, but doesn’t really mean it. Myrtle’s fine when she’s not being creepy, but she goes out of her way to be creepy an awful lot, so. “How have you been?”

“Bored,” she pouts. “You need to visit me more.”

“You’re welcome to join us down in the chamber,” Draco says, because he has much higher tolerance for Myrtle than Harry does. Probably because she’s not groping him all the time.

She looks to actually be considering it for a moment, but just shakes her head. “I’ll keep watch. Have fun down there. I hope you die.”

He sighs. She at least wants him to die because she likes him, unlike everyone else who shares her sentiments. “Thanks Myrtle.”

Draco eats the last of the biscuit and dusts off his hand. “Come on, hurry up, the last thing we need is to be caught lurking in the girls’ bathroom.”

On the bright side, while his progress with Tamil has slowed significantly with the start of the school year, he’s getting much better at switching back and forth in Parseltongue. “Open.”

The sink lowers into the ground, and Harry blows Myrtle a kiss before jumping down the massive
pipe. He hears Draco laugh before following him, and he’s smiling even as he rolls onto the ground. Except instead of dirty, cold, hard stone, he lands on something soft and squishy. Draco crashes into him a moment later, then grabs Harry’s shoulders and keeps rolling until he’s on top of him, until Draco’s straddling his waist his hair loose and falling around his face. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Harry returns, grinning, and Draco is beautiful and amazing and this war is bad for a whole bunch of reasons, of course, but right at this moment all he can think about is how much it sucks that he can’t just kiss his boyfriend in the middle of the great hall.

“Master Draco and Mister Harry,” Winky says, from right next to them. Harry startles, but Draco just looks disappointed before climbing off Harry and offering him a hand up. “Your people will be arriving soon. We have to be hurrying.” The first section of the chamber is sparkling clean and placed in front of the pipe is a giant green velvet cushion. “We is moving the skeletons and the shed snake skin into storage if you be needing it.”

“Why would we need it?” Harry asks, perplexed. If Winky answers, he doesn’t hear it, because they step into the main chamber and he forgets to breathe.

It’s beautiful.

He’d thought that everything was grey and black, but he was wrong. It was all just hiding under a thousand years of dirt and dust.

The long columns have bright and colorful designs, so small and precise he can’t even see all of them. The floors are polished white marble. Everything is clean and glittering, and they’ve even repaired the ceiling. Harry hadn’t noticed before, but the ceiling is an interlocking pattern of bright blue and bronze, with beautiful intricate floral designs that fade into the painting against the wall.

“Oh,” Draco says, eyes wide, “It’s – did you restore this?”

Winky shakes her head. “Mr. Slytherin did a very good job on his preservation charms. We is just having to clean off all the dirt on top of it.”

“Is this Islamic?” Harry asks, head craned back so he can stare at the ceiling.

Draco hums agreement. “Of course, Salazar wasn’t a religious man, but he was Persian. I didn’t – I’ve never seen any of this in the common room.”

“The school was controversial when it first opened.” Harry startles, and looks over to where Theophania slithers over from the other side of the room. One of the very brave or stupid house elves – so probably Dobby – had taken a brush to her, unearthing the true color of her scales. She’s a shimmering green blue under the light from the chamber, which comes from what looks like a hundreds of frozen lumos charms. He has no idea where the elves even got them. The basilisk looks less like something out form his nightmares, and more like an ancient and powerful magical creature. Of course, Harry is fully away that she’s both. “Parents did not want to trust strangers with their children, especially strangers as powerful and liberal as my human and his friends. My Salazar did not want to make it more controversial. So he made his chamber of secrets, and it’s where he kept the things he loved.”

“Where he kept you,” he says, and he gets it, finally.

They’d called her Slytherin’s monster back in second year, but that wasn’t right. Draco had called her a companion, which was closer, but still didn’t quite fit.
She’d been Salazar Slytherin’s friend. His terrifying, deadly friend, that he’d hid in the chamber, Harry thinks, not so that others could be safe, but so she could be safe.

He’s starting to think that Slytherin and Hagrid would have made really great friends.

He looks more closely around the chamber, thinking of the blue and bronze ceiling. Sure enough, he sees places where the pattern spins to red and gold, and to black and yellow. There’s a surprisingly lack of silver and green, but this is where Slytherin kept the things he loved. “What’s the statue of? Is it of Salazar?”

The giant bust that houses Theophania’s nest is all cool white marble, but looking at it now, Harry doesn’t think it can be of the founder, not unless he was a lot older than the records say he was. The basilisk has her second eyelids covering her eyes still, covering both her most deadly attribute and most of her emotions, but she lets out sigh that almost feels like approval. “No, of course not. It’s Zarathurstra. He was a Persian philosopher that my Salazar admired greatly. He said something that my human loved, and repeated often. Do you know what it was?”

Harry shakes his head.

“Good thoughts. Good words. Good deeds.” She raises her head until she’s staring down at him from her great height.

“Did he really leave Hogwarts?” he asks, because for once the story he’s been told about the founders doesn’t feel right, doesn’t feel as if it fits. He knows that Slytherins aren’t all bad, so it makes sense that their founder wouldn’t be either, but this is – more, than he thought there’d be, and he’s not sure what to do with it.

“Theophania!” Draco shouts, coming to Harry’s side so he can wave his hands in greeting. “Come down, let me check your wound, I think I can heal you today.”

She lowers her head, tilting it to the side so Draco can clamber on top of her. “Your scales are so pretty, and you’re so clean! That must feel better. Winky tells me she brought you lots of fish. Are you full? Does your head hurt? Do you have any throbbing or other pain? It looks like it’s healing well.”

“I’m full, for the first time in a while. I won’t feed again for another month. I do not hurt,” she says, and Harry pushes down his disappointment. Clearly he’s going to have to wait until another time to get answers to his questions.

“She’s good, and won’t eat again for another month. Nothing hurts,” he translates.

Draco looks pleased, and Harry wishes he was close enough to kiss him. “Good. I’m going to heal this now. It shouldn’t hurt.”

He says something long and complicated in what Harry thinks is Greek, and the soft healing green glows from his wand. It seems more like an incantation than a spell, but, whatever it is, it’s working. Her skin knits itself back together and new scales grow over her skin, until it looks like she was never hurt at all.

Draco’s clearly tired, but not exhausted, which Harry can’t help but be surprised by. “Excellent! I’m improving too. If I’d tried doing that a couple months ago I would have just passed out.” He slides off her head and back onto the ground. “All good?”

She shakes out, twisting her head from side to side. She raises the end of her tail and uses the very tip of it to curl around Draco’s torso, the closest she can get to showing physical affection without
crushing him. “Thank you.”

“She says thanks,” he says, and he knows Theophania likes Draco and isn’t planning to hurt him, but he still breathes a sigh of relief when she lets him go. One accidental move and she could have snapped him in half. “Are you staying for the defense lesson?”

Theophania snorts. “No.” She slithers back over to the statue. Instead of the long and pompous incantation Voldemort had used, she simply tells it to open, and then disappears inside it.

“Should we tell them that there’s a basilisk here?” Draco asks, which is a very good point. Because they haven’t told any of them so far, but it kind of seems to be in poor taste not to at least mention it. Especially because he’s almost certain that she’s going to end up interrupting the club one day just for the drama of it. Every snake he knows is dramatic, and he’s including the entirety of Slytherin house in that assessment.

“Maybe we’ll give it a couple meetings first?” he tries. “Either way, I have to get up there to let people through, otherwise there’s just going to be a bunch of kids hanging out in the girl’s bathroom, which I can’t imagine will go over well.”

“Have fun with Myrtle,” Draco says as he summons a pile of cushions from who knows where, the corners of his mouth twitching upwards.

He scowls and considers pressing his boyfriend up against one of those columns and kissing him until he runs out of breath to mock him, but he really does have to go.

~

Draco is leaning against a pillar when the rest of the Slytherins come traipsing through the chamber, looking around in awe. They all settle around him, which is concerning, if understandable. The rest of the houses are mingling at least a little, but all the Slytherins stay separate. Even Cassius, when George is right there and everyone knows they’re dating.

Harry looks nervous at the front, with what amounts to a good quarter of the school of looking at him. Then he seems find his resolve. He stops rubbing the back of his neck and stands a little straighter. Draco can only assume he’s reminded himself that compared to fighting off Voldemort and his Death Eaters while being tied to a gravestone, this is nothing.

“Well, you all know why you’re here,” he says, arms wide. “I’m leading a defense study group, because Cedric refuses.”

Cedric rolls his eyes and crosses his arms over his chest. There’s a smattering of laughter, and Susan elbows him in the side. He looks to his fiancé for help, but Cho’s laughing at him too.

“Do we get a name?” Ginny asks. “I think we should get a name.”

Harry blinks. “Uh, sure. What were you thinking.”

She shrugs, and Hermione offers, “What about Defense Association?”

“Boring,” Astoria says, the first of the Slytherins to speak. “It should be something interesting. Something cool.”

Daphne tries to kick at her younger sister, but she’s too far away. “Be quiet. You shouldn’t even be here. If Mama knew—”
“If Mama knew, we’d both be grounded until we died of old age,” Astoria says smartly.

“What about Rabitat Aldefa?” suggests Hakim, a seventh year Ravenclaw. “It’s just Arabic for defense association, but it sounds cooler.”

“And it fits with our current location,” Quinn points out.

Harry nods and looks out at everyone, “All in favor of Rabitat Aldefa, raise your hand.”

About two thirds of people raise their hands, except, Draco realizes with a jolt, the Slytherins. No one is raising their hand.

They can’t be difficult about this, not this early, everyone here is doing some sort of balancing act and so they need to be balanced with their dealing with the defense club. He’d been planning to be quiet and hang back, for once, because the more people saw him interact with Harry, the more likely that someone would see something they shouldn’t. But he has to do something, so he raises his hand.

There’s a beat of silence, then the rest of his house follows suit. All of the Slytherins are holding their hands high.

“How right,” Harry says, wide eyed, while Draco continues to stare at his housemates in confusion.

“How excellent. Well, before we get started, I need to know what everyone’s levels are. I know we’ve all had a, well, eclectic history of defense, so I need to make sure we’re all on the same page. Don’t worry, we’ll start small. Then we’ll review some basic defensive spells.”

He pauses, as if waiting for someone to disagree or cause trouble, but everyone is silent.

Harry, in full view of dozens of people, summoned an unrestrained patronus and killed hundreds of dementors. No one is going to cause trouble or say he isn’t qualified. And if there are some people who are thinking it, well. The Gryffindors won’t look divided in front of the Slytherins, the Hufflepuffs follow Cedric and Susan, the Ravenclaws follow Quinn, and the Slytherins –

Well, apparently the Slytherins follow him.

He stays at the back, so he can keep an eye on everyone and they can’t do the same to him. Harry’s good at this, because of course he is, because no matter how much he hates being the in the spotlight and getting attention, no matter how nervous he is, he still exudes this deep seated confidence and familiarity with defense, has an ease with it that can only come from experience.

It makes him impossible to ignore or deny. Harry easily rattles off defensive spells and keeps his eyes on all of them while he walks through the room. His nerves and discomfort don’t stand a chance against the sheer wealth of his experience, and Draco can’t show it, of course, but he’s proud of his soulmate.

Harry’s powerful, always good at things if only because of his magic levels. But this is where he shines.

It’s sappy and ridiculous, and he should stop thinking about it before his face gives something away, but he’s really happy he came if only because he loves seeing Harry like this.

Later into the night he drifts close enough to Cassius to murmur, “You know, you’re allowed to go over and stand with George.”

He rolls his eyes and ignores him. “It’s not the time for that right now.”
That doesn’t make any sense to Draco, because he gets making a united front and all, but the way all the Slytherins are all huddled together is a little weird. He needs to do … something about that.

Harry is telling them to practice the disarming spell against one another, and Millie has already turned in his direction. But instead he shoots her an apologetic glance and strides over to the other side of the group, stopping short in front of a cluster of Hufflepuffs.

If the Slytherins are determined to follow his lead, then he has to do it first.

He catches Susan’s eye and raises an eyebrow. “Partners?”

“Oh, I thought you’d never ask,” she purrs, something wicked in the place behind her eyes. He thinks she would have made a really good Slytherin. She pulls out her wand and says, “I’m not going to go easy on you just because you’re pretty.”

He laughs, and he’s still laughing a moment later when the force of her spell tears his wand from his hand and sends him stumbling back several steps. There’s a tense silence in the air around them, but Susan is grinning, and so is he. They go back to practicing without missing a beat.

The tension drains away, and slowly the Slytherins spread out to work with members from other houses.

Good.

Isolation and not talking to others is what got them in this mess to begin with.

~

It’s after dinner, so they’re in their classroom doing homework. It’s just the six of them, which Harry likes because he can sit with his leg pressed up against Draco’s without having to worry about anyone noticing. He’s fresh off of practice, and mostly he just wants to go to sleep, and this divination homework means nothing to him. He’d love to have Luna here. She always comes up with vague yet ominous crap that Trelawney loves and yet means nothing.

He should really drop this class. He can’t remember why he even took it in the first place. Trelawney doesn’t teach them anything useful, so he’s probably not going to manage to get an Owl in it anyway.

Draco has written about three feet of very small calculations, and Harry doesn’t know what it could possibly be for, while Pansy is most of the way through their defense essay, and Ron and Blaise are doing their best to label an astrology chart. They have one of Draco’s sky mirrors open, so the night sky is projected onto the ceiling. It’s way easier than having to trek to the astronomy tower.

Hermione has taken over half the classroom by rolling out enormous sheaths of paper onto the floor. She’s on her hands and knees, a piece of charcoal in her hand as she sketches out yet another circle that looks like absolute gibberish to him.

She’s starting to get a little wild around the eyes, which is never a good sign for any of them. A frazzled Hermione is a scary Hermione.

Harry’s keeping half an eye on her while foretelling his own doom, if only because he wants enough warning to duck if she explodes.

Several minutes later she runs her hand through her hair, charcoal streaking black against her dark brown hair. “Draco—”
“I haven’t done any of the theoretical work on light yet, I’ve been focusing on metalwork,” he says, not raising his eyes from the parchment. “So I can’t help you with that, and you’ll have to wait for anything else. I’m almost done breaking down this charm for Flitwick, and if you make me lose my place, I’ll cry.”

Hermione looks like she’s half a minute away from bursting into tears herself, and Harry doesn’t care that she’s a frustrated crier, that she cries when she’s angry rather than when she’s hurt. He can’t stand to see his friends cry.

“But I,” she pauses, bites her lip and turns around, looking down at her papers and circles and equations that mean nothing to Harry. She turns and kicks the nearest desk, the clatter of it falling to the ground enough to get everyone’s attention. Except Draco’s, who is still bent over his parchment and writing out numbers like his life depends on it. “I just – I don’t understand this! Why am I being so stupid!”

Pansy blanches, and Blaise looks at Harry, as if he knows what to do. Ron doesn’t even blink, instead getting to his feet and brushing imaginary dirt from his trousers. “What are you trying to do?”

“I want to turn copper into light. It’s – look, I’ve drawn out a circle for every step of the process, copper to liquid to gas to heat to light. But every time I try to put them together, it doesn’t fit or make sense or – it just all falls apart!” That doesn’t sound like any sort of science to Harry, but he guesses that’s why alchemy is magic, and not muggle.

Ron looks down at her mess of papers, head tilted to the side. “Well, first of all, heat isn’t its own reaction.”

Hermione blinks. “What?”

He grabs for the charcoal in her hand, absently tugging it free from her white knuckled grip. “How do you expect to turn a solid to a liquid to a gas? You need heat. Just because it’s magic doesn’t mean it’s any different. So heat has to be a part of your whole reaction, all the way until the end.” He grabs a new sheet of paper and draws a circle, one about half the size of Hermione’s. “And you don’t need four circles. You’re not doing four different reactions, not really. You are doing one thing, turning copper to light, so you need one circle. Heat applied to the copper at a continuous, controlled heat, and then that gas is changed on atomic level to produce light. One spark, so one beginning that carries itself through the circle to result in the the desired reaction.” He stands back, satisfied. “There. It should look something like that. You’re going to have to calculate the degrees for the angles and the size of the symbols yourself. I don’t do math.”

Hermione is just staring at him, eyes wide and mouth parted. Harry’s tempted to start clapping.

“Ron,” Pansy says slowly, “where the hell did you learn to do alchemy?”

He pulls a face. “I didn’t. I can’t. Nicolas and Perenelle just talk about this stuff while we’re playing and, I don’t know, I pick some stuff up. It’s not a big deal. If anyone tried to use the circle I drew, everything would blow up, the ratios are all wrong.”

“Done!” Draco announces, slumping back into his chair. “Sorry Hermione, what were you saying?” He leans his whole body against Harry’s to get a better look at the circles and lets out a low whistle. “Wow, that placement is amazing. You clearly don’t need my help.”

“I didn’t do it,” she says. “Ron did.”

Ron flushes and rubs the bridge of his nose. “It’s not a big deal.”
Draco opens his mouth, closes it, and opens it again. “But I thought you turned the Flamels down! Have you been getting private lessons?”

He rolls his eyes. “No, of course not. I don’t know how to use alchemy. It’s just – it’s like chess, you have to know what all the pieces do and how they react to each other, and how to move things in a way to get what you want. That part is easy, and it’s the one I can do. It’s not real alchemy.”

“It looks like real alchemy to me,” Harry says. “Did you really just pick all this up from chatting with the Flamels?”

“This is really not the easy part. Who told you that? Getting it all to fit together – that’s the hardest part of alchemy, are you joking,” Draco demands.

Ron shrugs again, not saying anything else. Harry doesn’t know anything about alchemy, but he knows that what Ron’s done is impressive. “You really don’t want to take the class for real?”

“Math,” he says, as if Harry could have forgotten. “No thanks. Are you good now?” he asks Hermione. “You’re not going take it out on any more innocent desks, are you?”

She shakes her head, bushy hair flying, and her face is flushed. Ron is grinning at her, and she’s looking at him with her beet red face, looking at Ron in a way that’s at once completely different and exactly the same as the way she used to look at Viktor.

“Good,” he says. “In that case, Draco, come help me and Blaise finish this chart. I know your mum made you memorize where all the constellations are, we’ve been saving them for you.”

He rolls his eyes, but banishes his parchment away, Harry assumes either to his room or to Flitwick’s office. “Gee, thanks.”

Harry goes back to his divination homework, but can’t keep from sneaking a look up every few minutes. He’s been front row and center for the entirety of Ron and Hermione’s relationship, and it’s getting to the point that something has to give.

He hopes it does soon, because watching them dance around each other is nauseating. He has a newfound respect for his friends watching him be an idiot over Draco.

~

Transfiguration may not be his best subject, but Draco can obviously handle second year spellwork, which is why he has a handful of Slytherins and a couple brave Hufflepuffs crowded around him in the great hall. He’s tempted to send the Hufflepuffs back to Susan, but he knows that she gave a couple Slytherins a lecture on History of Magic and they hadn’t even fallen asleep for it, which is more than can be said for most of Professor Binn’s class, so he feels like he owes her a little.

That doesn’t prevent him from grabbing Pansy and forcing her to help him. She’s the best transfiguration caster he knows besides McGonagall, and she’s his best friend, which means she’s required to help him out with stupid, labor intensive stuff like this. He has to run to quidditch practice as soon as dinner is over, so he doesn’t have time to go over all this stuff on his own. They have their first game this weekend, and if he shows up late to practice one more time, Cassius will kill him. Or possibly just burst into tears, and he’s not sure which is worse.

He’s partway when through explaining the correct wand movements, which Pansy is staying pointedly silent for since she thinks wand movements are for amateurs. A shadow falls over the table, and he twists in his seat to see Cho standing there sans Cedric, which is unusual for a mealtime. They’re usually joined at the hip. “Hi everyone,” she greets, but she’s not looking at Draco or the
“Pansy. Hi. Um. I was wondering if I could talk to you about something?”

“Sure,” she says warily. She shoots Draco a glance, but he only shrugs. He has no idea what this is about.

Cho picks at the sleeves of her robes. “I was just – I heard you were really good at sewing? I’ve seen some of the things that you’ve made or altered. I know you altered George’s suit for the Yule Ball. And I’ve hated all the dresses I found in the catalogues, and getting to Madam Malkin’s often enough for fittings will be a nightmare during the school year, and Cedric and I have already booked our venue for June, so I really can’t do it during the summer, I just won’t have enough time. And I know you know a lot of the new designers and that you keep up with what all the new things are—”

“You want me to introduce you to a designer?” Pansy guesses, blinking at the onslaught of words. “Sure, I’ve invested enough money into them, the least I can get is a consult. Do you have someone in mind, or did you want to look at my investment portfolio?”

“Yes, I mean, no – I have someone in mind, but I don’t need you to introduce me or to see your portfolio.” She bites her lip. “Pansy, will you make my wedding dress?”

Pansy’s mouth drops open, and Draco has to kick her before she’s able to close it again. Cho is wringing her hands together, waiting. “Are you – are you sure? I’ve never made a wedding dress before.”

“Yes,” she says. “I want – it’s not just that I don’t like any of the dresses I’ve found. I don’t want something that I just blindly pick out of a catalogue and that a thousand other girls are wearing. I want it to be special. Please? You always dress so well and look so cute and I know that you know what you’re doing. Help me.”

“Yes,” she says, because for all that she likes to play tough, Pansy is weak when it comes to a direct plea for help. “I – yes. Of course. You do – you do want a dress, right? Not a hanbok? Because I don’t know enough about those to design one.”

Cho shakes her head, a relieved smile breaking out over her face. “No. It was fun to wear to the ball, but I’ll leave the hanbok to my parents for my wedding. I want a dress. Something memorable. Something beautiful.”

“Okay,” Pansy repeats eyes going distant, clearly already thinking of designs. “We’ll get breakfast on Saturday and talk about it?”

She nods and they agree to meet up and walk to Hogsmeade together before the quidditch game and then Cho goes back to her own table, a noticeable spring to her step.

“Are you going to use transfiguration to make the dress?” one of the second year boys asks.

Pansy pulls a face. “No. Not a wedding dress. You can’t just transfigure something and expect it to be the same quality as something made organically. Magic can only do so much.” She launches into a lecture about the limitations of transfiguration spells, which is way too in depth for a bunch of second years, but does provide Draco with the perfect opportunity to sneak away to the quidditch pitch.

Harry knows that Draco is busy. He has his extra charms work, his healing lessons, quidditch, plus all the times they hang out at night with their friends. He gets it. He’s busy too. When he’s not serving detentions with Umbridge, he’s on the quidditch pitch or drafting lessons for their next
Rabbit Aldefa meeting. It’s a good thing he doesn’t have to practice spells much to make them sort of work, otherwise he’d be screwed. It’s not like they don’t both have a lot that they’re dealing with right now.

But he misses Draco, even though he sees him every day. They barely get any alone time, and when they do it’s rushed. He doesn’t want their whole life to be rushed.

It’s late when he sneaks out from the common room to the kitchens, and even this late at night the kitchens are full of movement and a blazing bright light from a cheery fire, dozens of house elves going every direction.

He only has a moment to appreciate the sight before there’s a small hand tugging on the bottom of his sweater. “Mister Harry!”

“Hi Dobby!” he greets. Dobby is weird, of course, but he’s also nice to Harry and listens to him and always smiles when Harry comes to see him, which is sweet. “Thank you for helping out with cleaning the chamber, you didn’t have to do that.”

“Dobby is happy to be of help!” he chirps cheerfully. “The big snake is not being so bad, and stayed very still for her scrubbing!”

It takes a lot of effort for Harry not to burst out laughing at the mental image of tiny, excitable Dobby scrubbing dirt and grime off Theophania’s back. “She looks great, you did a wonderful job.”

He puffs up in pride. “I is glad! Why is Mister Harry here so late? Is he needing something?”

“Oh,” he rubs the back of his neck. “Um, is Winky around maybe? I know it’s late, but – well, I was going to try and surprise Draco, maybe. Or maybe he’s already asleep and doesn’t want to be bothered, and it won’t matter. But I figure she knows what his favorites foods are.”

Dobby blinks. “You is wanting a meal of things Mister Draco Malfoy will like best?”

“Er, yes. Could you get Winky for me maybe?”

He shakes his head, massive ears flapping against his face. “You is not needing Winky! I was being a house elf for the Malfoys for many years. I is knowing what Mister Draco Malfoy likes. I can make the meal.”

“You really don’t have to,” Harry starts, because he knows Winky is possessive, but Dobby’s already on his feet and darting around the kitchen, pulling things down too quickly for Harry to keep track. He thought that Dobby didn’t like Draco, which is understandable, but if that’s true then he’s not sure why the elf is insisting on helping.

“Here you is going!” he says cheerfully, and shoves a picnic basket into Harry’s hands. “I put a warming charm on it, so do not worry. Can you shrink it, or are you wanting Dobby to do that?”

“I can do it,” he assures, waving his wand so that the basket and its contents shrinks to roughly the size of galleon that he tucks into his pocket. “Thank you, Dobby. I really appreciate it.”

Dobby bounces on the balls of his feet, too excited to keep still. “You is being very welcome! I hope Mister Harry and Mister Draco Malfoy have a good night!”

He’s grateful there’s no one here but the elves, because the way he flushes at that can’t be a very good look on him.
If anyone asks, the reason he’s bothering to go through this kind of effort at half past midnight on a school night is because he’s curious to see how many charms he can weave into the metal. Which might hold up, as long as no one questions why he didn’t stop at just making one.

“Be careful, you don’t want to—”

“Let the gold and copper touch, because then all the spells will be breaking apart,” Winky says impatiently, carefully setting a layer of silver between the gold and copper for this very reason “Yes, I is remembering from when you said it the first time.”

He rolls his eyes, but before he can say something sarcastic back, his pocket begins to vibrate. He pulls out his compact mirror and flips it open. “Hey, what’s up?”

Harry looks surprised. “You’re awake. Why are you awake?”

“You say that like I ever sleep,” he says dryly. “I’m making badges for this weekend’s game, but I’m trying a few new things, so it’s taking longer than I’d like.”

Harry raises an eyebrow. “Badges? Again?”

“They’re much more sophisticated than the ones I made last year,” he assures. “I can’t quite get another paper out of this one, but it’ll be really cool.”

“Oh good, I wouldn’t want your badges to be primitive,” he says. “Do you need to keep doing that, or can you come join me?”

“I can leave, Winky can handle the next part,” he says, then frowns. “Why?”

“Meet me by the greenhouse exit,” he says instead of answering, and then disappears from the mirror.

Well. Okay then. He looks to Winky. “You can handle this, right?”

She waves a dismissive hand, not looking up from where she’s pouring the badges into the mold. He already enchanted everything, so it’s just pouring the metal and waiting for it to set, really. “Yes. I will find you if I be needing you.”

Well, that’s fair enough. He’d thought he was in for the night, so he’s already changed into his pajamas. Harry wasn’t wearing pajamas when he called, so Draco’s assuming that he shouldn’t either. He leaves the badges to Winky and goes back to his dorm room.

He’s trying to be quiet, and usually Blaise is a heavy sleeper, but something must startle him because he pushes himself up in bed and asks, “What are you doing? It’s the middle of the night.”

“Harry called me on the mirror and asked me to meet him in the greenhouse,” he says, pulling on a bright blue sweater that matches his eyes.

“Fun or danger?” he asks.

Draco shrugs. “It’s Harry. It could be either.”

“Or both,” he grumbles, falling back into bed. “Don’t walk too closely to the carnivorous plants, Neville and I have been reducing their meals. For reasons. Grab me if you need me. I’m going back to bed. Goodnight.”
“Goodnight,” he echoes, but Blaise falls back asleep just as quickly as he’d woken. Draco’s an expert at sneaking through the castle at this point, so he barely hesitates as he walks through the halls. Although, technically, he doesn’t have to sneak. Since he’s a prefect, curfew doesn’t apply to him anymore. That still doesn’t mean he wants to have to explain himself.

He makes it down to the greenhouse without getting caught, although he does skirt around the flesh eating plant section. It’s a good thing he’s expecting Harry to be here, because his boyfriend reaches out from the shadows and yanks him close, easily slotting their mouths together. Draco grins against Harry’s mouth, kissing him slowly and pressing himself as close as he can. “Get tired of getting handsy in broom closets?”

“Never,” Harry says, grinning. “But I thought maybe we could – go on a date, maybe. I got food from the kitchens.”

“A date?” Draco repeats, something warm pooling in the bottom of his stomach. “In the greenhouse?”

Harry shakes his head. “No, I was thinking we could fly.”

“I didn’t bring my broom! I can go back and get it,” he says.

He shakes his head again, tugging Draco out towards the exit. “We don’t need brooms. Although we should probably use a disillusionment charm.” They step outside into the cool night air, and Draco doesn’t understand. Harry reaches into his pocket and put something on the ground before backing up several steps.

“What are you doing?” he asks, teeth chattering. They’re going to need some warming charms too, otherwise this is going to be more miserable than it is romantic.

Harry grins at him before taking out his wand. “Finite incantatum!”

There’s a fission of magic, and then in front of them is a sleek dark red motorbike with little flying snitches painted on it.

Draco had heard about the bike, but this is his first time seeing it. It’s brilliant. “It flies?”

“Yeah,” Harry says, getting on and turning the bike on with a flick of his hand. Harry looks good like that, straddling his bike with an easy smile. “Come on. I was thinking we’d fly for a bit and find a clearing in the forbidden forest to land and eat.”

They’re delayed by Draco needing to kiss him right now immediately, then by him adding heating and disillusionment charms, but then he slides behind Harry and wraps his arms around his waist, plastering himself against Harry’s back. “Like this?” he asks, making sure his lips brush up against the shell of Harry’s ear whenever he speaks.

“Yeah,” Harry says, voice low, and Draco’s tempted to kiss him again, but he really has to stop doing that if he wants them to get anywhere. “Don’t let go.”

“Never,” he promises, and Harry’s hand find his just for a moment before they’re shooting across the grounds and then lifting into the air, the castle getting smaller and smaller below them, until it’s just him and Harry and the clear night sky.
i'm sorry this took so long, life's been really busy lately! i hope you liked it!

arabic translation of 'defense association' provided by luciferwasonearch-angel

megalania-prisca has done several gorgeous pieces for siat that you can view here (she's added more since the last chapter!)

anxiousdemifaemess made several adorable chibis that you can view here

lita-of-jupiter made a bunch of really great rinmarus that you can see here

renified has added to their wonderful moodboard here

vikingeggs did a beautiful redraw of their fantastic siat piece and you can see it here and they also did a hilarious and amazing art of draco and nagini that you see here

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On one hand, Draco spent the night with his boyfriend and he didn’t get back until nearly dawn, so he’s exhausted. On the other hand, he spent the night with his boyfriend, so who gives a shit, really.

Winky is the best house elf ever because when he wakes up later that morning he sees a steaming cup of espresso on his bedside table, right next to a basket of shiny silver crown shaped badges. Taking on Winky’s bond is the best decision he’s ever made.

Blaise wakes up instantly, pushing himself out of bed and pulling out his expanding closet with a flick of his wand. People think that Draco is the one obsessed with appearances, but that’s because they’ve never seen Blaise get ready in the morning. Just like Zaira, he’s very careful about how he dresses. He doesn’t say much with his mouth, so he has to make sure his clothes do all the talking.

Making everyone wear uniforms should theoretically make things easy, but instead how carefully people ignore the dress code and to what lengths is scrutinized viciously. Pansy hasn’t been altering her clothes since she was twelve just for the fun of it. She’s been making a statement. Pansy’s short skirts and bare legs and tight sweaters are because she’s complying on sufferance, she’ll fall in line, but she won’t like it. Hogwarts is lucky she tolerates its constraints, because she’s willing to shrug them off whenever she chooses.

Blaise is different. His uniforms are pressed, clean, and perfectly tailored. They’re also custom made, which isn’t something even Draco bothers doing. All of Blaise’s uniforms fall strictly in line with the rules, and most people don’t notice, but his uniforms are of a higher quality, the fabric thicker and more expensive, the buttons made of teak and solid gold. His clothes say he will fall in line, he’ll play by Hogwarts’s rules, but he’ll do it better than everyone else, and they won’t even notice.

Draco isn’t as complicated as his friends. He wears clothes loose or tight depending on what makes him look best, has had Pansy tailor his clothes and cut his hair for years. He wears clothes so when people look at him they’re not sure if they want him, or they want to be him, but either way they want. Sometimes that means being a rich aristocratic pureblood with snobbishly good manners, and sometimes that means wearing jeans so tight he can’t breathe in them, but he’s flexible that way.

He wonders if people in other houses do this. Probably not. He’s certain that none of their Gryffindor friends put this much thought into their clothing. Ginny does, maybe, but she’s hardly the standard that he wants to hold everyone else to, that just wouldn’t be fair.

“Excited for the quidditch match today?” Draco asks, beaming.

Blaise twitches. “Not particularly. Especially not now that you’ve asked that. Why do you sound gleeful?”

He grabs one of the badges and presents it to Blaise, who takes it with careful fingers. “Weasley Is Our King?” he reads aloud.

“Ron’s freaked out by his first game, he’ll think it’s funny, and everyone else will think I’m an asshole.”

“You are an asshole,” Blaise says, frowning as he tries to decide on the best placement for the badge.
He nods. “Yes, I am. They sing.”

Blaise freezes. “The badges sing?”

“Don’t worry, they only provide the backup vocals,” Draco says.

He sighs. Draco doesn’t know what he has to be upset about. One day, Blaise is going to need his help hiding a body or overthrowing a foreign government, and Draco will have to help him without questions because of all the weird things he’s forced to Blaise to do over the years.

~

Harry spends the entire day barely keeping himself awake, and he’s really going to need to take a pepper up potion if he doesn’t want to die on the quidditch pitch. He’d noticed Slytherins wearing badges, but all his classes were with Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs so he hadn’t really been paying attention to them. He’d been preoccupied with the more pressing concern of not falling asleep in the middle of transfiguration, and the secondary concern of making sure Ron doesn’t vibrate out his skin from the anxiety he’s doing a poor job at hiding.

Which is why he’s incredibly confused when they’re walking to their next class and Ron snorts and starts muttering to himself, “Don’t laugh, don’t laugh, be offended, this is offensive, don’t laugh,” and Hermione makes a high pitched humming noise that’s her attempting not to giggle.

Then he finally reads the badges that all of Slytherin house is boasting, and the catchy and insulting rhymes flashing across them and he says, “I’m going to kill him.”

Ron nudges him in the side, and for the first time all day, he actually looks relaxed. “Don’t do that, he’ll never do anything nice again.”

“Nice,” he echoes, but only sighs. If Ron’s happy, then he’s happy.

~

For all of two seconds, Draco considers taking it easy on the pitch today. Then he realizes that Ron’s see him play enough times that he’ll know what he’s doing immediately, and that Ron will be pissed he’s holding back, so he scraps the idea as soon as he thinks of it.

Why couldn’t Ron’s first game be against the Ravenclaws? Their chasers suck. The only reason they win at all is because Cho is a fantastic seeker and Anthony is a decent keeper. Their whole strategy is keeping the other team from scoring while Cho looks for the snitch, which of course means that the other teams’ beaters hit bludgers towards her basically the entire game.

The beginning of their game is rough, with Slytherin managing to get five shots in during the first fifteen minutes of the game, which isn’t great for Ron. But then the swell of music comes from the stands and the Slytherins begin singing the song their badges have been flashing all day. And on the surface it’s mocking, even cruel, but Ron knows he’s the one who made these, and that he doesn’t actually think any of these things, so while it looks awful to everyone else, Ron’s biting back a grin.

Slytherin is ahead by a hundred points when Harry catches the snitch, since it was hard to come back from their fifty point lead in the beginning, but Gryffindor still wins the game, and Ron actually did a pretty good job for the rest of the game, once he got out of his own head. People in the stands are cheering or booing respectively, and everyone lands. Angelina and Cassius shake hands while Flora glares daggers at Harry.

One of the chasers, sixth year Keenan Carrow, spits on the ground and says, louder than he probably
intended, “Merlin, Cassius, just because you’ve decided to disgrace your family and fuck a Weasley doesn’t mean we have to lose to your boyfriend’s team.”

Draco is halfway through rolling his eyes, because Keenan has always been and will always be an asshole, when a bolt of red energy hits Keenan in the stomach. Draco pulls out his wand, but hesitates when he sees that it’s Fred with his arm raised and wand out. “What did you say about my brother’s boyfriend?”

“Fred!” Angelina shouts while Cassius raises both hands and says, “Now, really, I appreciate it but I can handle Keenan’s mood swings, he’s just cranky because he didn’t get a nap.”

Keenan coughs, clutching his stomach, and says, “Fuck your whole family, Weasley, Cassius’s social standing takes a hit every time he puts his dick in you. You must be a good fuck to be worth all that.”

“KEENAN!” Cassius roars, and wow, this is so not good. Cassius usually has a really good hold on his temper.

“What? It’s true,” he says. “I don’t understand why you’re with him at all. Your mother’s little mental breakdown over it was clearly a cry for help.”

His mother’s what? Draco was a little busy this summer, but there’s no way he wouldn’t have heard about one of the Warringtons having some sort of public breakdown. Right? His mother would have heard, at the very least.

Whether it’s true or not, Keenan needs to learn to keep his stupid fat mouth shut.

Fred apparently decides that magic is beneath him, because he’s closing the distance between them with the clear intention of punching Keenan in the face. Except Keenan is strong and broad and doesn’t go down easily. He punches right back, and of course George isn’t going to stand there and just watch his brother get in a fight over his boyfriend, so he joins him in doing their absolute best to beat the absolute snot out of Keenan.

Which, normally Draco wouldn’t have a problem with this, since he’s personally been wanting to punch Keenan in the face since he was seven years old, but now is so not the time. The whole school is watching them, and it’s only a matter of time before a professor comes running down to try and stop them.

A couple more people step forward like they’re thinking of joining in, and the Gryffindors match them, since they’re apparently incapable of not getting involved in a fight at every opportunity. He assumes Ron’s hand around Harry’s wrist is all that’s keeping his soulmate from bodily throwing himself into this mess.

Draco doesn’t have the patience for this right now. He doesn’t know how to use words and manipulation to stop this fight, so he pulls his wand from his sleeve and snaps, “Stop that!”

The twins and Keenan are ripped apart, both looking rather worse for wear, while everyone else in both houses is pushed several feet away from each other, just in case.

“What on earth is going on here?” McGonagall demands, suddenly towering over all of them. Severus is still near the edge of the stage, making his way towards them. He’s clearly elected not to run.

“A spirited discussion,” Fred offers, hands twitching like he’s thinking about putting them around Keenan’s neck.
“A small disagreement,” George adds, but he only has eyes for Cassius, who hasn’t moved an inch.

“One might say we had a tussle,” Fred allows.

“Enough!” They fall silent. “What do you have to say for yourselves?” McGonagall demands, looking to be a half second away from picking the twins up by the back of their shirts and shaking them.

Snape finally catches up, but he just looks bored. The Slytherins weren’t the ones who started throwing punches, so it doesn’t make the house look bad, so he doesn’t care.

Fred scowls. “He bloody well deserved it, and he should count himself lucky I don’t—”

“MR. WEASLEY!” she screeches, and Draco is kicking himself for not acting sooner, for not pulling them apart as soon as it happened. “This is unacceptable, fifty points from Gryffindor. From both you and your brother.”

Cassius is pale and his hands are clenched, which Draco thinks is rather impressive, because if someone said that about his mother, especially if it was true, well – he’d need to be the one being held back.

“Keenan deserved it,” Flora says.

They all pause. Snape raises an eyebrow. “Ms. Carrow?”

“He deserved it,” she repeats. “He said something he shouldn’t have.”

“Last I checked, saying rude things didn’t excuse physical violence,” he says mildly. McGonagall doesn’t disagree.

Draco is playing a tricky game, a balancing act where he has different faces for everyone. Only five people know all of him, only Pansy, Blaise, Ron, Hermione, and Harry know all his secrets, from his disdain of Voldemort to the marigolds on his hip. He has to look like a Dark Lord supporter to most people, but his house knows him as a moderate, while there are plenty of people who suspect he’s more liberal than he lets on, or even know it for a fact, but – can he really afford to say something in front of everyone, with all their eyes on him?

Can he afford not to say something? Everyone else is silent. They won’t say anything if he doesn’t.

Flora turns on him, eyes burning, demanding, and Keenan is her cousin and she’s still saying something, what excuses does he really have in the face of that?

“She’s right,” he says, and Snape scowls. “Keenan said something inexcusable about Cassius’s mother. That’s why the Weasleys attacked him.”

“A fellow Slytherin?” Snape growls, “In front of everyone? Fifty points from Slytherin.” Snape hates taking points from his own house. Now he’s going to be in a mood for weeks. “Whatever punishment Professor McGonagall gives the Weasley twins, you’ll receive as well.”

Keenan opens his mouth to protest, but Flora kicks him in the shin.

“All three of you, follow me,” McGonagall says. No one moves. She glares. “Is there a problem, gentlemen?”

“Malf–” Fred answers.
Oh, shit. He cancels the spell, and all three of them take a deep breath, now that his magic isn’t holding them in place. “Oops.”

“Ohops?” McGonagall mutters, giving him one her contemplative looks that makes him want to go find a rock to hide under, then she turns on her heel and heads to the castle.

Draco turns and sees Umbridge pushing her way through the stands out of the corner of his eyes.

Oh, great. She’s going to make everything worse.

~

“She can’t take you off the team!” Harry shouts, and Ron winces, probably because that was a little bit right in his ear. Everyone in the common room is staring at them, which he feels mildly guilty about until he realizes they’ve been staring ever since Fred entered the common room, sans George. He assumes he’s with Cassius.

Fred sighs. “As I’m sure we’re all about to find out, Umbridge can do whatever she wants.”

“McGonagall can’t seriously be allowing this,” Colin protests.

Harry shakes his head and says, “Her hands are tied when it comes to Umbridge. Going against her is going against Fudge, and she just doesn’t have that type of pull right now.”

Angelina finally pushes herself up from the couch to stand in front her boyfriend, eyes narrowed. Harry takes two hasty steps back. “So you got yourself kicked off my team.”

“Yep,” Fred answers, not nearly afraid as Harry thinks he should be.

Her eyes narrow. “As your captain, I’m furious.”

“But as my girlfriend?” he asks.

She smiles, leaning forward to give him a quick, chaste kiss. “If you hadn’t punched him, I would have. I’m still pissed I’m going to have to replace my beaters before the next game.”

The tension breaks after that, people focusing back on their books or conversations. Fred walks past him to go up to his dorm room, probably to shower because he’s still filthy, but Harry grabs onto his arm before he can pass him. Fred turns to him, eyebrow raised.

“About what Keenan says about Cassius’s mum,” he says quietly, then says nothing else, waiting. If Fred says it’s none of his business, he’ll accept that, but he has to ask.

He pats Harry’s shoulder. “It’s not because of George. She doesn’t hate our family that much. But, well, some families are handling Voldemort’s return better than others.” He ruffles Harry’s hair and then keeps going up the stairs.

Ron adds, too quietly for anyone else to hear them, “Cassius’s maternal uncle and grandmother were killed during the last war. The Warrington’s neutrality came with a price.”

How can that be neutrality? It seems at that point, whether they fight or not, neutrality has been taken off the table.

“Well, I do have some good news,” Hermione says, leaning against the wall and looking out the window.
“What is it?” Ron asks.

She turns to look at them over her shoulder, grinning. “Hagrid’s back.”

~

Draco means to corner Cassius before the shower, but he skips the locker room and goes straight back to the castle, which Draco can’t really blame him for, but he also can’t make himself follow him, because he’s sweaty and disgusting.

He’s not in his room when Draco gets back, but Hermione has the Chimera map, so he can’t even stalk him. He hopes he’s somewhere with George, and not alone getting stuck in his own head. He manages to spend a couple hours slogging through schoolwork before he gives in and grabs his mirror to ask Harry to use the map to find him, but as soon as his soulmate’s face appears in the glass he says, “Oh good, we were just about to call you. Hagrid is back.”

“What? Good,” he says, confused as to why this would warrant a call.

Harry rolls his eyes. “We’re going to go down to his hut. Do you want to come?”

“Cassius,” he says, like somehow Harry could have forgotten.

He scowls, then says, “Last, I checked with Fred, he said he and George went to Hogsmeade. I’m going to kill Keenan.”

“No, if we kill him first. The whole house is pissed at him,” Draco says, then sighs. “Yeah, sure, I’ll come see Hagrid. Give me about ten minutes to sneak down, I don’t have an invisibility cloak like some people.”

“Must be rough,” he says, then blows him a kiss before hanging up, and Draco tries to look irritated, but he knows that he’s grinning.

Blaise walks in just as Draco is zipping up his jeans. There’s no reason to wear his uniform on the weekend. “I’m going to go visit Hagrid with Harry, Ron, and Hermione. Want to come?”

He makes a face. “Well, as far as Hagrid knows, I’m a pretentious blood purist, so no, I don’t think I’ll do that.”

Draco’s not so sure about that, because Hagrid may be naïve about some things, but he’s not stupid. Either way, it’s not an argument worth having, so he just says, “See you later. Don’t wait up for me.”

“I never do,” he says, rolling his eyes at Draco’s offended look.

The disillusionment charm is wonderful, because it means as long as he sticks to the tree line, it’s almost impossible for anyone to see him. Smoke is lazily swirling out of Hagrid’s chimney, and there’s a cheerful yellow glow coming from his windows. Draco hadn’t realized how much he’d missed it until it was in front of him again, and okay, he’s glad Harry invited him to come down, because he’s not sure what excuse he could have given to come down and see Hagrid on his own.

He knocks on the door, and it opens just enough for Hermione to reach out, fist her hands in the front of his shirt, and yank him inside, which is pretty impressive considering she can’t actually see him. He breaks the disillusionment charm as soon as he’s through the door, smoothing out his shirt and saying, “That sort of aggressive manhandling hardly seems—”

He cuts himself off as soon as he gets a look at Hagrid. He’s covered in bruises and cuts that look
like they’ve barely stopped bleeding. What little of his face is visible is a mix of deep purple and fading yellow, and he’s holding himself in a way that makes it clear his dirty traveling clothes are hiding even more injuries. “’Ello Draco!” he says, “How’s yer school year been?”

Draco opens his mouth, closes it, then turns to his friends. “Is he serious?”

“Unfortunately,” Ron grumbles. “Can you, you know, do something?”

If he’d known he was going to be doing a healing on a half giant, he would have had a bigger dinner. “Yes, obviously.” He takes out his wand and turns to Hagrid. “Don’t move, this is tricky enough without you making it more difficult.”

“Er,” his eyes widen and he takes a step back, but there’s really nowhere for him to go, given the size of his hut. “I dunno if yeh need to do that.”

Draco taps his wand against his hand, trying to decide on a plan of attack. “There’s nowhere for you to run. Don’t make this more difficult on the both of us.”

“Is the resemblance to Pomfrey as disturbing to you as it is to me, or is that working for you?” Ron mutters to Harry, low enough that Hagrid doesn’t hear him but Draco is considering kicking him on principle anyway. Luckily, Hermione does it for him.

Hagrid looks at the window, as if seriously contemplating if he can fit through it, which is ridiculous. He could barely get one leg through it, and Draco’s blocking the door, so he might as well just accept his fate. He lifts his wand and casts, “Moudiasmenos.” Hagrid instantly relaxes, but it doesn’t really heal anything, just numbs the pain so hopefully he’ll stop squirming, the big baby. “Episkey.” The bruises fade from Hagrid’s face, and the cuts over his hands shrink and disappear. He assumes whatever other minor injuries are being hidden by his clothes are gone as well. He casts a diagnostic spell, and scowls. “Why do you have so many broken bones? What were you doing?” Hagrid opens his mouth, but Draco knows whatever he was doing was Order business, so he fires off, “Reparo,” putting more magic behind it than strictly necessary to heal Hagrid’s broken collarbone, femur, two fingers, and four ribs, but he can’t really afford to layer on any more healing spells. He adds on a scourify for good measure, so Hagrid looks a little less like he’s been rolling in the dirt for the past few months, even though for all Draco knows, that’s exactly what he has been doing.

“Did you just use reparo on his bones?” Hermione demands, scandalized.

“Yeah, and? They were broken, now they’re not, problem solved.” If Hagrid wasn’t so resilient, he wouldn’t have used it, but a half giant can withstand a lot more blunt force magic than a normal human, and the soft fiddly spells are harder to cast. “Don’t ever do that though.”

Hagrid pats himself down, as if he’s looking for his injuries, then looks to Draco with wide eyes. “I didn’t know yeh could – thank you.”

“You need to rest otherwise everything won’t heal as strong as it was before, magic can only do so much,” he says sternly. “Also, if you ever tell anyone I did that, I’ll have you committed for insanity.”

Harry snorts, but clearly Hagrid knows him too well, because he just smiles and says “O’ course yeh will,” and pats him on the back with his massive hands. Draco nearly stumbles, because now he’s exhausted and starving, but he only has so much of his reputation left, so he forces himself to stay upright.

“Uh, guys,” Ron says, squinting as he looks out the window. “We have a problem. Umbridge is
coming this way.”

“Who?” Hagrid asks while Hermione curses.

“She’s the new defense professor and a government plant, we hate her,” Harry says, and Hagrid nods, accepting that at face value. “Hurry up everyone, get under the cloak.”

“All four of us are not going to fit under there,” Hermione protests. “We’re lucky any of Ron fits under there, look at him.”

“Hey,” Ron protests mildly, still looking out the window. “Whatever we’re doing, we have to do it quickly. She’s not turning around.”

Harry scowls. “Stop arguing and come here.”

Draco sighs goes over to stand with Harry and Hermione at the opposite wall, and Ron joins a second later. Harry shakes out the invisibility cloak and hands it to Ron. “Sorry, you’re tallest, so this is your problem now. Just hold it up like a sheet in front of us.”

Hermione’s face clears. “Oh, that’s clever.”

“I have my moments,” Harry says, and Draco snorts as Ron holds the cloak up in front of them. Hermione grabs an edge and curls it around them so Umbridge won’t be able to see them if she turns in their direction. “Now be quiet, unless you want her to catch us and be stuck carving ‘I will not sneak out after curfew’ into your skin for a week.”

Ron kicks him and Draco rolls his eyes. Harry at least has the decency to look sheepish.

“Carving what?” Hagrid thunders, but it’s too late to answer him, because at that moment three tiny, polite little knocks are at his door. He gives the corner he knows they’re standing in a suspicious look, then goes to answer the door. “’Ello.”

“Mr. Hagrid,” Umbridge says, pushing the door the rest of the way open and stepping inside. Hagrid waits a beat before closing the door behind her. She stares around the hut suspiciously. Fang growls at her softly from his place in front of the fire, and Draco startles. He’s never heard Fang growl at anyone before, not even him at his most bratty. “I’m High Inquisitor Dolores Umbridge. Where have you been all year?”

“It’s Professor Hagrid, Miss Inquisitor,” he says, perfectly polite. Draco suddenly realizes that Hagrid is just like Pansy. The more textbook polite he is, the more he hates you. “Would yeh like me make yeh some tea? I just go’ back, so I don’ ‘ave any cake for yeh.”

“I’m High Inquisitor Umbridge or Professor Umbridge,” she says, and Ron rolls his eyes. “Where have you been the past several months?”

He walks over to the table and pulls out a chair for her. After a long staring contest, she goes over and sits down. Hagrid stays standing, and Draco has to hold back a snort. He’s over eight feet tall, it’s not like he needs even more of a height advantage over her. “I ‘as on an expedition ta find a rare magical creature.”

Draco looks to the others, who he assumes heard the real details of Hagrid’s whereabouts before he got here. Hermione pulls a face and makes a so-so gestures.

“What magical creature? Who authorized this? On who’s orders were you looking?” she fires off.
Hagrid blinks for several moments, like that’s all too much to take in, and Draco’s eyes narrow. Hagrid isn’t stupid. It’s possible that he’s literally insane, but he’s not stupid. There’s no way he’s having any trouble processing Umbridge’s questions, unless he’s a lot more tired than he looks. Which is possible, but Draco doubts it. “I’m a care of magical creatures professor, and I go’ to keep me skills sharp after all. These types of trips are necessary. It’s unfortunate tha’ I had to be gone for such a large part of the school year, but the Crumple Horned Snorkack is only active for a few months out of the year.”

Ron shoves his hand over Draco’s mouth, which is probably for the best, because Draco wants to scream. Luna doesn’t even take care of magical creatures. When did she have the time to have a conversation with Hagrid and discuss her more weird and improbable ideas?

“Who told you to go? Was it Dumbledore?”

Hagrid looks gently confused. “I’m a professor, it’s me responsibility to go in search of new and interestin’ animals, to make sure me skills stay sharp.”

That’s true, actually. Draco remembers the huge fight about it that happened about a year before he started Hogwarts. A portion of the Board of Governors had decided that the professors needed to increase the required combination of continuing education hours and professional accolades that a professor needed in order to keep their position at Hogwarts, but they hadn’t wanted to increase the professors’ personal research and continuing education budget, which obviously hadn’t pleased any of the professors. That had then sparked a whole debate on whether Hogwarts was an institution of learning or prestige, and the answer had ended up being both, pay the professors more if they need to do more, damnit.

He probably wouldn’t have remembered all this so well if his father hadn’t been the one who spearheaded the campaign to get the ministry to allocate some of their funds from the national quidditch team to Hogwarts, since one of those things was a worldwide embarrassment, and the other was regarded as one of the best magical schools in the world. Lucius had left early and come home late for months, in between acting as a barrister on behalf of Hogwarts pro bono, and then meeting with the Board to call half of them several kinds of idiot.

His father isn’t well liked among the Hogwarts staff, but Draco’s sure they all liked the extra money he worked so hard to get them.

And since Hagrid is now a professor, he’s held to that same standard. Which had been one of the arguments against his appointment a couple years ago – how could they expect a man who’d never even sat for his Owls to meet the same standards of academic excellence that they required from all the other professors?

The answer ended up being that Hagrid was apparently the most well known and respected zoologist since Newt Scamander. Dozens of letters recommending him for the position had flooded into the Board of Governors, from everyone from the pet shop owner in Diagon Alley, to the head of the dragon conservatory in Romania. Draco hadn’t found this out until later, but the only reason they’d gotten the dragons for the Triwizard Tournament was because Hagrid had called in a favor.

“And did you manage to find this Crumbly Horn Snack?” Umbridge asks, wrinkling her nose in disdain.

“No, the tricky blighters.” Hagrid looks so honestly disappointed that for a moment Draco wonders if he really did go out in search of Crumple Horn Snorkacks. “However, I think I may ‘ave found a subspecies of the flubberworm! I can tell yeh all about it, if you’re so curious.”
Umbridge hastily pushes herself to her feet. “That’s quite all right. I have – grading to do, you understand.”

“Ah, the gradin’,” says Hagrid knowingly, as if he’s ever assigned an essay. They did have a pop quiz last year. He gave them fifteen minutes to go in the forbidden forest and find as many invasive plants as they could carry. He deducted points for any flowers or plants that were native to the forest. Which basically means he made them all do the weeding for the day and then gave them a grade on it.

As soon as Umbridge is out the door, Ron drops the invisibility cloak.

“Hagrid,” Hermione says in wonder. “You lied to her.”

He frowns at them. “O’ course I did. Besides, yeh said we hated her.”

“Yes, but you lied well,” she clarifies.

Ron blinks. “Hagrid. Is – do you – is the reason you’re so bad at keeping secrets from us because you love us?”

“Aye,” he says, as if it’s nothing, looking at all of them in confusion. Harry looks like he’s about to cry. “Why would I wanna lie to you? Yer my children.”

Oh, merlin, now Draco’s about to start crying, because it’s clear he’s included in that. Maybe all of Slytherin house is included in that, even, and really, how can anyone who knows Hagrid manage to hate him?

“Want to see something really cool?” he blurs out before any of them can say or do something horrendously embarrassing that he’ll never recover from.

~

Harry, for the record, thinks that this is a horrible idea. Hermione and Ron agree with him, but Draco is determined, and now that they’ve told Hagrid about it, it’s not like they can not show him. For a moment there’s a worry that Hagrid will be too big to fit through the pipe, but Draco points out that if the basilisk can fit, there’s no way a half giant can’t. What takes longer than that is the five minute argument they have in the middle of the hallway over whether or not Hagrid can go in the girl’s bathroom. It takes Hermione loudly going through the bathroom asking if anyone is there, and even then Hagrid covers his eyes as he walks in, which ends up being a mistake because he promptly walks into a wall.

There’s a cold pressure against his backside, which Harry has just learned to expect at this point, but then Myrtle says, “Rubeus! Is that you?”

“Myrtle,” Hagrid says, startled into lowering his hand. “Oh, hello.”

She’s grinning like a little kid, ignoring Harry to float up and sit on one of Hagrid’s shoulders. If he minds the ice cold feeling of Myrtle against him, he doesn’t show it. “You’ve gotten so big, and I didn’t think you could get any bigger! I’ve stayed just the same,” she says, matter of fact, and somehow that’s the saddest thing Myrtle has ever said.

Harry realizes all at once that Myrtle knew Hagrid from when she was alive, that they went to school together. That’s so strange.

“Being the same s’not so bad,” Hagrid says encouragingly. “I can’t fit through a lot o’ doorways,
and me back’s starting to ache in the rain. And look at yeh! As pretty as yeh were fifty years ago.”

Myrtle blushes silver and she presses a kiss against Hagrid’s cheek. “You’re sweet. You’ve always been sweet. It’s too bad what Tom did to you and me and M-“

“Aye,” Hagrid says hastily, doing a very bad job at not looking at any of them. Hermione raises an eyebrow and Ron frowns. Draco narrows his eyes.

She sighs before patting Hagrid on the head. She winks at Harry before fading away, to wherever she goes when she’s not haunting the bathroom.

Draco grabs Hagrid’s sleeve and tugs him forward. “Right, well, enough of that, come on Hagrid.”

Harry uses Parseltongue to open the chamber, and they all go traipsing through. Hagrid looks around in wonder, trailing his hands over the stone and looking at all the beautiful mosaic patterns. Harry pauses in the center of the room and faces the philosopher’s huge stone head. He hopes she’s here and not going through the pipes somewhere. “Theophania,” he hisses. “I have someone I want you to meet. Don’t eat him.”

The statue’s mouth opens, and Hagrid tenses. “It’s okay,” Hermione says, but she sounds nervous, and Ron shifts so he’s a half step in front of her. They’ve never seen the basilisk either, so far it’s only been Harry and Draco. And, well, the time Hermione saw a reflection of her eyes and then was petrified for a couple months, which he can’t imagine is the most positive of associations.

Theophania glides out, scales shimmering in the light of chamber, and every time he sees her he’s surprised by her size. Her fangs are thin in comparison to the rest of her, but they’re still the length of his arm.

“Theophania!” Draco calls out, rushing forward. “Are you okay? Is the wound giving you any problems? No soreness or anything?”

“Hello hatchling,” she hisses, “I am well.”

Typical. He’s the Parselmouth here, and she ignores him completely. “She’s fine,” he translates.

Hagrid stays perfectly still, only twitching when Draco reaches out to pet her scales. “This is Hagrid. He’s our friend.”

She lowers her head, and she’d be looking him straight in the eyes if her inner eyelids weren’t covering them, but Hagrid only lifts his chin in return. Oh good, his first response is to have a staring contest with a basilisk, great.

“I remember you,” she says finally, darting her tongue out to taste the air next to his head. “Tom was so afraid of you.”

“Oh,” Harry really doesn’t know if that’s something he wants to hear. “She says hi.”

Theophania’s tail twitches, and Hagrid smiles. “No, that’s not wha’ she said. But that’s alright.” He holds out his hands, waiting. Theophania bumps her massive head into his hands, and he relaxes, running his hands over her scales. “There we go. Aren’t you a pretty lady? What wonderful skin you have.”

“Can… can we pet her too?” Hermione asks hesitantly, still half hiding behind Ron.

Snakes can’t sigh, but Theophania still gives the impression of doing just that. “Very well. I did
petrify her, however unwillingly. The tall one too I suppose.”

“Sure,” Harry says.

She can sound long suffering all she likes, but Theophania looks rather pleased with having four people fawning all over her.

~

When Draco finally makes it back to the common room, he’s surprised to find it occupied. Millie is curled on the couch, another muggle book in her hands, which shouldn’t seem out of ordinary, but this seems late, even for her. But she’s not alone. Pansy is seated on the other end of the couch, a sketchbook in her hand and a dozen or so crumpled and discarded pages around her. Millie looks up when he walks in, but Pansy doesn’t seem to even notice. Millie jerks her head towards Pansy and glares at him, very clearly telling him to do something about it.

“Hey,” he says, absently tugging on Millie’s hair as he walks past her. “What are you doing up so late?”

Pansy doesn’t look at him. He peaks over her shoulder to see what she’s working on. It’s a dress, he can see that, but all her notes across the page look like gibberish to him. “I need to figure out a way to make this dress without failing out of Hogwarts. Cho and I have decided on a design, more or less, and I like it, and it’s going to look awesome, but I just don’t have the amount of hours I need to complete it on my own in time for the wedding. Not if I’m going to make the lace by hand. That alone is going to take me months.”

“Use store bought lace?” he suggests. Pansy finally looks at him, but he almost wishes he hadn’t. Who needs a basilisk with that look on her face? “Okay wow, just kidding. Can’t you get someone to help you?”

“I’d love to. Who?” she demands. “I’m the best seamstress at this school, everyone else just uses magic for it, which means they’re not nearly skilled enough to work on something as important and tricky as a wedding dress.”

Actually, he knows of someone else at Hogwarts who sews by hand, and is rather good at it. “What about Winky?”

She blinks, so surprised by that that she forgets to be frustrated. “Your house elf?”

“Well, maybe they should,” Millie says, speaking up for the first time. “Anyone who looks down at a dress made by elven hands better take a good hard look at the food they eat or their clean house. You need help, and Winky can do it. House elves once maintained whole forests, they’re capable of more than just mopping the floors.”

Pansy frowns, but says, “That’s – you’re right. Okay,” she says to Draco, “if you don’t think she’ll mind.”

“Winky,” he says conversationally, and in the next moment she’s there beside him, wearing a very pretty dress that he thinks she might have made from one of his old cashmere scarves.
“Yes Master Draco?”

He points at Pansy, “She’s making Cho’s wedding dress, and needs help with the sewing or lacemaking or something. Do you want to help her? You can say no, she’s not your master.”

Winky’s large eyes get even wider. “YES! Winky would like that very much! Winky loves sewing!”

Pansy relaxes, a smile creeping over her face that Draco is sure is completely involuntary. “Find me tomorrow if you have time. I’ll teach you how to make lace and show you the pattern we’re using for the dress.”

Winky nods excitedly, her ears flapping against her head. Why can’t all their problems be this easy to solve?

~

Harry is the best at Tamil out of his friends, but that’s because he spent the whole summer getting daily lessons. Now that he’s back at school, his skills have started to lag, and if he keeps this up, Pansy will outpace him. He refuses to let that happen. Which is why he’s awake an hour before breakfast with a book in his lap, taking notes on pronunciation. Neville will sometimes get up and study with him, but the closest Ron will get is stumbling out his bed and into Harry’s, curling under his covers and mumbling out a conversation in Tamil. Dean and Seamus have started using some words in Tamil that they’ve picked up from them, but they have no great love of languages. Seamus speaks two different dialects of Gaelic, while Dean just sticks to Latin, and only that because his mother makes him.

“Hagrid back and you not say to me?” Neville scowls.

“Sorry,” Ron mutters, Harry’s comforter pulled around his shoulders, and the only bit of him they can see is his bright red hair. “Was fast. No time.”

“You were in the greenhouse,” Harry says, “Sorry.”

His face clears. “It is okay. Is he well?”


“Are you joking?” They all jump and turn to see Hermione standing at the foot of his bed with her arms crossed. “Are you studying? Without me?” By the way she says that, she would have been less scandalized to find them having an orgy.

“Tamil only,” the three of them chorus.

She scowls, but switches to Tamil. “Studying? No me? Why?”

“You need to sleep,” Harry answers, “and it’s just in the morning if we’re not too tired.”

“Why sleep when I can study?” He worries about her sometimes. “I study with you now! And in future!”

“Yes,” Neville says, because he’s the most afraid of her.

“Of course. We weren’t trying to exclude you,” Harry assures her.

Ron unearths his hand out from under the blanket to give a thumbs up.
“Breakfast now,” she says, seemingly satisfied. “First is Hagrid’s class today. We not late.”

That was fast. He only got back last night. Harry can’t help but wonder if part of this is because Umbridge is here, since he can’t think of another reason Hagrid wouldn’t at least take a day to settle back in.

They eat breakfast quickly and are among the first people near Hagrid’s hut the next morning. He greets Neville warmly, and the two of them talk about some plant that Neville’s been working with until the rest of the class trickles in. The Slytherins and Gryffindors stand apart and away from each other, as usual, but it feels weird now when it didn’t before. Ever since the RA, interacting with the Slytherins has been a little odd. They’re perfectly polite and courteous to each other in the chamber, but outside of it they have to pretend that they hate each other. This was all bad enough when it was just Draco, Blaise, Pansy and Millie, but now it’s so much worse.

Hagrid greets everyone enthusiastically, then has them all follow him into the forest, which they haven’t entered all year. Several seventh years had been openly weeping this morning about Hagrid being back. Apparently the care of magical creatures newt is almost entirely hands on, and that means Hagrid is a far better teacher for it.

He leads them into a clearing, and Harry can’t help but perk up. Maybe they’ll get a chance to ride them, like with the Hippogriffs? He’s always wanted to try.

“Why the bloody hell is he taking us to stand in the middle of an empty field?” Seamus mutters.

Harry looks at him in confusion. What is he saying? There’s at least a dozen of them standing there.

“It’s not empty,” Blaise says, his lip curled in distaste, which Harry doesn’t think is very fair. It’s not their fault they look strange.

“Aye,” Hagrid nods, “Mr. Zabini is correct. Thestrals are finicky beasts.”

One of the foals makes a piercing cry, not unlike a baby bird. A couple students flinch, but most don’t react at all. The little thing darts past its mother and comes running towards them. Hagrid shouts in alarm, but Harry just steps forward and holds out his hands. It barely slows, running into his chest with its pointy head. He winces and runs his hands down the foal’s neck while it lets out soft whuffling noises and lips at his robe. “Friendly little guy,” he comments, and freezes when he looks up. The rest of the thestrals have moved closer too, all of them crowding in as close as they can. He laughs, holding out his hands and passing them over as many stringy manes as he can reach. “Can they fly?” He loves flying. What he’s really asking is if any of them will let him fly them.

Every year he sees them pull the carriages, and every year he has to resist the temptation to climb on one of their backs.

He looks up, and the class is a mix of confused and horrified. Hagrid doesn’t seem worried, but he does look very, very surprised, which isn’t exactly comforting. “They can,” he says finally.

“How can – his parents?” Daphne hisses, loud enough they can all hear her.


Um, what?

Hagrid claps his hands, and everyone falls silent. “Enough of that. Thestrals can only be seen by those who ‘ave seen someone die.” Harry’s face heats up. If they’re invisible, then he must look very strange right now. ‘They’re as clever as you and me, and loyal when they ‘ave somethin’ to be loyal to.” He hesitates, but continues, “I wouldn’t call ‘em friendly, exactly.”
“They seem pretty friendly to me,” Ron comments, and Harry has to agree. He’s been pulled into the middle of the herd, and they keep brushing against him and nudging his body with theirs. Ron may not be able to see them, but he can certainly see the effect of Harry being pushed around by them.

“That’s strange,” Hagrid says, frowning. “They’re not – they’re not dangerous,” he doesn’t react to any of their skeptical looks, “but they’re not exactly docile either. I’ve never seen them act like this before.”

“Can I ride one?” Harry asks, because they seem to like him, and he really, really loves flying animals.

“I dunno know if-” The herd parts a little and one of the smaller mares remains, leaning forward in a clear invitation. “Well, alrigh’ then.”

“Harry, I don’t know if this is a good idea,” Neville says, eyeing the clearing nervously.

Who cares if it’s a good idea? It’s a fun idea. “It’ll be fine,” he says, waving his wand so the earth swells beneath his feet, allowing him to climb onto the thestral’s back without embarrassing himself. He’s extra careful of the thin, leathery wings, trying his best to sit on her bony back. This definitely isn’t the most comfortable creature he’s ever ridden. “Is this okay?” he asks her, since clearly they can understand him.

She lets out another bird like shriek, then launches herself into the sky, no running start or anything, just one moment they’re in the ground and the next they’re in the air. She’s fast. Faster than a broom, faster than Buckbeak. He’s pretty sure the Hungarian Horntail was faster, but she might actually outpace Payne. She keeps going higher and higher, until they’re flying through the clouds, and then circling around the castle and the grounds. Students are staring at him and pointing, and since apparently thestrals are invisible to the majority of people, he must look very strange right now. He doesn’t care in the slightest. This is awesome. “You should race my wyvern friend sometime!” he shouts, and the thestral’s ears prick backwards in acknowledgement.

He could happily stay up there for the rest of the afternoon, but his class is waiting for him, so he should probably head back down. “Can we go back to Hagrid?”

She lets out a soft trilling sound, then starts making lazy circles towards the ground and back to the forbidden forest. She lands lightly, smoothly making the transition from air to land. “MR. POTTER!” Oh no, what’s McGonagall doing here?

“Hi Professor,” he says, and Hagrid looks vaguely guilty while McGonagall seems as if she’s barely restraining the urge to strangle them both with her bare hands. “Want a ride?”

She rubs at her temples, muttering to herself. “I should have known. Very first year, a couple weeks into the school year, and he nearly flies his broom into your window. Should have known. Then the hippogriff, the wyvern, the dragon, and that ridiculous bike. Of course this was next. Why am I even surprised?”

Several Slytherins have turned away to bite at their knuckles or robes to keep from laughing. “Er, Professor?” he asks. It probably doesn’t help that he’s still sitting on the thestral’s back, but she doesn’t seem to be in any hurry to kick him off.

“Those things have fangs, you know. Venomous fangs,” she says, glaring. “One bite is enough to be fatal.”

Do they really? He takes a closer look at their mouths, and sure enough, there are fangs. It’s hard to
feel very worked up about it when he spends so much of his spare time hanging out with a basilisk, who has fangs roughly the length of his arm, a killing gaze, and is so large she could kill him just by accidentally moving the wrong way and crushing him beneath her. Some little fangs don’t seem like that big of deal in comparison to all that. “Isn’t that neat?”

She points a finger at him. “Don’t do that again.”

He is absolutely going to do this again. “Will it make you feel better if I say that I won’t?”

There’s a ripple of choked off laughter. He can’t tell if it’s from the Gryffindors or the Slytherins. McGonagall sighs, her shoulders slumping, “Just – I’m going back to my office,” she says, to him or all of them or the universe at large, he can’t quite tell.

Hagrid waits until she’s out of the clearing before he asks, “Was it fun?”

Harry slides off the thestral’s back and pats her on the side. “So much fun.”

~

“You did what?” Draco demands. This is ridiculous. He drops care of magical creatures to study alchemy, and Harry rides a thestral during class.

The twins are laughing, and Ginny has actually paused in her campaign to make Neville turn as red as possible to stare. Luna says, “I rather like the thestrals. It was nice of them to let you ride them.”

Luna’s always been able to see them, as has Blaise. He knows it was Luna’s mother she saw die, but he doesn’t ask about Blaise. If he asked, Blaise would tell him, and Draco doesn’t want to put him in that position. He assumes it was one of his step fathers, but he doesn’t know, and he’s never going to know, because he’s not going to ask.

“I don’t know why you’d want ride them anyway,” Blaise says, shivering, “those things look creepy. They freak me out.”

“They do have a bit of an unsettling air about them,” Luna admits.

“I have no idea what they’re talking about,” Harry says. When Blaise continues to stare at him, he admits, “Okay, they look a little strange, but they feel warm. Friendly. Like a bunch of smart, pointy dogs.”

“Enough about Harry’s recent poor life choice,” Ginny declares, getting up off of Neville’s lap. “More about me. Since Gred and Forge are kicked off the team, Angelina made me and Romilda the new beaters.”

“Congratulations!” Harry says, then frowns, “Wait, when did this happen?”

“The last team practice, which you were in detention for, as usual,” she says. “I don’t know why Angelina puts up with you.”

“I catch the snitch eighty seven percent of the time. Hermione did the math once,” he says.

“He does, and I did,” Hermione admits.

Ginny makes a face. “Well, that will do it. Stop getting detention during practice. Your high catch rate is the reason the other teams’ beaters spend half the game trying to knock you off your broom. We can’t get practice at protecting you if you’re not there. Stop skipping practice.”
Draco can tell that he has several things to say to that, but none that he’s willing to say and risk pissing Ginny off. Ginny is scary. An angry Ginny is even scarier. “I’ll try.”

Her eyes narrow like she doesn’t believe him, but that’s probably as good as it’s going to get, so she might as well just accept it.

~

It’s been nearly a year since Quinn asked him about casting this spell, so he’s thrilled that he finally gets to do it.

He just wasn’t anticipating an audience.

“What are they all doing here?” he asks Quinn. It’s a few minutes before midnight, which is the perfect time for this sort of thing, and Quinn had talked Dumbledore into letting them use the great hall, which is cool, but they’re not alone. He’d thought they were going to be alone.

“You don’t really think I’d let you do this unsupervised?” Filius asks. He totally had. Filius has been drilling him in this spell for weeks, it’s literally impossible to mess up.

Snape shrugs. “There’s the vague possibility that Quinn’s diagnostic potion will make everything explode.”

“And I need a certified potions master to bear witness to each step of my process, otherwise the board could contest my results,” Quinn finishes. Snape look irritated that he’s been exposed as doing something helpful.

“You need a ghost to summon,” Nearly Headless Nick says cheerfully. “I’m happy to help.”

Madame Pomfrey puts her hand on her hips. “This is foolish, and will certainly end in someone being injured, if not dead. I’ve invested far too much time in you just to let you die.”

McGonagall calmly lifts up a gleaming silver sword inlaid with rubies. “Someone has to behead Nick. As he’s Gryffindor’s ghost, it seem only appropriate that the head of Gryffindor perform this task.”

“Is that Godric’s sword?” Filius asks in interest. “How did you get that?”

“I was talking about tonight with Albus in his office, and it dropped out of the sorting hat, who said it’s what Godric would have wanted.” She swings it experimentally, and Draco’s not sure whether it should worry him or not that she looks like she knows what she’s doing.

He throws up his hands. “Okay, fine, but what about you?”

Pomona shrugs. “Honestly, we were having a head of house meeting before this, and I just didn’t want to be left out.”

Merlin above. “Can we get a move on?”

“Of course, Mr. Malfoy does need his beauty sleep,” Snape drawls. Draco will murder him and make it look like an accident. Blaise is his best friend, he can absolutely make that happen.

Snape, Filius, and Pomona stand off to side closer to the head table. Quinn has several bottles of a pure white potion on the table closest to zir, as well as a journal open on a blank page, ready to take notes. Nick stands in the center of the room, while McGonagall stand next to him, Godric
Gryffindor’s sword held ready in her hands.

“Don’t hesitate, really give it your all,” Nick tells her intently. “Some half hearted thwacking is what got me in this predicament to begin with.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” she promises, “I’ve been wanting to give you a nice solid thwack for decades.”

Nick clearly doesn’t know if he should look comforted or concerned.

“Shoo,” Quinn tells him before he can decide, “Draco can’t summon you if you’re already here. Get out of here. A couple floors away at least.”

Nick huffs, but fades away into the nearest wall, and hopefully to the other side of the castle.

“Ready?” Draco asks, looking at Quinn and McGonagall. They both nod. He takes a deep breath, lets it out, and raises his wand. “Adducere exspiravit!”

There’s a vicious tug along his spine, and for a moment Draco worries that he’s messed it up and he’s about to turn himself inside out, but then there’s a wash of magic over the room. First, tiny specks and wisps of white appear in the air. There’s another tug, one he can feel in his bones, but this one doesn’t hurt, and Nick appears. He’s not see through, but a solid white, like a marble statue. Quinn throws the white diagnostic potion on him, and writing starts appearing in the notebook, taking down whatever information about Nick that the potion can pick up.

Nick immediately bends at the waist, and McGonagall doesn’t hesitate. She’s graceful and powerful, and Draco sometimes forgets how young she is, barely sixty, but for once she actually looks her age as she triumphantly brings the sword down on Nick’s pale neck, finally severing it from his head. No sooner has his disconnected head bounced against the floor than it turns translucent and ghostly once more, along with the rest of him.

“Excellent!” Nick cries as his body picks up his head and cuddles it against his chest. “Spectacular, what a wonderful effort!”

Pomfrey and Filius come up on either side of him, Poppy muttering spells and Filius tugging at his sleeve until Draco bends down and lets him check his forehead for fever. “Are you okay?”

“He’s fine,” Pomfrey announces, satisfied. “You are fine, aren’t you?”

She sounds so threatening. “Yes,” he says, patting Filius on the shoulder before standing upright. McGonagall hands the sword to Pomona, who pokes Nick with it, and seems disappointed when it goes straight through him.

Quinn and Snape are ignoring them, huddled over the journal and going over the results, both their heads bent together and murmuring to one another. It’s weird to see Snape excited over something. “How’d it go?”

“Excellent,” Quinn says, “Now do it again.”

All the adults start to protest, but he knows this spell, thanks to Filius drilling it into his head, and now he knows how it feels. He can do it without wasting any magic, so he should be able to do it a few more times before it knocks him unconscious. “Yeah, okay. We should probably finish up before it turns one, because after that the spell will get harder. Also, everyone here has class tomorrow morning. Besides the ghost.”

“I’m at your disposal!” Nick’s head says cheerfully, from where it’s still being held in his hands.
Harry’s eyes sweep over the great hall as he walks in for breakfast, and it’s a struggle not to let his eyes catch on Draco. He looks exhausted, dark bags under his eyes and half slumped against Blaise while Millie piles food onto his plate.

His confusion only lasts until he looks over and sees Nearly Headless Nick performing Hamlet in the middle of their table, using his own dismembered head as a stand in for the classic skull.

Well, Quinn must be happy, at least. Harry doesn’t see zir at the Ravenclaw table, but Snape is in his usual place, looking even grumpier than usual. He can’t ask about Draco, but he does make a detour and sit at the Hufflepuff table to ask, “Hey, where’s Quinn?”

It takes Cedric several minutes to answer, pulling his head out of the binder to blink at him. It looks like a seating arrangement chart. Cho is doing math, but it he doesn’t think it’s schoolwork. He’s pretty sure it’s a budget. “What?” Cedric asks after blinking at him slowly for several moments.

Susan elbows a fourth year out of her way so she can sit next to Harry. “Oi, Diggory, Chang, wake up.”

“You think it really matters if it’s silk instead of satin?” Cho asks him. “Silk is better, obviously, but it’s also ten times the cost, and how closely will anyone really be looking at the tablecloths?”

“Just elope,” Susan advises, reaching over to dump half the serving bowl of home fries onto her plate.


Cedric frowns. “Your mother.”

“Yes, well, we have to have dreams,” she says.

Harry so isn’t the right person to ask about this. He has no opinions on weddings. Wait. Should he? Draco doesn’t care about his style opinions anyway, and he will be marrying Draco, right? When everything’s out in the open, and all that. But maybe he doesn’t want to get married? Sirius and Remus aren’t married. They don’t have to get married, he’s just never really thought about it. Except he does kind of want to get married, eventually, some day. To Draco, specifically, not just in general.

Oh, merlin, what is their seating chart going to look like? No wonder Cedric looks so stressed.

“Quinn,” Susan repeats.

“Right,” Cedric says, “ze locked zirself in the potions classroom. The only one allowed in is Snape, but he has a class right before lunch, so I don’t know what zir plan is after that.”

“Ghost summoning spell?” he presses when Cedric’s eyes start sliding back to his binder. He already knows the answer. He can’t think of how else Nick could have finally found himself fully headless.

He jerks his eyes back to him guiltily. “Yes. Supposedly it went very well, although ze says I have to deal with all the Head Boy and Head Girl stuff until further notice, which, ze’s been covering for me a lot since I’ve been so busy with wedding stuff and applying to the auror program and everything, so that’s fair.” He looks to the Slytherin table, “Malfoy looks like crap, but Quinn made him perform the spell five times, so honestly I’m shocked he’s even here.”

Five times? That’s ridiculous. He wishes it was acceptable for him to yell at Quinn for that, but he’s
supposed to hate Draco, so it’s very much not.

His wedding speech is just going to be him calling out everyone that was ever mean or inconsiderate to Draco when he couldn’t say or do anything about it. At this rate, it’s going to end up being a really long speech.

~

It’s hard to get everyone to focus during Rabitat Aldefa, but Harry can’t blame them for that. It’s the day before Christmas break, and for once he’s just as eager for it as his friends. He’s so excited to go home and see Sirius and Remus, and the Weasleys and Hermione are coming over to spend Christmas with them. It’s going to be great.

Draco, thank merlin, isn’t going home for the holidays. He’d argued it was a great chance to find out what Voldemort is up to, and Harry had pointed out that the last time Draco was home, Voldemort had tried to kill him, so maybe he shouldn’t do that. Instead he’s spending the holidays with Blaise. Apparently Millie’s father had reached out to Draco, asking if perhaps his daughter could spend the holidays with her friends, seeing as he was so busy at work, which according to Draco actually means that it isn’t safe for her to go home, and Pansy just hates being left out of things, so they were all spending the holiday at the Zabini residence.

It’s good, he’s glad his friends are going to be together, he just wishes they could all be together, that he could invite Pansy, Millie, Blaise, and Draco over to his home, just like the rest of his friends.

Since he holidays are just around the corner, he can’t blame everyone for being distracted. He’s distracted too. “Okay, that’s enough,” he sighs, after seeing a bunch of lackluster spells. Everyone stops casting and falls silent. “What can we work on that you guys will actually be able to concentrate on? If we’re all not focusing, we might as well be in bed.”

“Can you teach us the patronus charm?” Astoria asks immediately. Marietta makes a face, and Cho elbows her in the side. “Not a huge one like you cast in Diagon Alley, but a normal one.”

That’s actually a very useful spell, just for the messenger usage alone. “I can. But that will have to wait after the break. It takes way more than one session.”

“Target practice?” Theodore suggests. “Knowing all these spells won’t help us if we can’t actually hit anything.”

That’s a very good point. “Okay. We’ll play tag.”

“That’s not what I meant,” he starts.

Before he can finish, Harry whips out his wand and sends a spell at him, turning his robe a bright, vibrant blue. “You’re it,” he says cheerfully.

It ends up being exactly what everyone needs. They’re laughing and screeching, and for a moment Harry’s worried Theophania is going to come out to tell them all to be quiet, but she stays coiled and out of sight in her statue. The meeting ends up running long, and by the end of it they’re all covered in colors. Cho and Cedric had been determined to get each other as colorful as possible, and the entirety of Ravenclaw had turned on Quinn, who had so many colors layered on top of zir that it’s nearly impossible to tell any of them apart. Draco is painted head to toe in green while Blaise, miraculously, doesn’t have single spot on him.

As far as Harry’s concerned, it’s a perfect way to spend the last day before break. Well, as perfect as it can be when it doesn’t include his boyfriend and a convenient broom closet.
Harry had been exhausted after the RA meeting, and barely remembers getting into bed. Everything’s dark around him, but he doesn’t feel like he’s awake, not really, but he feels too aware to truly be asleep.

“Hello?” he calls out, or at least thinks he does. He doesn’t like this place, this in between awareness. It makes his skin itch. “Is anyone there?”

He thinks he hears something, but it’s faint. He tries to listen, but it’s hard. He doesn’t know if where he is even has a sound, if he’s any place at all, and this isn’t just some very strange dream.

“Help.”

“Hello?” he tries again, “Who’s there? Why do you need my help?”

“Help,” it says again, stronger this time, and he recognizes the way the word smooths out at the edges.

He tries again, this time in Parseltongue. “Hello? Who are you?”

“Well, that doesn’t make any sense. If only he could hear a little better, get a little closer, maybe he could figure this out.

Oh.

Shit.

He bet the reason whoever this is isn’t getting through is because of his occlumency shields. If he wants to figure out what’s going on, he’s going to have to drop them. Which will immediately open him up to the possibility of being attacked, but if he doesn’t, then he won’t know what’s happening and why a snake is talking to him.

His friends are going to kill him.

He braces himself, then drops his shields for the first time in years.

The effect is instantaneous. He’s ripped from his not-dream space into a different one, looking out of eyes that aren’t his own. He’s low to ground, looking around everything from what has to be a snake’s perspective, and it takes him a moment, but he knows where this is, he’s been here before. It’s the ministry of magic. Why would a snake be in the ministry? Why does this snake need his help? Is it trapped, like the boa he let out from the zoo, and now is trying to escape?

There’s a pair of feet in his vision, and then the snake’s vision changes as it raises his head, rearing back and getting ready to bite whoever’s standing there.

But when Harry sees who it is, his blood runs cold.

It’s Mr. Weasley, standing in front of a door with his wand held in front of him. What is he doing? Why is he just standing there? He should run! Unless – is he guarding the door? From what?

Snakes?

The snake pauses, hesitating, and for a moment Harry thinks that everything’s going to be fine, but
then there’s an unbearable pressure all around him, and in that moment he hates Arthur, wants nothing more than to unhinge his jaw and swallow him whole, to punish him for the audacity of attempting to defy him –

“Well, what do we have here,” says an oily voice, somehow all around him, and that terrible pressure abates for just long enough for Harry to catch his breath. “Potter. You’ve finally deigned to lower your shields. Get curious, did you?”

That’s Voldemort. Voldemort is with him, inside this snake.

Wait.

No.

That wasn’t the snake’s hatred, the snake that he’s now sure must be Nagini. She doesn’t hate Arthur, why would she, she doesn’t even know him. That was Voldemort’s anger, and Voldemort’s desire to kill, and this is why Nagini had somehow reached out to him.

Voldemort is controlling her just like he controlled Theophania. Or maybe not just like it – with Theophania it had been imperio, he thinks, but this is more like possession, like what he did to Ginny.

Both Harry and Voldemort are residing within Nagini.

She rears back, ready to strike, ready to sink her venomous fangs into Arthur, and Harry can do nothing but bear witness.

Except.

If he’s here, just like Voldemort is, he doesn’t see why he shouldn’t be able to control her too. Or at least do something, he shouldn’t have to just sit here and watch. “NO!” he snarls, pushing against that force that’s all around him, hoping to force Voldemort to split his attentions, at least, to give Arthur a chance to run.

It doesn’t exactly go as planned.

One moment he’s Nagini, he sees what she sees and feels what she feels, and then next he’s in the ministry, his hands against Voldemort’s bony chest, standing there between him and Arthur.

“Harry?” Arthur croaks. “Are – are you dead?”

What?

He notices that neither he nor Voldemort are solid, and he can see through both of them. They’re not the pearly hue that ghosts usually are, but they are more translucent than the ghosts he’s seen. Maybe he is dead.

Voldemort steps back, looking at his hand in fascination. “Forced sidelong astral projection.” He pauses then says, grudgingly, “Impressive.”

What?

“Oh, good,” Arthur says, although he’s so pale that now he’s the one that looks like a ghost.

“Nagini,” Voldemort hisses, “bite him.”
She curves her body in on herself, looking less like a deadly magical snake and more like a pile of morose rope. “You didn’t ask. Why didn’t you ask? You didn’t need to make me. I would have done it if you’d asked. But you didn’t.”

“I’m asking now,” he says, annoyed. “Take care of him.”

“Don’t,” Harry hisses, continuing to stand in front of Arthur, even though he doesn’t think an astral projection will do any good against a flesh and blood snake. “Mr. Weasley, is there any reason you’re still standing there, and not, I don’t know, running?”

“I’m supposed to,” he answers.

What the bloody hell. Is this what talking to him is like?

“I don’t want to help you anymore,” Nagini says. “You don’t listen, and you don’t ask. I saved your life when you had nothing, not even a body, and you don’t listen to me.”

“NAGINI!” he roars, but she only bares her fangs at him. She darts towards Arthur, but not to bite, instead twining her large body around his until her head is resting on his shoulder. He looks like he’s about to pass out.

“No,” she says, sounding oddly childish, “You can’t have me, and you can’t have him, and I won’t let you get what’s behind that door either.”

Voldemort snarls, reaching into his robe for his wand, but then he seems to realize that it’s no use, that he can’t cast spells like this. “I’m going to slit you open,” he says, but he says it in English, so Harry’s not entirely certain if he’s talking to Arthur or Nagini.

“Do you know how to banish astral projections?” Harry asks. Just because he’s the one who got them here doesn’t mean he knows how to put them back.

Arthur starts to nod, remembers the giant deadly snake coiled around him, and says, “Yes. Theoretically.”

“Maybe you should do that? Bring Nagini with you,” he says.

Voldemort curses, then grabs Harry’s arm, fury and hatred twisting his already unsettling face into an even worse shape. He doesn’t get the chance to find out what Voldemort intends on doing, because Arthur shouts an incantation that pulls them apart, and then there’s the sensation that’s not unlike a portkey, and Harry is dragged back through layers of darkness.

He wakes up with a gasp, in his own body once more, drenched in sweat and with his heart threatening to beat out of his chest.

His entire dorm room is huddled around him, each of the boys holding down one of his limbs, and they all look terrified. “Harry,” Ron says, his freckles standing out against his skin, “what – are you okay? Was it a nightmare? Are you sick?”

“I said we should go get Pomfrey,” Dean says, eyes wide.

Harry shakes his head. He tries to speak, but his throat is sore and his mouth is dry. He tugs at his arms, and Ron and Neville cautiously let him go. He tries to push himself up and fails, but Ron catches him before he can fall, dragging him into a sitting position. Seamus figures out what the problem is and pours him a glass of water. Harry takes two careful sips before saying, “Ron, everything is fine. No one is hurt. Okay?”
“I hate when you start conversations like this,” he says.

“I astral projected into Nagini’s body while Voldemort was controlling her, and he was trying to use her to kill your dad. But it’s okay! I pushed us both out of her body, and then Nagini defected to our side, or at least left his, either way she’s currently wrapped around your dad. Voldemort is pissed.”

There’s a beat where no one speaks.

“Why can’t it have just been a nightmare or a seizure or something normal?” Seamus asks mournfully.

Neville slaps Harry upside the head. “You astral projected? That’s illegal!”

“So?” He breaks laws all the time. He doesn’t usually get slapped for it.

“It’s dangerous,” Neville stresses. “No wonder you look half dead. Most people die attempting to do that! Most people’s bodies freak out when their soul is missing, and then they die!”

Oh great, now Ron is starting to look mad too. “I didn’t do it on purpose! Are we all just going to sit here, or should we tell McGonagall or something?”

“Can you walk?” Dean asks dubiously.

Sitting up has pretty thoroughly exhausted him, and what he really wants to do is go back to sleep. He turns pleading eyes on Ron, who rolls his eyes, but says, “Sure, whatever.”

They head down to McGonagall’s office, Harry getting a piggy back ride from Ron. “This is so high up. Does everything look like this to you?”

“Yes,” he sighs, then twists to knock on McGonagall’s office door. The painting of a woman at the harp frowns and says, “She’s sleeping, and you’re out after curfew.”

“It’s an emergency,” Harry says earnestly, peaking out over Ron’s shoulder. “Can you go get her? Please”

The woman scowls, but leaves her frame. A minute or so later the door swings open. “What happened? Who’s hurt?”

“No one! Isn’t that a nice change?” Harry asks.

Ron hums. “I think this counts as you being hurt, Harry.”

“I’m not bleeding, no it doesn’t,” he says. McGonagall’s eyes narrow. “That’s not the point. About the door in the ministry that you’re having Order members guard?”

“Mr. Potter!” she begins, glaring. “How do you even-”

“Voldemort sent Nagini to kill whoever was guarding it so she could get past, but don’t worry, I helped stop it and now we’re all friends.” He pauses. “Except Voldemort, we’re not friends with him. Obviously.”

Ron snorts. McGonagall seems lost for words, which is always fun for him, personally.

There’s a pop, and Dobby is next to them. “Dumbledore is wanting to be seeing you, and Mister Harry Potter,” he says, and then he blinks, seeing them and lighting up. “Mister Harry! And Mister Ron. Your father is being here,” he says.
Oh, well that’s convenient. “Can you go get the other Weasleys?” he asks Dobby.

“Don’t do that,” McGonagall says. “We don’t need to cause a ruckus.”

Dobby’s ears droop, and Harry’s about to tell him it’s fine when he stands tall and says to McGonagall, “Dobby is a free elf,” and disappears with a pop.

“Are you trying to make me go gray?” McGonagall asks, but now she has on the face she makes when she’s trying not to laugh, so he doesn’t feel too bad.

“The twins are,” Ron tells her, “we just do it on accident.”

“I can’t imagine what you would think up if you were trying to do it on purpose,” she mutters. “Alright, everyone to the headmaster’s office. I’m sure your sister and brothers will be along shortly.” She looks at Harry. “Can you walk, Mr. Potter?”

“Sure,” he says, “absolutely, I’ve been walking for years.”

Ron snorts. “It’s not currently his greatest skill. It’s fine, let’s go.”

She hesitates, but must decide that it’s not worth the argument. They walk up to Dumbledore’s office, and the first thing he sees is Arthur standing in the middle of the office, Nagini still curled around him, while Kingsley and Tonks keep their wands on him. Percy is pacing in the narrow space behind Dumbledore’s desk, while Dumbledore sits in a chair in the corner, popping lemon drops into his mouth. Nicolas is in the chair next to him, sitting on it sidewise and looking thoroughly unimpressed.

Dumbledore is wearing a ridiculous dressing gown and night cap, and Nicolas is wearing one too, and its way too long for him, and isn’t exactly his style anyway. Is it Dumbledore’s? Is Nicolas wearing Dumbledore’s clothes? Actually, why is he even here. Was Nicolas here when Dumbledore got the call, but wasn’t wearing clothes so he borrowed Dumbledore’s? No, that’s ridiculous, Nicolas is more than competent enough to summon or transfigure his own clothes if he needed to. So he’s doing it on purpose. He knows about the betting pool, he started it, so is he just messing with them? What if he wasn’t even with Dumbledore when he got the call, and now the two of them are just messing with them, because they know about the pool.

Nagini hisses a greeting, and Harry’s feels a little guilty about getting distracted. He’s not even part of the pool. It seems like cheating since he saw them interact over the summer.

Ron is participating in the pool, and he’s glaring at Nicolas like he’s personally offended him. “Hello young Mr. Weasley,” he says, then frowns. “Actually, there are several young Mr. Weasleys here presently.”

“You’re over half a millennia old, we’re all young compared to you,” Percy snaps. He’s wearing too big Chudley Cannon sweatpants that Ron must have grown out of, and a lowcut, bright purple tshirt that has to belong to Tonks. Tonks, on the other hand, is wearing a dark pink satin tank top and shorts edged with lace, which are hilarious considering the combat boots on her feet. Kingsley is wearing normal robes. Harry wonders if he was awake, or if he just always looks like that.

“Shit, you weren’t joking,” Ron says, finally turning his eyes on his snake covered father, as if this is something Harry would joke about.

“They are all very nervous, and I don’t like them pointing their wands at me,” Nagini says, raising her head off of Arthur’s shoulder.
“Harry!” Percy begins, furious, then he gets a closer look at him and his eyebrows dip together in concern. “Are you okay?”

“He astral projected across half the country, of course he’s not okay,” Arthur says.

“You what?” McGonagall demands, turning to scowl at him.

Shit, at this rate she’s going to tie him down to a bed in the hospital wing and he’ll never get to go home.

The door opens, and the twins and Ginny tumble the room, although they all freeze when they’re a couple of steps in. “Um?”

There’s a crack, and Dobby appears. “I is doing as Mister Harry asks!” he beams, then he gets a good look at Arthur. “Oh, no, Dobby is not dealing with that snake. That snake is being for Winky to deal with.” He disappears with another crack.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Tonks asks.

“Can someone please deal with the snake?” Arthur asks, strained.

“She wants you to stop pointing your wands at her, and for everyone to relax,” Harry reports.

They all look at him like he’s crazy. Which isn’t a new experience, but is a little rude.

There’s another pop, and Winky is standing there, decked out in an adorable outfit that looks just like Tonks’s, except it’s white. Harry knows exactly which of Draco’s old shirts she made that from. “Miss Nagini!” she cries, and a very odd look goes over Percy’s face. “What is you doing here? Are you causing trouble?”

“Oh good, you belong to the human I like,” Nagini says.

Winky places her firsts on her hips, “Well, there is only one thing to be doing with you. Behave!” she says sternly, then snaps her fingers. Nagini vanishes. Arthur looks relieved. No one else does.

“Winky,” Dumbledore starts, “where did you-”

She vanishes before he can finish that sentence.

Percy jumps over the desk to hug his dad, then asks, “How worried should we be about Nagini?”

Harry makes a so-so gesture. Honestly, he’s not worried.

Ginny and the twins rush over to the father as well, and Harry’s about to tell Ron to put him down when Arthur breaks away from his kids hug Harry and ruffle Ron’s hair. “Everything you did was incredibly stupid, and I never want you to put yourself in danger like that again,” he tells him sternly. “But thank you. You probably saved my life.”

The warm feeling in his chest lasts until Tonks says, “Who’s going to tell Remus and Sirius that Harry astral projected? Because it’s not going to be me.”

Oh, shit.

~

Draco is awoken by the feeling of something large and heavy falling on top of him, and he groans
before pushing himself upright, and coming face to face with a huge, familiar snake. “Fuck,” he says, “Is Voldemort here?”

She shakes her head.

Blaise gets to his feet, wand in hand. “What happened? What’s going on?”

“It’s okay, it’s just Nagini,” he sighs, glaring as she wriggles around him to get to the warm spot he’d left on the mattress.

Blaise blinks, then squints. “Nagini. Voldemort’s pet snake Nagini?”

Like they know another one. “He’s not here, she is, and she won’t eat anyone, probably. I’m going back to bed.”

Zaira is going to be here to pick them up in a few hours, and he refuses to spend those hours panicking when he could be sleeping.

“Okay,” Blaise says cautiously, “if she kills me, I’m going to be pissed.”

“Me too,” Draco answers, pushing at Nagini until she reluctantly only takes up half the mattress.

If she’s here for more than a visit, she’ll have to hang out in the chamber with Theophania, since there’s no way Zaira won’t notice Voldemort’s snake hanging around. But that’s a morning problem.

“At least you don’t drool,” he grumbles, accepting that he’s not going to be able to pull his favorite pillow out from underneath her girth and burrowing under the blankets.

Chapter End Notes

sorry for the long wait, hopefully my life calms down soon <3 <3 <3

megalania-prisca has done several gorgeous pieces for siat that you can view here (she’s added more since the last chapter!)

feel free to follow / harass me at shanastoryteller.tumblr.com

if you're worried about social media imploding but still want to keep up with me and my writing, you can sign up for my bi-weeklyish newsletter
Given Arthur’s brush with death, and the very real possibility that Voldemort might try and enact revenge, the adults decide it’s for the best for the Weasleys to stay at Grimmauld Place for the holiday break. Harry’s thrilled, which he’d feel guilty about, except Ginny cheers, the twins both try and high five him and end up slapping each other, and Ron says, “Oh, thank merlin.”

His bed is more than big enough to share, so Ron stays with him in his room. Hermione and Ginny share a room, and the twins take another. Molly shamelessly guilts her eldest sons about coming home for the holidays, so they’ll be trickling in over the next couple of days and getting their own rooms. She and Percy have come to a compromise where he still goes to work, but he stays with the rest of them instead of at his apartment. Which of course means Tonks is staying with them too.

Sirius and Remus had been furious when they found out about the astral projection thing, but Harry had pointed out that one, he hadn’t done it on purpose, two, it had saved Arthur’s life, and three, it’s Christmas, and they can’t ground him on Christmas, that’s illegal.

Sirius had turned away to hide his laughter while Remus had done a very good job at looking stern, except for his eyes, which always give it all away.

That night Draco calls him on the mirror and says, “What the fuck Harry?”

He laughs, and Ron calls out from where he is on the other side of the bed, “I’m right here, don’t be gross or I’ll throw up on you.”

Draco rolls his eyes. “We’re here too,” someone yells, and then Draco is being pushed out of the view of the mirror and Pansy thrusts herself into the frame. “Hi! Wow, Harry, your room is so nice.”

He grins. “Thanks Pansy. Draco, how’s Nagini?”

“I had Winky take her to the chamber, hopefully she gets along with Theophania, but since my favorite Parselmouth wasn’t available, I couldn’t exactly ask,” Draco says, shoving a laughing Pansy back out of the frame. “Why, exactly, did Nagini just suddenly appear in my room by the way? Winky gave me the gist, but as you can image that explained basically nothing.”

Harry tells him what happened, endures his scolding, then says, “How’s Blaise’s house?”

“Oh, we didn’t go there,” Draco says. “Zaira’s interviewing prospective victims, so we’re at one of the Severan houses in Florence. Plus, since avoiding the political climate was the point of all this, she wanted us out of the way.”

“She’s what?” Harry frowns.

Pansy pops her head back in to frame to clarify, “She’s dating. Draco is being presumptuous, she may not even kill any of them.”

“It would be a waste if she doesn’t, they all suck,” Draco wrinkles his nose. “When she’s just dating, they’re nice, and normal.”

“For a given definition of the latter,” Pansy says.
Ron perks up enough to ask, “Hold on, are you telling me that Blaise’s mum’s little murder sprees are politically motivated?”

“What’s the other option?” she asks scornfully. “It’s not like she’s doing it for the money.” That’s a good point. Harry doesn’t know exactly how much money the Zabini’s have, but it’s enough that even Draco considers them to be wealthy, and usually his soulmate is his metric for these types of things. “Anyway. We’re forcing Blaise to go out in public so we can get free food, see you later!”

“Bye,” he says, but Pansy has already swiped the mirror from Draco’s hand and closed it before he gets the chance to respond.

There’s a perfunctory knock at his door, then Hermione walks in, a large sheath of paper under her arm. “Ron, I need your help with this alchemy circle.”

Ron rolls over so his head’s hanging off the bed and he’s looking at her upsidedown. “Okay, but I must remind you that I don’t actually know how to do alchemy. And that I don’t do math.”

“Right, yes, whatever,” she says spreading the paper out on his floor. It’s the first day of break, has she lost her mind?

“That’s my cue,” he says, hopping off his bed. “Have fun.”

“Thanks!” Hermione says genuinely while Ron pulls a face.

He takes his broom up to the greenhouse and glides around it for a bit. He was hoping there was some weeds or something he could pull, but Kreacher has been doing an excellent job of upkeeping it in their absence. Which is good, but means he’s not totally sure what to do with himself. Well, he does have some lesson plans he has to work on. He’d written out a few possible schedules, but now Remus is right here, so he might as well ask. He pulls out his scrolls of notes and goes wandering for his godfathers. He finds Remus and Arthur playing chess while the twins are in the corner with a steaming cauldron. There’s something delicious smelling happening in the kitchen, which he’s pretty sure is Mrs. Weasley’s meat pies. The rest of the Weasleys should be descending on them at some point today.

Harry sits on the edge of Remus’s armchair and says, “Hey, when you get a chance can you help me with some lesson plans?”

“Of course I can,” Remus says automatically before blinking and turning to face him. “Lessons plans?”

“Yeah,” he says.

Now both Remus and Arthur are staring at him. “Why would you need lesson plans?”

What kind of question is that? It’s not like he can just wing every class –

George cackles while Fred frowns. “You didn’t tell them about the teenage militia you’re leading?”

“It’s a study group,” Harry snaps at the same time that Arthur says, “Now hold on,” and Remus calls out, “Sirius, you’re going to want to hear this.”

Damnit, he should have told them right away, he’d just forgot, as far as his school adventures go it’s practically normal.
“You’re leading a teenage militia?” Remus asks as Sirius steps out of the kitchen.

“No!” Harry exclaims.

Ginny pokes her head out of the kitchen. “What’s everyone yelling about?”

“Is Harry leading a teenage militia?” Sirius asks her.

She makes a face then shrugs, “That’s not an inaccurate description.”


“What rumors? We’re in it.” George says.

Arthur rubs his chin. “Now, I don’t know how I feel about my children joining a teenage militia.”

“We could always join the Order for real instead,” Fred offers.

Arthur claps Harry on the shoulder, “Best of luck with your militia of teenagers.”

“I’m going somewhere else,” he declares and stands up. Like Antarctica, or France. If he wasn’t so busy learning Tamil, he’d start in on French.

“But didn’t you want help with your lesson plans?” Remus asks, eyes crinkled in the corners.

“What have you covered so far?” Sirius sits on the other side of Remus’s chair. “Are you teaching for the Owls or just general defense?”

Oh thank Merlin, a real question. “General defense, really. It’s mostly just how not to get killed. But I’ve also just been teaching all the practical stuff that Umbridge leaves out of her lessons, so we’ve got the Owls pretty covered I think. And if the seventh years have any questions, we cover that.”

“Cassius appreciates it,” George says. “Defense isn’t his strongest subject, he’s only taking the Newt level classes because of his mother. Harry’s a brilliant teacher.”

He flushes and rubs the back of his neck. “Thanks.” Before George can say anything else embarrassing, he shoves his scroll of notes to Sirius. “This is what I’ve got so far. They asked to learn the patronus charm before break, and I’m not sure how to really test that. I don’t have a boggart handy, and even if I did, it’ll only turn into a dementor for me, and not anyone else.”

Remus stares at him. “Well, the patronus charm is extremely useful for a variety of things, so it’s absolutely worth learning, but I rather think that they don’t have to worry too much about facing a dementor.”

Harry blinks. “Why not?”

Ginny groans, and Fred says, “Uh, you killed most of the ones that would have followed Voldemort, mate.”

Oh, yeah.

He says, “I forgot.”

“You forgot.” Sirius repeats flatly.

Yeah. That was an interesting afternoon and all, but it wasn’t exactly being tied to a gravestone and
forced to fight Voldemort and all his Death Eaters.

~

Charlie shows up the next day with dragon dung on his boots, and Mrs. Weasley screeches at him until Ginny performs a scourgify charm. Tonks and Percy arrive, greet everyone, and immediately stick their noses into a stack of paperwork each.

Fleur tumbles out of the fireplace with her hair flying and long limbs in clad in some sort of reflective, pebbled material. It’s not until she’s closer that Harry realizes that she’s covered in pale green dragonskin leather. “Are you bleeding?” Arthur asks.

Fleur ignores him and goes up to Ron, giving him a kiss on each cheek and then doing the same to Harry. Hermione just manages to stop glaring in time for Fleur turns and grabs her in a bear hug. She’s shorter than Hermione, but that doesn’t stop her from lifting her off the ground. “Friends! I’ve missed you!”

“We’ve missed you too,” Hermione says, looking vaguely guilty.

Bill is in the same kind of armor, and he rolls his eyes and cross his arms. “She’ll probably take that back when she realizes you’ve bled all over her, dear.”

Fleur lets her go and steps back guiltily. She pokes at the painful looking cut that circles around her waist and curls below her ribs. “Oops.”

“What happened?” Remus asks, even as Kreacher appears and holds out a healing potion to Fleur, who takes it with a smile and knocks it back like taking a shot.

“We were running late because someone was so sure she could figure out how to collapse the wards in the next section of the tunnel,” Bill begins.

“I was right!” Fleur interjects, making a face at the taste of the potion. Kreacher pulls a glass of orange juice out of thin air. Good call, Harry thinks. That’s really the only thing that washes away the chalky taste of healing potions.

“You were right,” Bill acknowledges, “but I do wish you’d tested that theory while you weren’t inside it.”

She waves her hand dismissively. “I put up a shield in time. I just wasn’t expecting the poison arrows to come from the floor. That was stupid.”

“Enjoying Egypt then?” Sirius asks, laughing.

“We’re in Paris, actually,” Bill says. “Those catacombs go on forever, if you know the right place to turn. Curse breakers aren’t usually allowed inside, but Fleur knows someone who knows someone, and we’ve spent the past couple of weeks going through those tunnels.” He adds, more proud than rueful, “Fleur’s a natural. Our whole expedition has gotten further with her leading us in a couple weeks than we would have gotten in months. My boss is willing to offer anything to get her to sign on to our company, up to and including her wife and first born child.”

She rolls her eyes. “Unfortunately, I’m on loan from the French government. Once the gliding season starts, I’ll need to start training.”

“You’re on the national team?” Harry asks excitedly. “That’s awesome!”
“Thank you! I’m only signed on for one season, and I don’t know if I’ll do it past that even if they want me - this curse breaking thing is a little more up my alley,” she admits, “but the national gliding team outfits are divine, it’s worth it for that alone.”

Bill hooks his elbow with his soulmate’s. “Come on, we’re both filthy. We can catch up after. Harry, I want to hear about this astral projecting thing. I didn’t know you could do that.”

Sirius and Remus turn to glare at him. Harry raises his hands in front of him. “It was an accident! I can’t!”

That’s mostly true, at any rate. It was an accident, and he can’t do it, not really.

But he does intend to learn.

~

Staying behind to spy on Voldemort and fight the good fight is nice and all that, but Draco missed this.

“Since when does your family own a resort?” he asks, stretched out on a beach chair in swim trunks. It’s too bad he has to hide his soulmark, he could absolutely pull of a speedo.

Blaise tips down his sunglasses to stare at him. “Well, we own the beach, so.”

“Stop talking,” Pansy commands, wearing a pink crochet string bikini, and she has to be using magic to keep that in place. “You’re ruining my mellow.”

They both roll their eyes.

“Pansy, I’m not wearing this, have you lost your mind?” Draco turns to see Millie standing there with her towel wrapped around her, her shoulders hunched up as she glares. “Give me back my other bathing suit.”

“I wouldn’t let my grandmother be caught dead in that tent you brought last time,” she says. “You look great, put down that towel. This is a five star remote beach resort, not a communal shower.”

“I look stupid,” she says, lower lip jutting out.

Oh boy. Draco can’t handle crying. “I’m sure the bathing suit Millie brought is fine-”

“What did I say about shutting up?” she snaps. “Millie, you don’t look stupid. Would I make you look stupid?”

She hesitates, then shakes her head.

“Then drop the towel,” she commands.

Millie sighs, then pulls the towel off.

Draco’s never noticed how big her boobs are before.

It’s also pink crochet to match Pansy, with a high waist and an off shoulder ruffle top that pushes her chest up and out. Millie has a good shape, he’s never noticed before, curvy all over, obviously, but moreso in the hip and chest. She should really stop wearing such large sweaters and skirts.

Blaise wolf whistles. Millie flushes and glares at him. “Don’t make fun of me.”
“No one is making fun of you,” Draco says, and Blaise nods, looking startled she thought otherwise. “You look great, Pansy did a great job.”

“Of course I did,” she says, “and now we match for the pictures we’ll take later. Don’t worry, I packed just as many bathing suits for you as I did for me, so we can always match or coordinate. The pictures are going to be fantastic.”

“You brought more than one?” she asks.

Pansy shakes her head. “Of course I did. You can’t wear just one bathing suit on vacation. I only let you get away with it this past summer because we spent most of it inland.”

“Which was clearly a mistake,” Blaise says, leaning back in his chair. “This is so much nicer than going to the cities.”

They all roll their eyes. He only feels like that because he can barely walk down the street without someone calling out his name or going to shake his hand. At least Diagon Alley has calmed down for Harry, but everyone is always so excited to see the youngest son, and he’s only here a couple times a year. The only time he gets a break is when he goes to see his family.

“Well lie down,” Pansy says to Millie, “here, relax, have a drink.”

“We’re not old enough to—” A tray with a strawberry daiquiri, the exact same shade as her bikini, floats over to her, being carried by four similarly colored pixies.

She blinks.

“To the Zabinis,” Pansy says, taking a sip of her own color coordinated drink.

Millie sighs, smiling even as her shoulders slump and she gives in to the ridiculousness of it all. She takes her drink from the tray and lays out on the beach chair next to Pansy. “To the Zabinis.”

~

Harry is shaken awake, big eyes looming over him, and he wishes this is the first time this has happened to him. He hopes this time he doesn’t end up losing all the bones in his arm. He pushes himself upright, and Winky steps back so he doesn’t end up hitting her with his forehead. “What are you doing here?” he whispers, looking over to the other side of the bed where Ron is curled onto his side, dead to the world. “Is there something wrong with the snakes?”

“Miss Basilisk is not eating Miss Nagini,” she says, “I is assuming that means they are friends.”

Or they’re friends with the same cranky Slytherin who would be upset if one of them hurt the other. Harry had told the adults that Winky had sent Nagini back to Albania, and he’s not sure if they believed him, but they didn’t seem interested in pressing him about it, and he’ll take what he can get.

“What are you doing here then?” he asks.

She grins at him, dimples appearing on both her cheeks. “It is Christmas Eve, Mister Harry.”

“Yes,” he says, because it is.

“Master Draco gave to me a whole bolt of silk and velvet, brand new and not taken from any other things,” she tells him. “I is wanting to give him a good gift too.”

“You want suggestions?” he asks. He’d gotten him bright pink Quiberon Quafflepunchers quidditch
practice clothes. Which was a gift to Draco, because that was his favorite team and he loves wearing their merchandise, but was also a gift to himself, because he got to see Draco in it.

Winky shakes her head and holds out her hand. There’s a bright red bow in it, and he’s confused until she smacks it against his chest, leaving it stuck there. “You is being the present, Mister Harry.”

He blinks, looking down at himself. “How are you going to-”

She snaps her fingers.

~

Draco feels someone land on top of him, and he yells, rolling them both over, grabbing his wand from under his pillow as he does.

Which is how he ends up straddling his soulmate, pointing a wand at his face. “I - Harry?”

He goes cross eyed looking at his wand. “Happy Christmas, dear.”

“How did you get here?” He demands, tossing his wand on his bedside table. He then processes the red bow, and the tag it’s tied to.

He tugs it off and reads: **To Draco, from Winky**

He laughs, dropping it and leaning over, planting his hands on either side of Harry’s head. “Seems like you’re mine now.”

“You’ve got me,” Harry agrees, “Now what are you going to do with me?”

Draco lowers himself down a couple more inches, until they’re sharing the same breath and all he can see is the bright green of his soulmate’s eyes. “Want to go swimming?”

Harry blinks. “What?”

“Swimming,” he says, “You’ve never been to a beach, have you? Let’s go swimming.”

“Hogwarts has a beach,” Harry says, lifting his head up to meet Draco’s lips with his own, but he pulls back just enough so that Harry can’t reach. “Love, come on, you’re killing me here. We’re in an actual bed for once, and I’ve get to get back in a few hours before the rest of the house wakes up. Sirius and Remus will freak out if I’m missing, and Winky didn’t exactly give me enough time to leave a note. Besides, I’m a shit swimmer without gillyweed.”

Draco rolls off of him and onto the floor, hands on his hips. “The bed’s not going anywhere. Come on. The water is perfect, and I want to make out with you under the stars on an Italian beach with the waves behind us. That’s better than a bed.”

He sighs, and Draco’s not above begging, but Harry doesn’t make him. “Okay, let’s go to the beach.”

~

Harry doesn’t think anything is better than being warm and comfortable and getting to just take their time *for once,* but Draco’s grinning at him, all excited and eager, and really, the absolute best thing is being with Draco and making him happy, so.

He borrows a pair of Draco’s swim trunks, pleased when he finds they have a pocket for his wand. It
seems Pansy had made the modifications she did on his shorts for the second task the standard. Draco takes his hand, and they sneak down the hallways of the resort. A couple of house elves appear to ask if they need anything, but Draco just presses a finger to his lips and winks. They wink back.

“Okay, this is nice,” Harry says as they're walking down, the sand sinking beneath his feet and between his toes. It’s so soft. He didn’t know sand could be this soft, and this pale. The waves are gentle and curving, and even by the weak light of the moon, it’s easy to see how clear and perfect the water is.

“We haven’t even gotten in the ocean yet,” Draco laughs, stepping into the wet sand and tugging Harry along with him.

He gets them as far as their knees before Harry digs his heels in. “Are you sure this is a good idea? It’s dark, and we’re all alone, what if the waves drag us under?”

“Don’t worry, it’ll be fine,” he says, taking another step further in. “Here, watch this.” He lets go of Harry’s hand and falls backwards, disappearing beneath the waves. Harry’s heart seizes with panic, but before he can do more than look around frantically, Draco’s head pop up about a few yards further into the ocean. He waves his hand, “Come on!”

Harry’s going to kill him.

Unfortunately, he has to get to him first.

“I’ve done scarier things for worse reasons,” he reminds himself before taking a deep breath and diving beneath the water. He can’t see much under the waves, but the salt water doesn’t sting as much as he feared. He doesn’t remember it stinging last time after the gillyweed wore off, but he’d assumed that was more due to adrenaline than anything else.

He’s not nearly as good a swimmer as Draco is, so it takes him way longer to get as far. His lungs are burning, and he swims towards the surface, coming up and taking a deep breath. Draco is only a few feet away, but for some reason his smile slides right off his face as he looks at him. “Harry. What—what’s on your mouth?”

“My mouth?” He rubs his hands over his lips, but he doesn’t feel anything strange, and when he looks at his hands, there’s nothing on them. “Did I get it?”

Draco swims closer and hesitantly reaches out, pressing his thumb against Harry’s bottom lip. “Not to alarm you—”

“It’s too late, I’m alarmed,” he interrupts.

His boyfriend rolls his eyes. It can’t be that bad then. “They’re kind of, um, just a little. Glowy.”

“Glowy,” he repeats flatly. What the hell.

“Try something for me,” he says, “Duck your head below the water and try to breathe.”

“This is the most indirect and unexpected attempt on my life yet.”

Draco elbows him in the ribs. “Shut up, I’m not saying to drown. Here,” he grabs both of Harry’s hands in his own. “We’ll do it together. I’ll cast a bubblehead charm on myself, you breath in, and if you start to drown, I’ll pull you back up.”
“If? What’s the other option here?” Draco just stares at him, waiting. It clicks a second later. “No, that’s ridiculous.”

“Listen, merprinces don’t just kiss people willy nilly,” Draco says. “You said you were able to breathe underwater after he kissed you.”

“That was just temporary!” he protests.

He raises an eyebrow. “How do you know that? Is that what he said?”

Well, no. “This is insane. Just because my mouth is glowy, whatever that means–”

“And your arm,” Draco says.

“My–?” He glances down, and sure enough one of his forearms is faintly glowing, almost looking more like a reflection of the moon than anything else. Only part of it though. Right where the grindylow had bit him, and in the perfect shape of a hand. Akeakamai’s hand, most likely. “Okay, maybe it’s not that insane.”

“Come on, let’s test it, what’s the worst that can happen?”

“Well, I could drown and die,” he says flatly.

Draco pokes him in the chest. “Do you really think I’d let that happen?”

Well, no.

“Fine,” he says, “but you’re not allowed to let go of me, no matter what.”

“I like that rule,” Draco tells him before casting the bubblehead charm on himself. He slides his wand back into his trunks then holds out his hands. They clasp forearms, holding on tightly enough that it would take a strong current to rip them apart. “Ready?”

“No,” Harry says, but doesn’t resist when Draco drags him beneath the waves. He holds his breath on instinct, but Draco just glares at him. This is so stupid, he’s going to inhale a lungful of water and choke and it’s really going to ruin the romantic atmosphere of this little escapade.

Draco digs his nails into Harry’s skin to get his attention. “Breathe.”

He opens his mouth and snaps, “Easy for you to say!”

Wait.

He takes another deep breath, and he can feel the water filling his mouth and going down his throat, but it’s - it doesn’t hurt, it’s not killing him. He takes and experimental deep breath and breathes out, “Merlin’s sagging balls.”

He can breathe underwater.

Draco laughs and twirls them around. “This is so cool!”

It’s pretty cool, although Harry can’t help but think this is just one more thing that separates him from everyone else. But he can’t say that, not when Draco looks so excited, and really, what does it matter? Draco loves it, his friends and family won’t care, so what does it matter?

He’s always been the odd one out, even in the wizarding world, but what does that matter, really,
compared to everything else he has?

“You have to get better at swimming.” Draco says, “this is amazing - you can deep dive and not have to worry about charms breaking or shattering or gillyweed or anything running out!”

Harry kicks up towards the surface, and for a moment there’s the unbearable pressure of being unable to breathe, then he opens his mouth. As soon as he tries to take in a mouthful of air, it’s like the water in his lungs disappears. “Do we have to do it now?”

Draco cancels his bubblehead charm. “Well, no, and really I wouldn’t recommend the open ocean at night for intense diving lessons.”

“Well, what would you recommend for us to do at night, then?” he asks, placing his hands on Draco’s hips and dragging him closer.

His soulmate grins and throws his arms around his neck, pressing their foreheads together. “Not sure. Got any suggestions?”

Harry finally gets to kiss him, salt water on both their tongues and their skin slippery and warm. After several long moments of kissing beneath the light of the moon, Harry licks his way down Draco’s neck and asks, “Can we please go back to bed now?”

“Sleepy?” he asks, because he’s asshole.

Harry glares and digs his thumbs into Draco’s hips just to make him squirm. “No.”

“Oh, I don’t know, this water is so nice,” he says, biting at his bottom lip in an attempt to keep his grin tucked away.

Merlin above. Harry drags him backwards until his feet find solid land again, and Draco’s too busy laughing at him notice. Harry leans over, grabs Draco around the waist, and hauls him over his shoulder.

All those hours spent training for quidditch aren’t for nothing.

“Harry!” he yelps, “Put me down!”

He bounces Draco around a little to get a better grip, then begins his walk back to shore. “Sorry, what was that?”

Draco tries to slide out of his grip, but when he realizes Harry’s not letting him go, he just goes limp. “Well, I can’t complain about the view at least.”

Harry doesn’t get it until Draco slaps his ass. “Hey!”

“You’re lucky I didn’t bite it,” he says magnanimously

Harry carries him all the way back to his room, waving cheerfully to several amused house elves along the way.

~

Winky drops him back off just before dawn, and he crawls back into bed exhausted and content and happy. This was stupidly risky, and they really can’t do it again, they shouldn’t have even done it once. But it was nice and good, he can’t make himself regret it.
Up until Ron wakes him up and pulls him out of bed at seven in the morning. “What’s wrong with you? It’s Christmas!” He’s practically dragging Harry down the hallway.

“Just didn’t sleep much,” he says, because other doors are opening up, people stumbling out of their bedroom. Ron gives him a skeptical look, so Harry winks at him. He’ll tell Ron and Hermione later.

Obviously he and Draco still have to be a secret, for so many reasons, but they could tell the others that they’re dating, at least, right? The twins, Neville, Ginny, Luna, and Millie. He’s pretty sure at least Luna knows already, she seems to know everything, and he’s pretty sure half of them think he and Draco are in some sort of dramatic unrealized star crossed love story, when actually they’re in the middle of a dramatic star crossed love story and are very, very aware of it.

Then again, that opens the question of soulmates back up again, because the whole wizarding world knows that Harry has a soulmark, and he assumes both Luna and Millie know that Draco has one, since before second year neither of them had gone to any great lengths to hide it. They hadn’t flaunted it, which was good, since probably someone would have noticed if they’d gone from showing it off to keeping it covered all the time.

They are so, so lucky that they’re marks in a place that’s easy to hide. Otherwise they have wouldn’t have been able to get away with any of this.

“Nathaar Vaalthukal,” Remus says, ruffling his hair. Sirius smiles at him from where he’s hunched over a cup of coffee, clearly still half asleep.

“Nathaar Vaalthukal!” a chorus of voices greets him, all his friends who’ve gone to the effort to learn his language with him, so he wouldn’t have to discover his father’s heritage all on his own.

Okay, there’s the whole Umbridge trying to ruin his life, having a secret soulmate, and a madman trying to kill him thing, but besides that, he’d say his life is going pretty great.

~

Once they all return to Hogwarts, things fall into a familiar pattern for Draco. Quidditch practice, classes, assisting Filius and working on his second academic paper, and studying with Pomfrey. Then the secret RA lessons, and the even more secret meeting with the Gryffindors, and those rare moments he can snatch alone with Harry. There’s also the added fun of trying to hide a giant magical snake in his room, since Nagini keeps sneaking away from the chamber to nap in his trunk. Thank merlin Blaise is unphased by just about everything, including this.

Which is why it takes him a while to notice that something is happening with Umbridge. By which he means, he doesn’t notice at all, and Millie and Pansy are the ones that bring it up at one of their late night meetings with the others.

“She’s planning to do something awful to Trelawney,” Millie insists. “She’s attending pretty much all of her classes.”

“Same with Hagrid,” Pansy points out. “Who she obviously hates.”

Ron looks up from the alchemy circle he’s helping Hermione sketch out. “Okay, but is doing something awful to Trelawney really that bad? She’s terrible.”

“She’s a real prophet!” Millie says. “Well, according to my aunt she is, and she works in the Department of Mysteries, so she’d know.”

Ron shrugs. “Yeah, sure. So assuming that’s the case and she just doesn’t have a few screws loose
and a sore throat, it’s not something she was taught, it’s something she is. It’s like having Hagrid teach a weight lifting class. He wouldn’t know where to start when it comes to teaching someone how to get strong, because he just is strong, no effort needed, and has no idea how anyone goes about doing it in a purposeful kind of way.”

“You all know what I think about divination,” Hermione says, and Ginny snorts, because the whole school knows how she feels about divination. Possibly all of magical Britain knows how she feels about divination. “But Ron has a point. Just because she can do, doesn’t mean that she can teach.”

“And I’m still pretty suspect on her ability to do,” Ron says. “How many prophets have turned out to be crazy and just vague enough that people can pretend they actually foretold something? I feel like the answer is a kind of a lot.”

Pansy and Millie turn to Draco and he raises his hands in front of him. “Look. Obviously Umbridge exerting power and influence over the school is bad. However. Getting rid of Trelawney wouldn’t be the worst thing. Dad’s been trying to do that for about a decade.”

Blaise frowns. “Actually, how did she even get appointed? Hagrid was a struggle, and frankly there isn’t anyone more qualified. As opposed to Trelawney, who’s barely qualified to pretend to read auras in the corner of a muggle bookshop.”

“Dumbledore did it right when the war ended,” Neville says. “Things were kind of a mess, and about half the board was being accused of being Death Eaters – Draco’s dad included. So it was a lot easier to get her appointed than it should have been. As for how she’s still here, well, if she really does have multiple officially recognized prophecies, then they’d be hard pressed to find someone with better credentials than that.”

They all stare at him.

He flushes. “My cousin Caligula is on the board, remember? She’s, uh, mentioned it a time or two. She’s a diviner, and she’s pretty good. She’s not interested in teaching, otherwise she might be able to wrestle the position from Trelawney. But she does kind of consider it an insult that one of the most highly respected educational institutions in the magical world has such an abysmal divination department. We’re apparently the punchline of a joke in Haiti, but she won’t tell me what the joke is.”

George frowns and Fred asks, “There has to be lots of prophecies, right? That’s what divination is all about.”

“Also, Neville and Millie, I’m certain what you’ve just said is confidential information,” Blaise says, “the names of prophets are kept a secret in the Department of Mysteries. She’s actually given a real, verified prophecy?”

“The only part that’s a secret is what the prophecies said. The rest is public, if closely guarded, information. Otherwise she never would have been able to get the position,” Draco points out.

“I’m just repeating what my aunt told me about her,” Millie says while Neville holds up four fingers.

“No way,” Hermione says automatically, glaring at Neville. “That’s impossible.”

He rolls his eyes. “Impossible and improbable are not synonyms.”

George raises his hand. “Hi, would you like to share with the rest of the class? What’s the big deal if Trelawney’s given four prophecies? She’s supposed to be an expert, shouldn’t she be banging out prophecies every day?”
Hermione shakes her head. “No, you’re thinking of predictions. Predictions are just – looking into the future and saying what’s likely to happen. Prophecies are different. They – they foretell the future, sure but they also have the power to shape the future. Time is malleable, and it can be manipulated. Even if a prediction is true when someone makes it, it can still change. But if there’s a prophecy, then what’s being foretold becomes a fixed point.”

“Whether prophecies create fixed points, or whether prophecies are only told about fixed points is a matter of debate,” Neville adds. “But either way, they’re rare. Since Hogwarts’s founding there’s only been about three hundred verified prophecies, and only a handful of them were told by the same person. Trelawney’s told more verified prophecies than anyone else in the past thousand years. It must be what makes her so hard to fire. She’s a terrible teacher. She just is. But, she’s also the most acclaimed prophetess in British history, even if she’s a horrible diviner.”

“That can’t be right. That woman couldn’t predict what the Great Hall was serving for dinner if someone handed her a menu,” Fred protests.

“Is Hogwarts about prestige or learning?” Draco asks. “It’s both, and Trelawney is also pretty light on the former, since everyone knows how bad she is, prophecies or no prophecies. All I’m saying is, is that if Umbridge fires her, it’ll be the one good thing she’s done for this school.”

Millie throws her hands up. “Okay, fine, maybe. But she’s going after Hagrid too, and he does belong here. He’s the best care of magical creatures professor we’ve had in decades.”

“She’s right,” Harry says, and Draco’s not stupid enough to argue. “But what are we supposed to do about it? I’m already making Umbridge’s life plenty difficult, and I’ve got the detentions to prove it.”

“Same,” says George. “We’re just lucky we have Draco to patch us up and Quinn to keep making those healing potions. But I’m not sure how acting more obnoxious and pissing her off even more than we already are can keep her from firing Hagrid.”

Draco’s blows out a breath, frustrated, and Harry lays his hand against his back and says to everyone, “One problem at a time. We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it. For now, we just do what we can. Which isn’t much, unfortunately.”

“I don’t know if I’d define leading a secret literally underground militia in an attempt to undermine her while also slowly driving her to a mental breakdown as not much,” Neville comments. They really need to get better hobbies.

~

Suspicious deaths of ministry officials that make the third page news? Cool. Unfortunate, but cool. What was a Devil’s Snare doing in the department of mysteries, is what Draco really wants to know.

Umbridge enacting a decree banning professors from discussing anything unrelated to their subject matter in the classroom in a transparent attempt to keep them from analyzing and internalizing the ministry’s incompetence? Not cool. Not cool at all.

Not being able to send his parents letters that say anything beyond boring generalities is frustrating for a number of reasons. His life would be so much easier if he could just ask how much Voldemort is encroaching on their manor and harming his parents instead of having to infer it from his mother’s bland mentions of needing to order more fine china. But currently it’s most annoying because he can’t send his dad an angry letter complaining about Umbridge and needling him for more information. His dad doesn’t work for the Wizengamot technically, but he’s assisted in enough
litigation and knows enough people that if there’s something to know about, then he’s probably one of the people that knows about it. Of course, that was before Voldemort moved into their house and started up eating up all the time his dad used to use to dig around in ministry matters. Now Draco is just forced to wonder about things like everyone else. It’s certainly one of Voldemort’s lesser crimes, but it’s also really annoying.

Unless the two things are related, then his dad might know about it anyway.

Draco freezes, blinking down at his parchment. The alchemy circle he’d been sketching out looks like crap, this is what he gets for trying to do his alchemy homework while distracted.

What if they are related? Voldemort was clearly trying to get something in the ministry, and now a ministry member has been killed by going somewhere he shouldn’t. Voldemort’s talent with possession and the imperious curse is legendary. If he can’t get it himself, what’s to stop him from forcing someone else to get it for him?

Bode worked in the Department of Mysteries. Maybe that doesn’t matter, and he was just some random ministry member that Voldemort managed to get his hands on. Except if it could be just anyone who worked at the ministry, then he wouldn’t need to use imperio or anything else. He has plenty of followers who work at the ministry, his aunt included. Why risk using someone else if he doesn’t have to? He doesn’t value any of their lives enough for it be for their safety.

So it had to be that Bod is special. And as far as Draco’s aware, the only thing separating Bode from any of the ministry Death Eaters is that he worked for the Department of Mysteries, and none of them do.

“And you okay?” Blaise asks. “You’ve been staring at nothing for like three minutes. It’s kind of creeping me out.”

He stands up, tapping the parchment with his wand to dry the ink. “I’ve figured something out, I think, or maybe I’m just paranoid.”

“It can be both,” Blaise says in an encouraging tone of voice. Draco throws his quill at his head.

Everyone agrees that it’s pretty likely that Draco is right. Voldemort wants something in the Department of Mysteries, which is also likely the thing he still wanted from the summer.

Unfortunately, this presents a whole new problem.

“No one really knows what’s in the Department of Mysteries?” Hermione asks, frustrated.

Pansy says, “Well, you see, I don’t know if you noticed the name, but it’s a mystery.”

“Prophecies,” Blaise says before it can turn into an argument. “Like Neville said. Maybe it’s a weapon?”

“It would have to be, wouldn’t it?” Harry frowns. “What else would be so important to him that he’d spend months obsessing about it?”

“Could be a nose,” Ron offers. Pansy snorts and Hermione elbows him in the side. It doesn’t deter him in the slightest. “A nice toupee, maybe.”

“Isn’t there a book about this?” Hermione asks desperately. “What’s in there can’t be a complete
“Research into the forbidden arts, and books deemed too dangerous to the public.” Hermione opens her mouth, outraged, and Blaise continues, “Yes, censorship and hoarding knowledge is bad, and a system which permits that at all is a system which can be used and exploited to the detriment of society. I know. But maybe that’s what he’s after.”


“Books are important!” Hermione defends, but then says, “I don’t know what kind of book could be that important, though. Some sort of mass killing spell?”

“That’s wingardium leviosa,” Blaise says. The Gryffindors turn to stare at him. “What? Lift a few hundred stones high enough into the air, and then just end the spell. Sure, people can stop it with a strong enough protego, but that’s only if they see it coming. Add an illusion charm and sound muffling charm to that, and they’re not going to know what’s happening until they’re already dead on the ground. A particularly talented first year could do it.”

Harry turns to glare at him, and Draco admits, “My first year levitation weight was five hundred pounds. I could have done it. Well, my illusions were crap back then, but the deadly rain of rocks part is easy enough.”

“Bullshit,” Hermione says, and Ron laughs.

“Magic is only as useful as your imagination,” Blaise says, in the tone of voice of someone who’s had that exact thing said to them a thousand times before. It’s one of Zaira’s favorite sayings. She’s not a particularly powerful witch, but she is a creative one.

Pansy sighs. “So it’s a weapon, or a piece of knowledge, or neither. Great.”

“You could almost say,” Ron intones dramatically, “that it’s a mystery.”

Draco flicks his wand to send one of the chair cushions sailing into Ron’s face. He doesn’t regret it, even when it sparks an all out pillow fight, and he’s given the very painful reminder that Hermione fights dirty.

~

Harry is on his way to quidditch practice when someone grabs his arm and yanks him under the bleachers. “Ow!”

“Sorry,” says Quinn, “but I needed to talk to you.”

“We eat meals together three times a day and are in a secret underground study group together,” Harry points out, rubbing at his arm. He waits for the protest that it’s not a study group, it’s a teenage militia, but instead ze only smiles weakly in response. “What’s wrong? Is someone hurt? Are you hurt? You know Malfoy is the one who can heal.”

Quinn shakes zir head. “No, I - so I was in Severus’s private stores,” Harry pulls a face, and ze rolls zir eyes. “That’s not a metaphor for anything, don’t be gross. I was in his private stores, which I’m not technically supposed to do, because if I ask him for something he’ll let me have it, but I’m supposed to ask. But he’s at some conference or whatever this weekend, one of those things Dumbledore forces him to attend so he can keep his teaching position, and I didn’t want to wait, that would be torturous, and it’s not like Severus wouldn’t give it to me anyway, right?”
“Right,” Harry says, because ze seems to be waiting for some sort of response.

Ze nods, rubbing zir hands on the front of zir skirt. “Right. So I break into his private stores, because it’s not like it’s hard, the password is hemlock, obviously.”

“Obviously,” Harry says. He hopes this isn’t leading up to Quinn finding Snape’s Death Eater mask or something, because then he’ll have to come up with some sort of lie to stop zir from freaking out about it without revealing that Snape’s a member of the Order.

“And I went in, and there was the ingredient I needed, but - but there was also this thing in the corner, this huge bowl, and it was glowing, right? And I can’t just ignore a big cool glowing bowl, obviously I go over to look at it, and I lean my face in, and I accidentally touch the glowing liquid, and then - then I saw something.”

Ze’s pale and shifting zir weight from one side to the other. Harry waits, then asks, “What did you see?”

“I can’t tell you.”

Harry’s going to scream. “Quinn, I’m late for practice. Again.”

“I can’t tell you, because you won’t believe me,” ze says. “I barely believe it, and I saw it. But you - you should see it, I think. Even though Severus is going to kill me, first for looking myself, but definitely for telling you.”

“Well, then maybe I shouldn’t look then,” Harry says. He doesn’t want to get Quinn in trouble, and also he likes to spend as little time as possible thinking about Snape. That means purposefully going snooping for his secrets isn’t really something he want to have to fit into his schedule.

“You should look,” Quinn insists. “Severus is gone until tomorrow. I would do it tonight.”

“Why?” he demands. This is ridiculous.

Ze licks zir lips, opens zir mouth, then just shakes zir head and turns on zir heal to march back to the castle.

“Bye Quinn,” Harry says to the air in front of him, then sighs and trudges onto the field to get yelled at by Angelina. Ginny doesn’t seem too pleased either, and Romilda has a look on her face like she’s seriously considering hitting the bludgers towards him rather than away from him.

~

Harry doesn’t tell anyone about Quinn’s cryptic instructions. Mostly because he’s decided to go see what all the fuss is about, and he knows all of them will advise him against making his relationship with Snape worse than it already is, if that’s even possible. He sneaks out of the common room that night, and luckily he does that basically every night anyway, so no one questions it. Even Ron doesn’t say anything, probably assuming he’s off to see Draco.

If no one asks him any questions, then it’s not like he’s lying, right?

Getting into the potions classroom takes no more than an alohamora, and what’s the point of that anyway, the only people that those level of locking spells keep out are toddlers and muggles, neither of which are roaming Hogwarts’s halls. He goes to the storage room in the back, which isn’t even locked, and that leaves him standing in front of the closet in the back, the one that’s locked away from all of them. “Hemlock.”
There’s a series of clicks, then the door creaks open. The shelves are lined with rare and expensive ingredients that he can barely name, but in the corner of the shelf that’s perfectly at eye level is exactly what Quinn said there would be - a large bowl filled with shining liquid. He leans over, and it almost reminds him of unicorn blood, which doesn’t exactly encourage him to dunk his face in it.

But Quinn wouldn’t trick him or do anything to hurt him, and he’s already here. He might as well.

He doesn’t even get past the tip of his nose before he’s falling, pressing through the liquid to land, stumbling, to his feet. He’s standing outside the castle, which what the hell, but everything looks washed out and faded. And, wait, it’s light out. But it was just the middle of the night.

“Hey, Lils, over here!” someone calls out, and for a moment Harry turns and thinks he’s looking at his double.

Wait. That’s Sirius draped over his double’s shoulders, and Remus rolling his eyes, and even Peter is there, laughing and light, looking nothing like the sniveling man Harry had seen before, but definitely him.

Which means that man is his father.

“Sod off,” a girl’s voice snaps, and Harry turns to see a young woman with fiery red hair and glaring green eyes. His eyes. “I saw what you did to Sev yesterday. Really? You haven’t outgrown this yet?”

“Snivelius is an asshole,” Sirius says while James’s face drops. “I thought you weren’t friends anymore, anyway.”

“It’s not that simple. And that doesn’t matter, I don’t need to be his friend to be intolerant of your bullying. I don’t condone it when he does it, so I don’t know why you think you’d get a free pass. I thought you’d grown up,” she says sharply, tossing her hair over her shoulder before walking away from them. His father scrambles to his feet and goes chasing after her.

Harry turns around and is face to face with Snape, barely an inch between them.

He only has a moment to be terrified before he realizes that Snape is young here too, maybe in his sixth or seventh year, and still wearing a Slytherin student uniform. He’s half ducked behind a tree, watching them and rubbing at his arm, where Harry knows his dark mark is. Harry is standing right in front of him, but he’s not reacting at all, instead looking through him.

These are Snape’s memories.

He’s no sooner figured that out when everything shifts again. He’s in a hallway, and it’s even one he recognizes. “Why didn’t you join me?” his mother asks, and she’s so little, she has to be a first year. “We said we were going to be together!”

She’s glaring at an equally small Snape, who just shrugs, looking down as he scuffs his foot against the ground. “The hat told me I would do well in Slytherin.”

“Well, then I should be in Slytherin too!” she says, grabbing his hand and attempting to tug him down the hall. “Come on, we’ll go to Dumbledore right now and make him resort me!”

“Lily, please,” Snape says, voice gentler than Harry’s ever heard it. He didn’t know Snape could sound like that. “You’ll do great in Gryffindor. You’re going to make so many new friends.”

“I don’t want new friends!” she snaps, then sniffs, rubbing her arm across her eyes. “I don’t like it
here. Everything is strange, and different. Everything except you.”

His mum and Snape were friends? Childhood best friends, from the sound of it. How - how is this possible? How could he not know this?

Snape looks so sad staring at his mum, like seeing her upset is breaking his heart, but he pushes that away when she turns to look at him. “We’ll be fine. We’ll see each other every day. Nothing will change.”

“You should have been in Gryffindor with me!” she says, but her shoulders are slumped, resigned.

He smiles at her and flicks her nose. “Bravery isn’t really my thing, you know that. You’ve always been the brave one.”

The scene ripples, but it’s the same hallway, he hasn’t moved at all. He’s confused until he turns and sees Snape towering over his mother, furious. Lily glares right back, not giving an inch. They look the same age as him now, fourth or fifth year. “Potter? Really?”


“Are you punishing me for not going to the dance with you last year?” he asks. “It’s not my fault that Bella asked me first. Besides, you know none of your friends like me, they would have been miserable if I’d gone with you, and that would have made you miserable, which would have made me miserable, and no one would have had any fun at all.”

“You shouldn’t have said yes to Bella in the first place! Of course I was going to ask you!” She shakes her head. “James isn’t about you. Not everything is about you, Sev. This is about me, and what I want.”

Snape crosses his arms over his chest. “Him? Really? The guy who’s been torturing me for years? I thought you had higher standards that that.”

She goes red with anger, marching forward until Snape is forced to take several steps back. “I don’t want to hear this from you. James has changed. You have too, but not for the better. Hanging out with Bella and that crowd. You know what they say about me, about muggles, about all of it. You hang out with people who would sooner see me dead than say hello to me, but I’m the monster here. Give me a break.”

“They’re not like that,” he defends. “They’re my friends. Your friends hate me, and I don’t ask you to stop hanging out with them.”

“No,” she says, a strange look on her face, “and you never have, have you?”

They freeze, and the scene shifts. Harry feels like he’s drowning. The way his mum was talking - is it possible that she and - no, of course not, he’s being ridiculous.

He’s in a playground, a muggle playground, and he doesn’t understand. Why would Snape be here? What memory could he have?

“Tuney, wait for me!” a child’s voice calls out, and a little girl with dark hair and a sharp chin runs past him, laughing, and then a moment later a girl with her red hair in pigtails follows, yelling out for the first girl to slow down. They can’t be more than six. That’s his mum and Aunt Petunia. But that makes even less sense. How can Snape have memories of this?

Lily trips and goes tumbling to the ground, but Petunia doesn’t notice, still running forward. Harry
moves to help her up before remembering this is a memory and that he can’t do anything at all.

A little boy with dark hair and hand me down clothes jumps down from the swings and runs over. “Are you okay?” he calls out, stopping in front of her and sticking out his hand for her to grab. “Stand up, you’re okay, it’s just your knee. I scrape my knees all the time.”

She sniffs, looking up with tear filled eyes. She stares at him for a long moment before placing her hand in his.

They both let go with cries of pain, each of them reaching for their right forearms. His mother rips her jacket off, and at first Harry thinks she’s bruised, but then he realizes dotted across her arm are pale purple hydrangea blossoms. The boy shoves up his sleeve, and in the same place he has a delicate yellow rain lily.

“That’s me!” his mother says excitedly, grabbing onto the boy’s arm, “You’re mine! I’m Lily! That’s my name!”

The boy blinks, then grins, putting his hand over hers. “Hi Lily. I’m Severus.”

“Sev - Sev - Ros - Sefrus,” she says, stumbling over her words and getting more frustrated with herself each time.

He throws his head back and laughs, and she purses her lips and puffs out her cheeks, doing a great impression of a puffer fish. “You can just call me Sev.”

“Sev,” she says, satisfied, as they clasp each other’s arms and smile.

The scene dissolves, but Harry can’t quite believe it, this can’t be real. Snape and his mother were - she’s his - it’s just not possible!

The scene solidifies again, and he’s standing in the ruins of a home, a whole wall blown open. He doesn’t understand where he is or what’s going on until he sees a crib, and a baby with green eyes and a bloody forehead.

That’s him. This is the night his parents died. Why was Snape here?

“Lily!” Harry turns to see Snape frantically searching through the wreckage, pulling wood and glass aside, his hands turning bloody. “Lily, are you here? Say something!” He grabs onto a piece of glass, and curses, a deep gash forming down the center of his palm. “Where’s Potter? Where’s your kid?” He swallows, rubbing one of his bloody hands over his face. “Maybe everything’s fine and they all got away and the reason your point me spell isn’t working is because they’re under a powerful protection charm, and you’re acting like an idiot for no reason.”

Snape can’t see him - baby him - from across the room, and he isn’t crying. He’s just sitting in his crib, green eyes wide and watching, and from where Snape is he wouldn’t be able to see him unless he walked over and looked. Snape kicks one of the boards, and it reveals a single pale out flung hand. Snape turns an alarming shade of white, and Harry has to look away while Snape digs out his mother’s body.

“No,” he says, tone completely normal, and Harry risks a glance up. Snape is just sitting by his mother, his hands hovering over her like he wants to help her, to gather her up in his arms and fix her, but he doesn’t know where to start. Probably because there’s nowhere to start. She’s not sick. She’s dead. “No, this can’t - the whole bloody point of Potter is that he’s supposed to protect you, what use is he-” Snape pushes himself to his feet and goes through the house, shouting, “Potter! Where are you? It’s Severus! I mean, it’s Snape!” He shakes his head, muttering to himself, “Idiot,
he’d probably taken the kid and ran - why didn’t he give the kid to her, why leave her behind to fight, even if she is a,” he stumbles, tripping over something, and Harry and Snape look down at the same time.

Lying dead on the ground is his father.

“James,” Snape breathes, looking genuinely horrified for a man who professed to hate his father so much. He stands there for several long moments, doing nothing at all, then his head snaps up. “The baby!”

He runs back upstairs, barely glancing at his mother’s body. He starts pushing boards aside, just as frantic as he was before, face ashen pale except where his blood is smeared across it. Harry wants to tell him that he’s not in there, that he’s not buried by wood and glass, but he can’t.

“Ma,” his baby self gurgles, reaching out pudgy hands towards Lily. “Ma!”

Snape freezes and stands up, finally peering into the crib. His baby self smiles when he sees Snape and holds up his hands. “Up! Ma!”

He slumps, holding onto the sides of the crib so tightly the whole thing creaks. His shoulder shake, and Harry comes to the uncomfortable realization that he’s seeing his horrible potions professor cry.

There’s no safe place to look, either Snape’s tears or his mother’s body, and he hates this, he can’t do this anymore.

Snape is digging his fingers into his arm, where his dark mark is. Where his soulmark is. There’s a bright silver light through the window, then a swan patronus is standing before him. A voice he doesn’t recognize says, “Something has happened to the Dark Lord. Everyone meet at the Lestranges.” Then the swan disappears.

Snape rubs his hand over his face, looking so tired that Harry can’t help but feel a twinge of sympathy. He takes out his wand and casts, “Expecto patronum!”

Nothing happens.

His eyes narrow and tries again. “Expecto patronum!”

Nothing. Snape curses, smacking his hand against the side of the crib. Baby Harry latches onto his hand, using it to pull himself upright. “MA!” he demands.

Harry’s expecting Snape to snatch his hand away, or yell at him, or something. But instead he just stares at him, looking into his eyes. He says softly, “Expecto patronum.”

A bright silver doe bursts from his wand, prancing around the destroyed room before coming to stand back by them. “Go to Dumbledore. Give him this message: The Potters are dead. Harry is alive. I have to - I have to go, but the child is here.”

The doe nods and disappears in a burst of light. Snape looks down at his baby self and uses the edge of his sleeve to clean the blood off his forehead, so only a small lighting bolt wound remains. It’s not even bleeding anymore. “You have her eyes,” he says softly. He steps away, throws his shoulders back, and casts, “Protego!”

Harry blinks from the burst of bright blue light. What could he be casting that on -

Snape apparates away, and the memory starts to dissolve around him. Harry just barely gets a chance
to see his crib enveloped in a thick magical shield before he’s pulled into the next one.

He can’t do this anymore. He gets it, he understands, he saw what Quinn wanted him to see - more than ze probably intended, since he assumes Quinn figured everything out way faster than he did. He needs to get out of here.

He’s in the potions classroom, his mum and Snape partnered together in the front of the class, and they can’t be more than thirteen. They’re smiling and nudging each other with their elbows, and Harry can’t, he really can’t, he can’t watch Snape and his mother be friends after watching Snape finding her dead.

“OUT!” he shouts, his magic itching and crawling under his skin, “Stop it, stop all of it, get me out of -”

There’s a pulling in his navel, not unlike traveling by portkey, and then he’s lying flat on his back in the middle of the storage closet, the bowl sitting exactly where it was before.

He raises a hand to his face and is unsurprised to find that he’s crying.

~

Draco is confused when Harry doesn’t show up to potions class. He saw him this morning, and it’s not like he’s sick or anything, since Draco just came from the hospital wing, trying to squeeze in some extra training with Poppy. He glances at Hermione and Ron, but they both shake their heads. Neville looks just as concerned as he feels.

“No Mr. Potter today?” Snape asks coolly, “A pity. That will be a zero for him across the board then.”

Ron glares, and Draco’s pretty sure Hermione’s hand on his arm is all that stops from saying something stupid.

Harry’s potions grade really can’t afford for him to skip class. What could he possibly be doing?

~

Harry has discovered something that he’s never, ever going to tell Hermione.

“You’re sure no one saw you?” he asks.

Dobby nods, his big ears flapping against his face. “Not a one, Mister Harry! Dobby is being sneaky!”

“And you’re sure you won’t get caught?” The last thing he wants is to get Dobby in trouble.

“I is sure,” he says. “I is not being sure that getting you that book is being a good idea.”

House elves shelve the books in the library. That means they can take books from the restricted section without having to check them out.

“It’s a better idea than me trying this without having any idea what I’m doing,” he points out. He hadn’t slept at all since seeing Snape’s memories, still trying to process everything. He thinks he’s mostly managed to keep everyone from suspecting anything this morning, but he couldn’t bring himself to go to potions class, can’t make himself go and face Snape. Not yet.

He hasn’t told anyone what he’s seen, and it’s killing him. He’s keeping so many secrets from so
many people, but he’s not supposed to keep secrets from Ron, Hermione, Pansy, and Blaise. From 
Draco. He doesn’t like keeping secrets from them, and he knows if anything talking it out with them
will only help.

But there’s something he needs to do first. It’s too bad Umbridge is spying on the mail and floo
network, otherwise he wouldn’t have to go quite this far.

“Keep watch for me, okay?” he asks.

“Yes, Mister Harry,” Dobby says, looking disapproving. Harry hopes that he doesn’t tell Winky
about this, because then she’ll tell Draco, and it’s so much better if this comes from him. But he can’t
ask him not to say anything, because that feels a little too much like keeping secrets.

He flips through the book, and the spell looks easy. He did this before without a spell or wand or
anything at all, surely doing it properly will only make it easier?

Well, there’s one way to find out. He climbs into his bed, lays back, and brings his wand to his chest.
He thinks of his bedroom back home, closes his eyes, and casts, “Proiectura!”

Nothing.

He sighs, pushing himself up to check the book again, and blinks. The dorm room and Dobby are
gone, and he’s in his bedroom, cream linens and the bright Indian sky over his ceiling. He looks
down, and he’s see through, here but not here.

“Yes!” he shouts, punching his hands into the air. He doesn’t have much time, so he scrambles out of
his room and shouts, “Kreacher!”

There’s a pop, and Kreacher narrows his eyes. “Young Master is being bad!”

“Yell at me later. Where are Sirius and Remus?”

He glares and crosses his arms, but grudgingly says, “They is being in the sitting room.”

“Thanks!” He runs down the hall, leaping over the stair banister onto the floor below. He doesn’t
even make a sound as he touches the ground. He’s managing to stand and walk just fine, but he can’t
figure out how to open the door, so he just phases through it.

Sirius and Remus are bent over a large unfurled map. Which, now that he’s looking at it, almost look
like blueprints. Wait, Remus has an ink brush in his hand, so they’re making some blueprints. House
renovations? He hopes not, Kreacher will throw a fit. Sirius looks up and pales. “Harry! What are
you doing?”

“Harry?” Remus mutters as he tears his eyes away from the parchment. He looks up, blinks, then
shouts, “Harry!”

“Okay, yes, this is dangerous and illegal and you said not to do it,” he says, “but we need to talk.”

“Send us a bloody letter!” Sirius roars. “We explicitly told you not to this, now stop right now before
you hurt yourself -”

“Why didn’t you tell me that Snape and my mum were soulmates?” he interrupts.

Sirius’s mouth drops open. Remus breathes, “Oh shit.”

“I’m not sure why you’d say that,” Sirius begins.
“I saw it,” he snaps. “In this glowing bowl thing his storage - you know what, it doesn’t matter, don’t lie to me. Snape has a yellow rain lily mark on his left forearm, and my mum had purple hydrangeas on hers. Didn’t you think Snape being my mum’s soulmate might have been something I should know?”

“You looked in Snape’s pensieve,” Remus sighs. “That was a gross invasion of his privacy.”

“It wasn’t my idea,” he protests. “But that’s not really the point here.”

Sirius runs his hand through his hair. “What does it matter, really? It was just a mark on their skin to them. Not - look, obviously Remus and I worked out, and we’re very happy together. But not all soulmates are like that. Look at Tonks and your friend Cedric.”

“Severus made a lot of mistakes,” Remus says gently, “He - he chose a different path.”

“He joined those psychopaths who ended up killing so many of our friends, you mean,” Sirius says.

Remus shoots him a warning look. “It wasn’t that simple, and you know that.”

Harry shakes his head. “No. They were friends. They were best friends, and I saw - Snape was there the night they died, he went looking for them and he left a shield over my crib when he had to go-”

“That was him?” Sirius asks, looking genuinely surprised.

Remus lays his hand on Sirius’s back. “Look, Harry, we didn’t tell you because we didn’t want you to - to think that Severus is someone he isn’t, or to think that your parents weren’t in love. They were. Severus and Lily kept their soulmarks close to their chest even before everything fell apart, but James knew from the beginning. Lily and Severus weren’t ever in love, and they never dated. They were friends once, and that’s it.”

Remus and Sirius really seem to believe everything they’re saying, but - but Harry saw them, saw the way his mum acted around Snape, saw the way he would look at her when she wasn’t looking at him, and he doesn’t understand how things could have gone so horribly wrong. He believes them when they say that his parents were in love, that they were genuinely happy and besotted with one another.

But, as much as he’d like it to be true, he doesn’t think things between his mum and Snape were as clear cut as Sirius and Remus are saying it was. But if that’s what they believe, then it’s not like him telling them they’re wrong will help anything. “Okay.”

“Okay?” Remus asks, uncertain.

“Yeah,” he says, swallowing. “It’s - it’s okay, I’m okay. So. Okay.”

Neither of them look like they believe him, but Sirius only says, “Harry, please. We can find a way to talk more about this later. But you have to stop, you have to go back, this is dangerous.”

Harry feels like they don’t properly appreciate how many incredibly dangerous situations he’s found himself in, and how this doesn’t even make the list. But telling them that won’t help his position at all.

“We love you,” Remus says, reaching for him, but pausing when he remembers that he can’t touch him. “Please don’t astral project again.”

This part is easy, at least. “I love you too.”
He breaks the spell without responding to the second part. He doesn’t like making promises that he doesn’t intend to keep.

~

Something happened.

Draco doesn’t know what, exactly, but Trelawney get fired right in front of them, and is replaced with a centaur of all things, and Harry barely even blinks. He’s been acting dazed and quiet for days, and there are lot of things that could be taking up his soulmate’s mind right now, and he just shakes his head whenever any of them ask him if he wants to talk about it, but this is ridiculous.

Just the six of them are meeting up tonight, and Draco’s going to get some answers if it kills him.

It turns out he doesn’t have to, because they’ve no sooner walked through the door than Pansy snaps, “Okay, what’s your problem? Skipping potions? Are you trying to fail? You know Snape isn’t going to accept your late work or give you partial credit on anything.”

Harry rubs the back of his neck. “Sorry, I know. I just wasn’t ready to deal with him.”

“Why?” Ron asks, eyebrows pushed together. “What are you talking about?”

Harry looks nervous, of all things, which makes Draco nervous. They’ve been through so much shit these past few years, what could he possibly have to tell them that would make him nervous? He’s pretty sure they’re all immune to surprises at this point.

“Snape and my mum were soulmates.”

Blaise swears, Hermione is horrified, and Pansy and Ron look like they’re contemplating murder.

Draco has to fight the urge to sit down.

He was wrong. Clearly.

~

Harry ends up having to explain the whole thing twice, which is less horrifying than he thought it’d be, and actually, he was being stupid, he should have told them all immediately, because even just describing it to them makes him feel better.

“So what?” Ron says. “Remus and Sirius were right. Who cares if what they had on their arms? Snape maybe wasn’t born being awful, and so he and your mum were friends. But what he was doesn’t change what he is. Which is a bastard.”

“Your mother married your father, and she had you, and maybe she and Snape were alike,” Pansy allows, “Quinn gets along with him, he’s clearly not all awful, but there’s a big difference between being soulmates and being in love. Would you still love Draco if your soulmate was Ron?”

Harry looks over to Draco, who smiles at him, and he can’t imagine giving him up for anything or anyone, even if their marks disappeared tomorrow it wouldn’t matter to Harry. Draco is Draco, and that doesn’t have anything to do with the marks on their hips. “Yeah.”

“See?” Pansy says. “Who cares if your mum had a soulmate who wasn’t your dad? Bit unfortunate for all involved that it’s Snape, but at the end of the day, that’s not what’s important. You know that.”
They’re making a lot of sense. “Okay, yeah, you’re right. Still a bit weird that Snape was friends with my mum, though.”

“It’s very weird,” Blaise says. “But as far as your life goes, does it even rank?”

He has to take a moment to think about that. He wants to say yes instinctually, but really? “No.”

“See? Not a big deal at all,” Hermione says, but he knows her, and she’s definitely thinking something that she’s not sharing.

He raises an eyebrow and waits.

She bites her lower lip and looks to Ron seemingly without thinking about it. He shrugs, and she continues, “It just – just makes him a little more awful, doesn’t it? He was your mum’s soulmate. Even if he was in love with her, or if they ever dated or something – you’re his soulmate’s son. He should have looked out of you, he should have at least been nice to you. Or, okay, I know he’s saved your life a couple of times, and maybe he’s not evil, but he’s not, he’s not kind.” She says in a small voice, “I think, even if I was bitter and alone, I would try and be kind. Just a little.”

“Snape’s an asshole,” Ron says, “which we’ve always known. It’s just possible that we may have to consider the possibility that he didn’t leave the womb hurling insults and he maybe once knew how to be a person. Which is a truth I personally would have been happy to never have confronted, but at the end of the day, I still want to punch him in the face. Or even maybe just knee him in the groin and run away, I’m not picky.”

Harry snorts, which turns into a giggle, and then he’s laughing so hard his stomach hurts while Draco pokes him in the side and tells him to pull it together, and everyone’s smiling, and really, truly, he’s an idiot. This is why he doesn’t keep secrets from his friends.

Draco understands the importance of learning the patronus charm, but he’s not looking forward to it. He’s known for being good at charms, and more than a couple of people have figured out that he’s been taking lessons from Poppy on the sly, and it’s going to be deeply embarrassing for him when he struggles with this charm in front of them. He works so hard to maintain his reputation as being good at charms, at being bloody brilliant at them, and even though it’s an advanced charm that most full grown wizards can’t cast, it still makes him uncomfortable that it’s something he can’t do.

“Focus on your happiest memory.” Harry instructs, his voice echoing around the chamber. He’s spent most of the session having them review everything they’d done before break, and he’s just finished explaining the basics of the charm. There are a couple of people missing, which Draco can’t help but think was foolish. This really isn’t the session to miss, but it does at least mean things are moving a little more quickly than usual. As it is, they don’t have much time to practice if they want to get to bed at a reasonable hour. “It can’t be something small, like a good test score or your favorite birthday present. It has to be something more, something deeper and more meaningful than anything like that. Often it’s a simple moment, a conversation or a kiss. Don’t mistake excitement for happiness, because they’re not the same. Hold that memory in your mind, but don’t just think of that memory. Try to relive it, as vividly and honestly as you can. Then point your wand in the air and cast. Remember, there are no special wand movements for this charm. It’s all mental.”

Draco can hear everyone casting around him, and he’s tempted too look around and see how they’re doing, to see what he has to compare himself against. But he knows that’s not going to help anyone, least of all himself. He ignores everyone’s cries of excitement and disappointment and closes his eyes. His happiest memory. What’s his happiest memory?
There’s all those moments with Harry, his friends, his parents. But he’s tried so many of those before, back in third year, and sure, he has more of them now, but how are they different? If they didn’t work before, he doesn’t see why they would work now. Maybe he needs a different kind of happiness.

He remembers the night of Triwizard Tournament, and he thinks past the fear, past the uncertainty and worry. He remembers holding Harry in his arms, seeing Fleur protecting all of them, finding Cho and Cedric alive. He remembers his clawing desperation as he used healing spells he’d never tried before on his father, snatching him back from the edge of death. He remembers his mother’s hysteria folding into calm, her silent acceptance and support at his back as he performed spells she hadn’t thought he knew the words for. He remembers his father opening his eyes and telling him that he did it for him, that what he valued even more than his own safety was Draco’s good opinion.

It’s not a soft happiness. It’s jagged and painful, but it’s real, in a way all his other hazily pleasant memories aren’t.

He holds that feeling in his mind, exhausted and afraid with his father’s blood drying under his fingernails, but sure in the knowledge everyone he cared about was as at that moment as safe as he could make them. “Expecto patronum!”

He feels his magic tighten, then expand, and a hush falls over everyone. He hopes he just hasn’t made something embarrassing and they’re all doing their best not to laugh at him, like a little cloud of patronus mist that won’t do him any good at all.

When he opens his eyes, he sees something bright and silvery right in front of him. He has to take several steps back, and then he’s laughing, part genuine amusement and part relief.

A large silvery peacock cocks his head to the side, so well formed that Draco can see the different pattern of feathers on his chest, to say nothing of his tail feathers, which are even taller than Draco. Clearly he’s improved since third year.

“Brilliant,” Cedric breaths, looking honestly impressed.

Cho nods, eyes wide. “Draco, that’s wonderful!”

Blaise snorts, and Pansy laughs, calling out, “Of course it’s a peacock!”

“What are you implying?” he asks, eyes narrowed. His patronus snaps his beak at her, and then his long tail feathers fold together so they’re narrow, and he spreads his wings, flying around the roof of the chamber. Even Pansy stops laughing long enough to look impressed, and he wants to look at Harry so badly, to see his proud smile and soft eyes, but in the middle of the RA is nowhere close to private, so it’ll have to wait.

Of course, a moment so nice can’t last.

There are two pops and Winky and Dobby are standing next to Harry. “You must be going!” Dobby says urgently. “Miss Umbridge knows where you are!”

Everyone pales. Draco dismisses his patronus.

Harry shakes his head. “She can’t. How? And even if she knows, she can’t get in. I closed the entrance behind everyone.”

“Unless she has a Parselmouth with her,” Luna says. “You’re not the only one, after all.”
Hermione frowns. “Does she? I thought Harry was the only British Parselmouth.”

“That we know of,” George points out.

Cassius adds, “There’s rumors of a couple in Africa, at least.”

Draco can’t see Umbridge being on good enough terms with any foreign nation to borrow one of their Parselmouths.

“She is not using a snake speaker,” his house elf says darkly.

“Winky, speak plainly,” he orders.

Just as he finishes talking, there’s a boom, and the whole chamber shakes, dust falling from the ceiling, as if they’re in the middle of an earthquake. Everyone stumbles, and some people scream.

Hermione clings to Ron’s arm to stay upright. All the quidditch players shift their weight with the tremors, but everyone else is struggling. Ron says grimly, “She doesn’t need a parselmouth. She’s going to force her way in.”

There’s another great echoing boom, and Draco’s really starting to panic when things go from bad to worse. The statue of Zarathurstra groans, and its mouth falls open.

Oh, shit.

“It’s okay!” Draco shouts.

Nagini slithers out first, and people are already screaming when they see her. They should have saved it, because when Theophania follows her, fangs bared, they have no screams left to give.

Harry curses. They really should have mentioned the couple deadly magical snakes they were sharing space with before now, but in his defense, he hadn’t anticipated the chamber coming down on their heads.

“What is this? What are you doing?” Theophania demands. Her inner lids are still closed at least. “Stop! Right now!”

“It’s not us,” he tells her, ignoring the startled glances he gets when the Parseltongue leaves his mouth. He barely registers his friends telling everyone to calm down and put their wands away. That’s good. The last thing they need is for someone to start attacking Theophania. “The person we were hiding from has found us. She’s trying to get in.”

“She’ll break the chamber! My Salazar’s chamber!” she roars. “Fix it!”

Fix it? How’s he supposed to fix this, he doesn’t even know what she’s doing, exactly.

Nagini has slithered over to Draco and curled around his feet. She says, “The children need to go, especially these ones. They can’t be found. My former human will be angry if he discovers they lied to him.”

“I don’t care about the children!” Theophania shouts, towering over Nagini and Draco both. Neither of them look as afraid as Harry thinks they should. Another terrifying bang and the echo of breaking stone shudders through the chamber. Whatever Umbridge is doing, it’s working. She’s either getting closer, or she’s planning to collapse the chamber with them still inside.
Nagini looks into her milky eyes for a long beat, then says, “Your human would have wanted you to care.”

Theophania curls back as if she’s been struck, but neither of them look away from the other.

Harry is surrounded by far too many beings that are comfortable having staring contests with a basilisk. “Nagini is right, we need to at least get the Slytherins out of here, it’s important.” Also, he’d like for none of them to die, if possible, that would be nice too.

Theophania swings her massive head around to look at him. She bares her fangs, the venom dripping off of them and landing precariously close to where he’s standing. “I will get them away. But you must stop this. If I save the children, you must save my Salazar’s chamber.” She hesitates, and it’s wrong to see indecision on her, she’s far too old and powerful to second guess herself. “It’s the only part of him I have left.”

Well, fuck. “Okay,” he says. He’ll just have to do – he doesn’t know, something. He can’t let Umbridge either find or destroy the chamber, because the former will inevitable lead to the latter. “How are you going to get them out of here?”

“The same way I get myself out,” she answers, lowering her head and laying her body flat on the ground.

“Pipes,” he says in English. He looks to the RA, who are afraid and uncertain. “Get on her back, she’ll get you out of here.” Everyone looks at him like he’s crazy, which isn’t new, but they don’t have time for it right now. “Trust her. Or me. Trust someone, and go.”

Draco runs the palm of his hand over Nagini’s head, then steps over her. He clambers onto Theophania’s back without hesitation, then looks down and holds out his hand to the person closest to him, who happens to be Colin Creevey. “Come on,” he says.

Colin swallows, but takes Draco’s hand and lets himself be hauled up behind him. He wraps an arm around Draco’s waist, then holds out his free hand for the next person. That gets everyone moving, people climbing onto Theophania’s back and helping anyone who struggles on her smooth scales.

“What about you?” Neville asks.

Harry shakes his head. “Don’t worry about me. I’m going to stop this.”

“How?” Ron snaps.

He shrugs. “I’ll think of something, I always do.”

Hermione scowls. None of them look impressed.

“We is knowing how to help!” Dobby says excitedly, “We is being right back!”

Winky glares at them. “We will help. But everyone who is not Mister Harry must be going. The more people there is being, the less safe it is.”

“You can’t be serious.” Hermione says.

Winky shrugs. “I am going to get things to help. Do not be making this harder.”

They disappear with a crack, and Hermione snarls. Ron searches Harry’s face, nods once, then snaps her elbow and drags her towards Theophania. “Come on, let’s go.”
“Have you lost your mind?” she screeches.

Neville sighs, claps Harry on the shoulder, and goes jogging after them.

“Dobby won’t let anything happen to Harry,” Ron says patiently as he lifts Hermione onto Theophania’s back, like she weighs nothing at all. Hermione’s whole face is red, but Harry thinks it’s mostly indignation. “Worst case scenario, he’ll just snap them both Hogsmeade.”

Hermione still looks pissed off as Theophania starts moving, slithering her massive body from side to side and deeper into the chamber, where it connects to the pipes that are large enough for her to fit through. He hopes someone reminds them all to duck.

He only has a moment to stand around uselessly when there’s a crack, and then screaming. It’s Dobby, but not just him, the book in his hands is screaming too, a high pitched woman’s voice that fills the chamber. Dobby’s hands are smoking and there’s a horrible smell of burned flesh in the air as he digs his fingers into the binding.

“Dobby!” he yells, horrified. Harry grabs the book from his hands, and then has the split second thought that grabbing the corrosive book with his bare hands wasn’t maybe his smartest play.

But as soon as he touches it, the book stops screaming, and it doesn’t burn. The leather only feels warm and soft in his hands. He looks at the cover, but it’s blank. Then golden embossed symbols rise out of the leather, and hieroglyphics settle across it.

“Are you okay?” he asks, tearing his eyes away. “What is this? I can’t read it.”

Dobby nods, even though his hands are bloody and peeling. “You must look closer!”

“I can’t read this,” he insists. Dobby glares, which is a first, so Harry sighs and looks back down at the book. He’s just trying to figure out what a bird could mean when the symbols shift again, and curling golden calligraphy flows across the cover.

**An Advanced Treatise on The Ancient Art of Necromancy**

His stomach rolls. “Necromancy?”

There’s a deep crack, and for a moment Harry worries he’s too late, and Umbridge is either about to burst though the chamber doors or the ceiling is about to collapse on his head. Instead Winky appears in front of him, and behind her is a small mountain of animal skeletons, all the animals Theophania had lived on during her thousand years alone and forgotten under the castle. “I told you I is saving them for when you be needing them,” she says, pleased.

“I,” he looks between the skeletons and the book. “What do you expect me to do? I can’t – I’m not – I don’t know what you want me to do with this. I don’t even know any necromancy spells. Just the one ghost summoning one I messed up.” This is so much more dangerous and illegal than astral projecting. Sirius and Remus are going to ground him forever.


“How? Is there a chapter on mass reanimation?” he asks, frustrated.

The books snaps open in his hands. Words flow across the page, and for a moment they look like what he thinks might be Mycenean Greek before it all shifts to English.

It’s a single paragraph, barely four sentences. It’s a list of wand movements, then a spell. There’s
ominous creaking, and then the ground shakes again, so much so that the tower of animal skeletons fall over and the house elves grab onto his legs for balance.

He’s running out of time. He really, really wishes he had a better idea, but, well, he doesn’t. He told Theophania that he’d keep Salazar Slytherin’s chamber safe, so that’s what he’s going to do. Hopefully. It’s at least what he’s going to try to do.

He reads over the wand movements twice, practices it for about a minute, and really wishes the book had literally any other instructions. But it doesn’t.

Harry raises his wand, circles the pile of bones twice, then jabs his wand into the center. “Ola zontana!”

This time when everything shakes, it’s not because of Umbridge.

“I wish we had the map,” Millie mutters, and Draco can’t help but agree. Cedric and Susan give them an odd look, but they don’t ask. The Ravenclaws and Gryffindors had broken off to head up to the towers, but the Slytherins and Hufflepuffs are creeping along together back to their common rooms. They usually leave a few at a time from RA, since it’s very hard to be inconspicuous in this large of a group. If Filch comes across them, there’s nowhere to hide or any believable excuse they could give. Of course, they could always have Hermione obliviate Filch, her spells are usually more controlled than his anyway. He’s a bit leery of trying it a second time considering that he’s still not entirely sure how many memories he took from Snape in the shrieking shack.

They just have to cross the main hallway, then they can start heading down to the dungeons using the East corner staircase. It’s not one of the main staircases so it doesn’t move, and it’s narrow and makes everyone who uses it dizzy, which means they probably won’t cross paths with anyone. They just have to get to it.

“We’ll run across in groups of two,” Cedric says.

Susan shakes her head and whispers, “That’ll take too long, there are too many of us.”

Cedric frowns, but nods. “Okay, groups of three. Hide in the alcove near the hallway that leads to the herbology exit, wait a couple minutes, then proceed to the staircase. Understand?”

Everyone nods, and Draco’s about to tell Blaise, Pansy and Millie to go first when he hears something in the distance. Cedric holds up hand for silence, even though no one is talking, and his eyebrows dip together. Draco asks, “Is that … what is that?”

They stand there a couple more moments, perplexed, then Cassius says, “I think it’s screaming. And, uh, rats? Something scurrying.”

What the hell.

Cedric shakes his head, clearly about to tell them all to ignore it, but then it gets louder. And closer. Someone is screaming. Several somones are screaming. And they’re coming this way.

“Get back! Hide!” Draco snaps, and everyone rushes to get back into the shadows of their narrow hallway, flattening themselves against the wall. A couple smart people whisper spells to extinguish the nearby torches, giving them a little more darkness to hide in.
Draco watches the hallway, hoping that whoever’s screaming passes by without noticing them.

He really didn’t need to worry about that.

Thousands of animal skeletons with glowing green eyes rush down the hall, so many of them on top of and around each other that it’s just a river of bones barreling down the main hallway. Umbridge, a couple ministry officials, and several seventh years that Draco has never particularly liked are caught in the mass of bones, being carried along by all of them and unable to force themselves free. The river of animated skeletons blasts by them, including the screaming and crying people caught in their grasp, but it’s not until their shrieks are faint echoes that Draco feels safe leaning out into the main hallway. Cedric fists his hand in the back of his robe but doesn’t pull him back.

The entire hallway is empty. Or, well, mostly.

A single rabbit skeleton hops down the hall. It’s missing most of the bones from its right leg, leaving it’s hops lopsided and haphazard.

“I’m going to need so much therapy,” Cassius breaths.

Susan snorts. “They’re going to need so much therapy.”

“Can we go to our common rooms now?” Hannah asks plaintively. “I don’t think we have to sneak. If that didn’t raise any alarms, I don’t think we will.”

“Yeah, okay,” Cedric sighs, and they all walk into the hall.

At the same time, Perenelle and Nicolas Flamel turn the corner, wands out.

They stare at each other for a long moment, no one making a sound. Then Nicolas beams and says, “Lovely night for a stroll,” before turning on his heel and walking in the opposite direction. Perenelle sighs, gives them all a disproving look, then followers her husband.

Forget therapy. Draco needs a drink.

Chapter End Notes

life is slowing down a little, hopefully the wait between chapters will get shorter T_T i hope you liked it!

megalania-prisca has done several gorgeous pieces for siat that you can view here (she’s added more since the last chapter!)

feel free to follow / harass me at shanastoryteller.tumblr.com

if you're worried about social media imploding but still want to keep up with me and my writing, you can sign up for my weeklyish (sometimes ever other week) newsletter
Harry knows what it feels like to cast big spells.

He remembers the weariness when he botched the ghost summoning spell in the graveyard, how summoning a giant patronus literally knocked him out for days, how astral projecting made all his limbs felt like jelly to the point where they wouldn’t support him. He knows what magical exhaustions is and what it feels like, because he always ends up pushing himself past his own limits, and he’s used to paying the consequences.

Reanimating several thousand animal skeletons is not small magic. Any type of necromancy isn’t small magic. It takes a tidal wave of green, smoky magic to fill the skeletons and push them forward, to send them scurrying after Umbridge and whoever’s with her.

Harry is prepared for the exhaustion.

What he isn’t prepared for is its absence.

He feels fantastic. He feels like he could cast this spell a hundred times and it wouldn’t bother him at all.

“Mr. Harry is okay?” Dobby asks anxiously, but then he smiles. “You is very well.”

He doesn’t understand. He’s never cast magic like this before. He’s never felt this alive with magic before. “How – how did you know I could do that?”

“You is being a necromancer,” Winky says, “of course you can be doing necromancy.”

He shakes his head. “No – no, I’m not, that’s only the second necromancy spell I’ve cast.”

The house elves blink, then glance at each other, a silent conversation happening between them in moments. Winky hesitates, but says, “It is not being about spells. It’s an ability, not a thing you learn.”

“There is some learning,” Dobby says, scowling at Harry and the book in his hands like he’s going to go off reanimating things all over the castle. “But the lady is sitting in your shadow.”

Harry turns, twisting to stare into his shadow. He doesn’t see anything. “What lady?”

There’s a beat of confused silence. “It – it is not being an actual lady,” Dobby says. “It is a thing people is saying. You have Miss Death in your shadow because you are being a necromancer, and you is being a necromancer because Miss Death is in your shadow. She knows your name.”

Dobby has a long history of saying horrifying things to him, but he’s pretty sure this beats all of them. “What?”

“There is not being time for this,” Winky says impatiently. “You must be getting back before someone notices you is missing. Dobby will be taking you.”

He obligingly holds out his hand for Harry to take, but it’s still burned. He thinks it even looks like it’s still burning. He must notice the same thing, because he offers him his elbow instead. “What
about the skeletons I just reanimated? Shouldn’t I stop them? Or something. I don’t know how to end
the spell.”

The book vibrates in his hands, then the pages flip before stopping closer to the back of it. Again, the
pages remain blank for a moment before curling ink fills the page.

Chalaroste.

“The book is knowing,” Dobby says impatiently. “We should be hurrying. You can end the spell in
your dorm, but you will be getting into trouble if anyone notices you is missing.”

There’s a rumbling, and then Theophania pours back into the chamber. “Listen to them. You kept
your word, and you may go.”

“Fine,” he sighs and wraps his hand around Dobby’s elbow.

He falls into his bed with a deafening crack, and for a moment he’s worried that he’s broken it but,
no, it’s just the sound of elf transportation magic. He can’t believe they’ve spent so much time
sneaking around the castle when they could have just asked Winky and Dobby to take them. Then
again, he’s not sure how many of them they can transport. It might just be one at a time, which, at
that point it’s easier to just sneak around the castle themselves.

“Harry!” his dorm mates cry, crowding around him.

“Are you okay?” Ron asks. “What did you do?”

“I’m fine,” he says, pushing himself to his feet. “Did everyone get out okay?”

“We did, and so did the Ravenclaws I’m assuming. The Slytherins and Hufflepuffs went the
opposite direction we did,” Seamus reports.

Oh, good. Harry’s about to start explaining when they hear the screaming. It’s faint, like it’s coming
from outside. Dean presses his face to the window and says, “Er, guys.”

The rest of them crowd around the window. A river of reanimated animal skeletons is pouring from
the front doors of the castle and onto the grounds, dotted with their glowing green eyes. Umbridge
and a half dozen other people are caught in its grasp, unable to pull themselves free. The river of
skeletons is heading towards the forbidden forest.

He feels the weight of four incredulous pairs of eyes on him.

“Shit, hold on,” he says, lunging for his bed and grabbing the book, because he remembers the
incantation but not the wand movements. He flips through the pages but they’re all blank.

Neville pears at the cover and blinks. “Since when can you read hieroglyphics?”

“I can’t,” he says, getting frustrated. “I need to end the mass reanimation spell.”

The book goes flat in his hands and cursive crawls across the page.

Ron leans over his shoulder. “Mate, last I checked you can’t read Gaelic either.”

“Uh, that’s Korean, I think,” Seamus pipes up.

Harry ignores all of them, focuses, and this is so annoying, this is the worst way to have to end a
spell. He balances his wand on the back of his hand, right where his knuckles are, and then casts,
“Chalaroste!” as he snags it between his pointer and middle finger, making sure it’s aimed at the skeletons.

The river halts immediately, right on the edge of the forest. A dust cloud rises from the skeletons as they all fall, useless, back down, bones disconnecting and rolling across the ground. The cloud is faintly green, all the necromatic magic he’d used to animate them, but it’s gone in the next moment, scattered with the wind.

He sighs and snaps the book shut. He turns to his friends and sighs at their flat stares. “What? What did you expect me to do?”

“Not necromancy?” Neville asks. “How are you even still standing? You know, I know I say this a lot, but usually people who did what you just did? They die.”

Harry frowns. At a certain point, he’s not sure how much of the crap he pulls can be explained away by having a lot of magic. “How does someone become a necromancer?”

“By winging it, clearly,” Ron says. “What is that book, where did you get it?”

He reaches for it, and Harry remembers too late to pull it back. “Wait, don’t—”

Ron grabs the book and yells, dropping it just as quickly. The scent of burning flesh fills the dorm room. Harry grabs his wrists, pulling them up to his face. It’s not even just burns, it almost looks like acid is eating away at his hands.

“What the bloody hell?” Ron curses, his voice high with pain. “What kind of book is that?”

“Fuck,” he says, his grip on his wrists tightening to the point where he’s probably going to leave bruises. It’s not stopping.

“We have to go to Pomfrey,” Seamus insists. “Right now!”

“And tell her what?” Ron snaps, “I touched Harry’s necromancy book?”

Dean scowls. “Well, it’s better than you losing your hand, so yes!”

“Draco,” Neville blurs, eyes darting nervously to their dorm mates. “Take him to Draco. Well, not you Harry, you know Umbridge is going to come looking for you, and you have to be here when she does. But Ron should go.”

Seamus blinks. “Why would Malfoy help?”

Ron’s keeping a mostly stoic face, but Harry can see the wounds sinking deeper, can feel tiny rivulets of his best friend’s blood pooling between his fingers. They don’t have the time to either explain themselves or come up with a lie, so he doesn’t bother. “Dobby! Winky! Please!”

~

Draco has slipped inside his room after making sure everyone is safely back in bed when there’s a crack, and then Ron is sprawled across Blaise’s bed and, incidentally, Blaise.


“Sorry,” he says, rolling off of him and onto his feet. Draco’s confused about the awkward way he does it until he catches sight of his hands, bloody and peeling.
He rushes over, grabbing at his upper arms to get a closer look. “What happened?”

“I touched a cursed book. But Harry touched it too, and this didn’t happen to him.”

“So it’s not a curse, it’s protective wards,” he says, and great, awesome. “I’m going to have to break the wards’ connection to you before I can heal you.”

Ron blinks. “Can you do that?”

“Well, we’re going to find out, aren’t we?” he says. Ron glares at him. “Relax, Filius went over ward breaking with me weeks ago. What could possibly go wrong?”

Blaise groans. “Why would you ask that?”

Draco ignores him, pulling out his wand and casting a quick diagnostic spell. The ward magic only extends to Ron’s wrists and not any farther, so worst case scenario he could cut off his hands. But that would probably be way harder to explain to Poppy than the wards in the first place, so maybe not. “Desciscendum,” he casts, but the wards don’t even loosen their grip. Great. He shouts, “Winky!”

There’s a beat where nothing happens, but before he can get too worried, she appears before him with a crack. She’s not alone.

“Yes Master Draco?” she asks, not paying attention to him at all as she wraps strips of fabric over Dobby’s hands. They’re soaked in what he thinks is the dittany they made last week.

Unbelievable. “You touched it too?” he asks his former house elf, not expecting an answer. “Winky, leave it be. That won’t work. Grab me the warding book from Pomfrey’s shelf in her office. Try not to get caught.”

“But his hands!” she cries, big eyes shining, looking more distressed than she has since he took on her bond.

“I’ll heal his hands. But I need the book to do that,” he says.

She sniffs, nods, then disappears. Dobby rounds his shoulders and plops down on the floor, his burning hands held carefully atop his spread legs. He’s never looked more pathetic, which is saying something, because generally he considers Dobby to be rather more pathetic than other creatures.

“Don’t suppose you have any painkillers around here?” Ron asks, flushed red and sweating from the pain.

Draco shakes his head. “I can’t cast any pain numbing spells, it will interfere with the rest of the magic. And I’m a little bit more concerned with removing the wards and healing the damage than anything else.”

Ron doesn’t argue, but he doesn’t look happy either. Blaise rummages around in his trunk for a moment before saying, “I have fire whisky. That won’t interfere with any spell casting.”

“I’ll take it,” he says immediately. Draco’s not convinced that that’s the best of ideas, but he’s not going to say anything against it. It’s not like one bottle of fire whiskey is going to get Ron more than tipsy anyway.

Blaise walks over, uncorks the bottle, and holds it up to Ron’s mouth, carefully tipping it so he can drink without choking. It’s a good thing Blaise is so tall, otherwise this would go from comical to ridiculous.
“Here!” Winky cries as she appears back in the room, pushing the book into Draco’s hip.

He grabs it and flips to the index, running a finger down the page. “Thanks.”

There it is. It’s an incantation phrase more than a spell, which is such old magic, but being old means he can trust that it will work, which is really all he needs right now. “Are you ready?” Ron doesn’t stop drinking, but he does give him a thumbs up, which he supposes is the best he can really ask for.

“Vinculis catenisque vecordia lacrimam, vinculis catenisque vecordia lacrimam, vinculis catenisque vecordia lacrimam,” he mutters, shoulders slumping in relief when he sees it’s working.

The magic the incantation calls forth curls around the wards surrounding Ron’s hands and slowly begins tearing them apart. It takes about another forty seconds of muttering, but then the wards are gone, and its just wounds, just flesh and blood, and Draco can heal those. A couple applications of episkey should do it, but then again it might not, and episkey is kind of a pain in that it’s one of the easiest and most malleable healing spells, but it also tends to react poorly with other magic being layered on top of it. “Ementur lignum carnum,” he casts, which is probably overkill, but at this point he’d rather waste some magic than leave Ron’s hand partially healed.

It fights him for a moment before giving in, the faint green magic sinking into Ron’s skin and regenerating the missing muscle and skin. At least they stopped it before it got to the bone.

“All right, you next,” he says, turning to Dobby.

He scrambles to his feet and hides his hands behind his back. “No, that is okay, Dobby is not needing anything.”

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he says. “Show me your hands.”

Winky scowls and grabs the back of Dobby’s shirt, tugging him forward. “Let my master help! He is a good master!”

He shakes his head, still resisting, and if they don’t hurry up, Dobby’s not going to have any hands to save. He probably should have healed him first. “I’m not going to hurt you. You’re not my elf to discipline, and even if you were, you haven’t done anything wrong.”

Dobby kicks his feet against the ground, and Draco thinks of how many times his father ordered Dobby to put his hands in the oven. He could never do that to Winky. But at the same time, Dobby was a disloyal elf. He didn’t listen, he kept secrets, he went behind their backs. Lucius couldn’t use magic against him, and freeing him for disloyalty would be as good as killing him, and they couldn’t just let him continue to betray them unpunished. But hurting him was wrong. But he doesn’t know what they should do instead, what anyone should do instead. House elves need magic to survive, and wizards and witches are the only reliable source of that magic left. They can’t just hand over pieces of themselves and drain themselves dry for creatures that don’t even like them, that could hurt them and leave the wizards no way to defend themselves.

Draco doesn’t know what the solution is. He doesn’t even know if there is one. Hermione’s been researching it all in her spare time, he should ask her.

“I’m sorry,” he says. Dobby freezes, big eyes even wider than normal. “You were the absolute worst house elf that we’ve ever had the misfortune of employing. But it wasn’t right for us to keep hurting you. I wish there had been a way to free you sooner.”

Dobby doesn’t do or say anything for a long moment, still held in Winky’s grip, but then he smiles. Draco doesn’t think he’s ever seen him smile before. “It is being alright. Tilly was always yelling at
me for being a bad elf. She never got hurt hands burned. Even when she is messing up, and your parents were very angry, she is not being hurt, because Tilly is being a loyal elf. I am a smart elf. I am making my own choices.” He holds out his burning hands, finally giving Draco permission to heal him.

Thank merlin. House elf magic is different, more slippery, but the incantation works just the same. He has to be extra careful when applying the healing charm, but thankfully it only resists him for a few moments before sullenly settling into Dobby’s skin and leaving his hands good as new.

“Now that that’s over with,” Blaise says, passing the firewhiskey bottle to Ron, “I want to know where the hell Harry got a warded book on necromancy.”

Draco has been wondering that too, but suddenly Winky and Dobby are looking anywhere but them, and okay, that answers that then.

~

When McGonagall comes to collect him, she at least waits until the portrait door swings shut behind them to ask, “What did you do?”


But she doesn’t give him his favorite look, like she’s trying not to laugh. She looks really worried, and they’re not walking to Dumbledore’s office, instead standing in the middle of the hallway. “All those skeletons in the courtyard – I didn’t see anything, but Professor Umbridge claims that they were all moving, carrying her out of the castle. The aurors she was with left, and the students that were helping her are in the hospital wing, and the only way what they’ve said is even feasible is if--” She pauses, clearing her throat and collecting herself. “But it can’t be. Because you’re standing here in front of me, on your own two feet, and you wouldn’t be if you had done that.”

He knows exactly what she means, and she’s right. He’s done that type of large magic before, and it’s always left him exhausted.

But this is different. This magic is different.

He doesn’t want to lie to her. He wouldn’t be lying to her about anything if he had the choice. Even at her most inconveniently rule abiding, she’s always looked out for him.

She’s watching him closely, and the struggle on his face must be all the confirmation she needs, because she slumps and puts her hand to her head. “Harry-”

“Plausible deniability,” he says. “I’ve been in my dorm room all night, and I have no idea why you’re dragging me to Dumbledore’s office in the middle of the night at Umbridge’s insistence. I don’t know anything about any skeletons. What a strange thing to bring up.”

McGonagall grips the back of his neck, just for a moment, hard enough to bruise, then she folds all her emotions back in on herself, turning into the stern, uptight professor look she gives the first years. Well, she gives it to all of them, but only the first years are dumb enough to fall for it. “Very well, Mr. Potter.”

They walk quickly to Dumbledore’s office, and McGonagall doesn’t say anything more even though Harry can tell she wants to. He’s prepared for Umbridge standing there, hair coiffed and clothes once more perfect, and Dumbledore sitting behind his desk, looking at them from behind steepled fingers. Flitwick throws him, he’s not sure what he’s doing here, but whatever, and then he finally looks at the last person in the room.
It occurs to him for the first time that maybe he should have asked Blaise and Hermione exactly what kind of curses they’d put on the parchment they had everyone sign.

“Miss Edgecombe!” McGonagall gasps, “How did this happen?”

Marietta, sullen and stubborn but with a knack for dancing hexes, stands there, tears falling from her eyes and muffled sobs getting caught in her chest.

Her lips are sewn shut.

The thread is black and fine, but the stitches are ugly, crude and large. There’s no blood. That should make it better, but instead it actually makes it worse, makes it easier to see the way her skin strains against the thread, the way it pulls her lips shut without enough room for her to get out even a whisper.

“Why don’t we ask Mr. Potter,” Umbridge says nastily, something wild in her eyes, almost unhinged. He guesses she didn’t enjoy her little trip. He wonders if he should feel sorry. He doesn’t. He’s not sure he even feels sorry for Marietta, even with how horrible it all is. If Voldemort found out those Slytherin kids were in the DA, found out that they’d turned their back on him, people would have been tortured, they could have even died. Voldemort is just itching for a reason to kill the Malfoys, to claim their manor and money and power for his own, and if he found out Draco was working against him -

No, he can’t make himself feel sorry for Marietta at all.

“I didn’t do this,” he says. “I don’t why you’d think that.”

“She said your name before her lips got sewn shut,” Umbridge hisses. “She said to go to Merry’s bathroom, and she said your name, and then this happened.”

He feels a stab of irritation. “I’m assuming you mean Myrtle’s bathroom? We don’t have any Merrys.”

“Why hasn’t this been fixed?” McGonagall says. “This is ridiculous, we’re all standing here while this poor girl’s in pain-”

“It can’t be fixed,” Dumbledore says, “at least not easily. The curse is protected by wards. Rather complex ones, even, it’s like they’re all stitched together instead of being layered. Pomfrey is searching for the incantation to remove it, but is having a bit of trouble locating her book on warding.”

Pansy must have designed the wards. And he’s sure she’s only gotten better since she did the ones on their classroom.

“I know you were in the chamber,” Umbridge hisses, “half the students in this school creep around at night, unsupervised, but we can never find them, it’s like they just disappear. I’ve heard the rumors, Mr. Potter, I know what you’re doing. I know about your little army.”

The urge to clarify that it’s really more of a militia than an army is spectacularly unhelpful.

“Army?” he says. “Professor, are you feeling alright? I really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t lie to me!” she screeches, “What have I told you about lying?”

Draco heals him. He always heals him, but he can feel the words carved into the back of his hand
like a phantom wound. “That it’s only acceptable when the ministry does it?”

McGonagall makes an aborted motion to rub at her forehead. He feels a little bit bad about how much trouble he causes her, but not enough to stop.

“I know it was you,” she says, taking a step towards him. He only raises an eyebrow. She wields her power like a toddler wields a hammer. “I know it was you in the that chamber, you that cursed Miss Edgecombe, and you that sent those - those - those horrible creatures after me! Ignoring the rest, necromancy is illegal, and I’ll see you thrown in Azkaban for it!”

Yeah, okay. Azkaban has like, five dementors left. He’ll escape and run away to France. Or Romania. He can ride dragons and as long as he has a wyvern handy, he can even translate for Charlie and the other trainers.

People keep threatening him with locking him up or throwing him out like there isn’t a whole world out there for him to explore. He likes it here. But it’s not like Britain is all there is. Besides, his friends have followed him into near certain death more than once, he’s pretty sure they’ll follow him to like, Italy. He’s also pretty certain Blaise will let him hang out in his house in Rome.

“Why would you think Mr. Potter performed that unfortunate bit of necromancy?” Dumbledore asks. “It seems rather more likely that it’s just a defense built into the Chamber of Secrets than anything else. It seems not to be a fan of blunt force trauma.”

The defense built into the chamber is actually a thousand year old basilisk, but he doesn’t bother to point that out. If everyone’s under the impression that Theophania is dead, he’s not going to be the one to correct them.

“After what he did in the graveyard? Of course it was him!” she says. “Slytherin wasn’t a Mother, Mr. Potter is, it was obviously him!”

Um. He doesn’t have any kids. And he’s a boy. He’s definitely not anyone’s mother.

McGonagall smiles, sharp and small and in a way that makes Harry wish that he could go hide behind something. “What on earth are you talking about, Dolores? You and the ministry have been saying that Mr. Potter lied about the events in the graveyard for nearly a year.”

Umbridge freezes, caught, but doesn’t give in inch. “Just because he obviously lied about You Know Who’s return doesn’t mean he didn’t perform necromancy.”

“How would I have gotten to that graveyard in the first place if it wasn’t for Crouch Jr.?” he asks. “I thought you lot were insisting I never left the maze. Maybe there were some necromancy that happened in a graveyard that night, but I’m not sure how it could be me, if I’d never left the maze that night. It’s not like I can be in two places at once.”

Dumbledore sighs, and McGonagall has that look, finally, his favorite one. Technically, he can be in two places at once, what with his newfound talent in astral projection. But it’s not like anyone’s going to tell Umbridge that, since that’s illegal too.

“It was still you,” she insists, “You were in the chamber, you did this to this girl, and you reanimated all those skeletons!”

“Do you have any proof, Dolores?” Dumbledore asks. “That’s a rather long list of accusations.”

She scowls. “I’m sure Miss Edgecombe will be able to confirm all of it as soon as she’s able to speak again.”
“Well, until then,” McGonagall says tartly, “I imagine we should all go to bed and get this girl to the hospital wing. Filius?”

Flitwick has been silent this whole time, and Harry finally takes a good look at him. He looks old. Obviously he is old, but he’s never looked it before. “I think that’s a good idea.”

He’s not looking at Marietta. Harry doesn’t think he’s looked at her this whole time, even.

“We’re not done,” Umbridge says, “there’s still the matter of the chamber of secrets! How could you just leave that open? After all the deaths and petrifications it caused?”

“That was a basilisk, who’s no longer a concern,” Dumbledore answers.

Does he think Theophania is dead? Or does he know that she’s their friend now? Harry wishes he could ask.

“You didn’t submit any sort of plan to take care of the chamber to the Board of Governors. You didn’t disclose its existence to the students’ parents.” Uh, Harry’s pretty sure everyone found out about it at the end of last year. It’s less the chamber that no one is sure is real anymore, and more the chamber that no one can get into. Except him, and any other Parselmouths that might wander their way through. “This is gross negligence and endangerment. Because of this, as the High Inquisitor, I hereby strip you of the title of Headmaster, effective immediately.”

McGonagall is shouting, and so is Filius, coming alive in his anger in a way he hadn’t been moments before. Dumbledore’s face is blank, and Harry can’t help the deep, churning feeling of fear, guilt, and regret percolating in the bottom of his stomach.

A toddler with a hammer can still do a lot of damage.

~

Draco has to sneak into the hospital wing, because he’s the only one of them who can. He knows where Poppy puts all her traps and her wards, and so he has to be the one to get them inside. Besides, this is an excellent chance to return her warding book that he’d borrowed. He’s giving it back, so it’s borrowing.

He borrows Harry’s invisibility cloak for it. He’s already come too close to ruining everything for his parents to risk doing it again. Once they’re inside, he hangs back, watching but just sitting silently underneath the cloak.

Marietta is laying in a bed in the middle of the hospital wing, tossing and turning. Good.

Blaise and Hermione trade a look before he says, “Marietta.”

She stills, hunching her body like they’re a boogeyman she can avoid by hiding under the covers.

“If you want me to drag you upright by your hair, I will,” Hermione says, and somehow the casual, conversational way she says that is even more threatening than if she’d screamed it.

Marietta flinches before pushing herself upright, clutching the blankets in her lap like a little kid, her face puffy and her eyes red from crying. Harry had told him what it looked like, but it was one thing to hear it, and another to see the threads poking through the skin above and below her lips. It makes him a little queasy, and he lifts a hand to his own lips.

“What part of the Slytherins being part of the RA is a matter of life and death was confusing to you?”
she asks coolly. “What could have possibly been worth their safety? The safety of their families?”

She tries to speak but can’t, not real words, just sounds. It’s part of the curse. Even with her lips sewn shut she should be able to at least make a little sense, but the curse won’t let her. According to Pansy, she shouldn’t be able to get herself to write it down either, it should all come out as gibberish.

Pansy doesn’t have the power or the patience to set up the wards herself, but she’s brilliant at designing them, pulling them together like she’s crocheting them in place. He’s never seen magic anchored together like that before.

“It doesn’t matter,” Blaise says, voice soft, almost consoling. “There’s no good reason for it. Not really. Umbridge wasn’t holding a knife to your throat like Voldemort is doing to so many of us.”

“We don’t have to help you,” Hermione says, even though they kinda do. Poppy will manage to pull the wards apart eventually, even if he doesn’t return the book, and they need to deal with her before then. But she doesn’t need to know that. “We can just leave you like this forever. There are spells to make sure you don’t starve to death. Not very pleasant ones, of course, but what can you expect, really.”

Marietta’s eyes go wide and pleading, tears falling down her cheeks. Draco feels bad. She could have gotten his family killed, and he still feels bad. She’s older than them, but she’s just a kid, not everyone is like them, and fine, she was stupid and did a terrible thing, but she’s never had to do anything that mattered before.

“We’ll remove the curse,” Blaise says, “on one condition. You let us obliviate you.”

She jerks back like they’ve slapped her. She makes an awkward motion like she wants to shake her head, but the curse won’t let her do even that.

Hermione crosses her arms. “Actually, let’s be clear. We’re going to obliviate you no matter what. But if you cooperate with us, it’ll be easier on the both of us, and we’ll remove the curse. If you don’t cooperate with us, we’ll obliviate you anyway, and we won’t remove the curse. You won’t even know why you’re like this, if you remember anything at all.” She grins, and fuck, Hermione is so scary. “Who knows what can go wrong with memory charms if I’m not careful? Maybe I’ll be just as careful obliviating you as you were with the Slytherins’ secrets.”

She’s lying. Hermione at her most furious still isn’t malicious. They’ll remove the curse, and Hermione’s too talented to mess up the memory charm. Marietta has scooted away, pressing herself up against the headboard and as far away from Hermione as she can get.

“So what’ll it be?” Blaise asks, still in that same soft voice. “Won’t you make this easier for all of us? Won’t it be nice, not having to carry the weight of these secrets? You’ll cooperate, won’t you?”

She can’t say yes, can’t nod her head or write it out or anything, but her whole body slumps, giving in, a clear sign of surrender.

“Good choice,” Hermione says while Blaise takes out his wand.

He points it at Marietta and lets out a long string of Latin that Draco doesn’t bother to follow. It’s not any incantation that exists in any book, it’s one Pansy made especially for this. Poppy would have been able to break through her wards given time, but it would have been in pieces, chipping away at it until it broke. There’s no loose thread she could pull to undo it all, so she’d have to unravel it in sections.

The thread pulls itself from her lips. Draco knows it’s not hurting her, that no part of this curse hurts,
but it still makes his stomach flip to see the black thread sliding through her skin.

The instant the curse breaks, she says, “I’m sorry okay? I am, she’s just so scary and you’re all insane—”

“If you want me to feely pity for your cowardice, it’s not working,” Hermione says. “It’s my turn now. Don’t fight me.”

“You’re such a bitch,” Marietta says, dropping her fake apology. “I wish she’d found you and you and all your crazy friends had gotten expelled so I could have just one normal year at this school.”

Hermione pulls out her wand. “It’s sad you’ll forget this moment. You’re a lot less pathetic when you grow a spine.”

“Fuck off,” Marietta says.

“Obliviate!” Hermione casts, and the white light from her memory charm is bright enough that it nearly blinds him.

He remembers to stick Poppy’s book in the cabinet in her office before they go. She must have been really distracted earlier, because she hadn’t even locked it. He spends a moment looking around her office in confusion, because Poppy always locks it, but then Blaise is hissing at him to hurry up before Marietta wakes up, and he doesn’t have time to worry about it, so he just closes the door behind him and follows his friends out of the hospital wing.

~

On the plus side, Hermione is brilliant, so Marietta doesn’t remember anything about the RA, which means she can’t snitch on them, and Umbridge is so traumatized by the skeleton river that she doesn’t try to break into the chamber of secrets again.

On the down side, Dumbledore is gone, and Umbridge has installed herself as headmistress.

“This is a nightmare,” Quinn mutters darkly, slumped sideways and half on top the Hufflepuff table. Harry hopes ze’s making progress with the whole ghost solidifying thing, if only so ze’ll get some more sleep. It’s really not a good sign when someone is getting even less sleep than he is. “Can’t we just. Revolt, or something.”

Cho rolls her eyes, huddled into Cedric’s side. She’s sandwiched between him and Quinn, and Marietta keeps shooting her confused and hurt looks from the Ravenclaw table. They used to be best friends, but Cho’s been giving her the cold shoulder ever since she found out what she did, but the worst part is Marietta doesn’t even know why. Harry tries to imagine what it would be like if Ron suddenly started ignoring him for absolutely no reason, and he feels bad for her, just a little. Cho says, “There are only a few months left to the school year. Besides, the majority of the board of governors voted to have Dumbledore reinstated. Umbridge is ignoring them, and Fudge is letting them, which is just. Great.”

“Do we need to find another meeting place for the RA?” Cedric asks. “Since Umbridge suspects we’re using the chamber.”

Harry shakes his head. “Nah, there’s no point. Unless she imports a Parselmouth, it’s not like she can get inside, and if she tries to force her way in again,” he shrugs.

“You’ll reanimate a couple thousand skeletons and chase her away?” Quinn asks dryly.
“Sometimes accidental necromancy just happens?”

“I’m not sure what part of that was accidental,” Cedric says. “Isn’t that what you meant to do?”

Yes. “No?”

Ze rolls zir eyes. “Look, if I’d known you were down to play the part of a necromancer, then I would have made you do the ghost summoning spell instead of Draco.” Ze pauses. “Actually, considering how it went last time, maybe not.”

“I’m not a necromancer!” he protests, careful to keep his voice down. He remembers the way Quinn looked at him before. “Wait, did you think I was a necromancer even back then?”

“No, I thought there was some other sort of reasonable explanation for your unprecedented ability to summon a couple dozen souls and reanimate just as many corpses on accident, which is something that would kill a normal person who tried to do it on purpose.” Ze rolls zir eyes. “Obviously you’re necromancer.”

“I’m not! I’ve only done it twice. You’re not a potions master just because you made a couple potions.”

Cedric bites his bottom lip, but says, “Well. I agree that just being able to perform two spells doesn’t mean much, even if they were complicated, but it’s not about what you’ve done. It’s about what you can do.”

That literally makes no sense. He can do lots of things. “I’m going to the Gryffindor table now.” he announces. “RA will continue as normal. We’ll just use the pipes to get there instead of using the main entrance, Umbridge doesn’t know about those.”

“That’s a long walk,” Cho says. “It’ll take us a long time when we’re not riding on the basilisk’s back.”

It’s too bad he can’t ask Theophania to act as their transport. Well, he could, technically, but she’ll definitely say no, and then sulk in her statue that he’d even asks.

Drama queens, the lot of them.

“Roller skates?” he suggests, remembering how jealous he was when Dudley had gotten a pair for Christmas when he was eight.

“No,” Cedric says.

Cho frowns. “That’s not a terrible idea actually. The pipe the basilisk took us through was pretty flat for most of the way, with only one major incline. Anything with wheels should do it.”

“Are you suggesting everyone skateboard in the pipes to the chamber?” Harry asks, amused. “Wait, don’t tell me, it’ll be a surprise. How everyone gets there is your problem now.”

The furious way Cho, Cedric, and Quinn are all whispering to each other isn’t the least bit comforting.

Draco is pretty sure that Filius and Poppy know that he was somehow involved in the whole Marietta debacle. They don’t seem mad, which is strange, so maybe he’s wrong. He’d be mad in
their place. Marietta is one of Filius’s Ravenclaws, and he’d broken into Poppy’s hospital wing. Plus, he’d condoned everything that was done to Marietta, up to and including the memory charm that theoretically no one knows about, but honestly, how can that not be the first thing on everyone’s mind when she suddenly has no idea what any of them are talking about when they mention her actions with Umbridge.

He’d do everything with Marietta again. The secrets are too important, and at the end of the day, a curse that lasted for all of ten hours and a memory charm that wiped away maybe a day or two’s worth of memories is … an acceptable loss to him, even though maybe it shouldn’t be.

Filius is teaching him how to make interesting things, how to do great things, and Poppy is teaching him patience and precision, teaching him how to take someone’s life into his hands and hold it steady. He can’t imagine either of them being happy what he’s chosen to do with his power instead. He imagines that if they knew, they’d stop teaching him entirely.

But they’re not doing that, and they don’t seem mad. Instead they’re cheerfully working him into the ground.

“Again.” Poppy says, kind and firm, exactly like she’s been speaking to him for months. “You almost had it that time.”

He huffs, running the back of his arm over his forehead. His hair feels hot and itchy against his neck, clinging to his sweaty skin. He sticks his wand in his mouth to reach back and pull it into a messy bun on top of his head. “Don’t muggles usually use electricity for this part?” he asks, voice muffled.

“And muggles usually lose their patient,” she says, tugging Draco’s wand out of his mouth and wiping it on her apron. “If you can keep their heart beating, you keep the blood flowing. If the blood is flowing, it gives you time to fix everything else. Remember, even the most advanced magic in the hands of the most skilled healers struggles to repair brain injuries. Keeping oxygen flowing to the brain is the most important thing, and the easiest way to do that is to keep their heart beating. Now. Do it again.”

She hands him back his wand handle first. He takes a deep breath, then points it at the pig’s heart in the center of the examination tray. “Cicer!”

It trembles, then slowly begins to beat. But his elation only lasts until it explodes, covering everything around it in slimy pieces of pig’s heart. Draco and Poppy included.

“Better,” she says, and she means it, is the worst thing.

“Again?” he asks, because Filius wants him to translate this old charms theory passage from Japanese into English, which he’s absolutely recruiting Luna to help him with, but Poppy is right. He does almost have this. The magic keeps slipping away from him at the end, but he’s so close, he really does almost have it.

Poppy wipes bits of the organ off her face with her hand, seemingly uncaring of the way it smears into her hair. She summons another pig’s heart with a twist of her wand. “Again.”

~

So, there’s the issue of the book.

It pretty much takes everyone about forty five seconds of arguing over the language on the front of the book to realize it looks different to all of them. Whoever is looking at it sees it in a language they can’t read.
Except Harry.

“It just looks like English,” he says helplessly. “Do you think the language thing is part of the curse?”

“Maybe,” Ginny says, “but what I still don’t get is why you can touch the book when the rest of us can’t.”

And they’d all tried, with Draco on standby to heal all of them when the curse started eating at their skin. Everyone had the same reaction as Ron and Dobby.

Luna is absently braiding her hair, clearly not as interested in this as the rest of them are. “It’s because he is Mother.”

Okay, that’s the second time someone’s called him that, and he’s just as confused this time as he was before.

“What are you talking about?” Ron asks. “Harry’s not a mum.”

Luna says, “No. He is Mother.”

“Loony,” Draco sighs, going over to tug her hair out of hands. He undoes it and stands behind her, running his hand through his cousin’s hair so he can French braid it. “Please speak plainly. I’m begging.”

She frowns. Harry knows that Luna thinks she is speaking plainly, and is just a little confused about why they’re not getting it. But she’s a good sport about it, as she always is, and says, “Lady Death sits in his shadow, and he is Mother.” Wait, that kind of sounds like what Winky and Dobby had been going on about. “He – he,” she pauses, frustrated, struggling to make the concepts in her head come out as words they can understand.

“Is it a title?” Hermione asks. “Mother?”

She nods, relieved. “You or I could cast a necromancy spell, and it might even work, but we are not Mother, and it’s not the same.”

Hermione, the twins, Ginny, and Millie look like that means something to them, but Harry still has no idea what’s going on. “What?”

“Like this,” Luna says, slipping away from Draco mid braid to go stand in front of him. She holds out her hands like she’s going to take the book, but then stops and says clearly, “Mother, may I?”

She’s already tried holding the book. It burned her, just like it burned everyone else. There’s no point in this. But she’s looking at him with her steady, piercing blue eyes, calm and sure, so he says, “Yes,” and drops the book into her waiting hands.

He’s ready to snatch it back once it starts hurting her. But it doesn’t. There are no burns, no screaming, no nothing. She runs her hands over the leather and says, “I still can’t read it, though. It’s Tagalog, I think.”

“Merlin’s balls,” Fred says, before jumping to his feet. “Give it back to Harry.” Luna complies, and Harry’s confused until Fred holds out his hands and says, “Mother, may I?”

He drops the book into his hands, just like he had with Luna. Just like Luna, he’s completely fine. “It looks Greek to me,” Fred says, “like, real actual Greek.”
“Okay, this is cool and all,” Ron says. “But what does it mean?”

“That book was written by a necromancer, for a necromancer,” Blaise says. “It’s decided it belong to Harry.”

“No thanks,” he says. “Necromancy is creepy.” He feels a little guilty as soon as he says it. He doesn’t think it’s creepy, but he’s starting to wonder if maybe he should.

“No more creepy than any other aspect of your life,” George points out. “And come on, it’s cool, you know it’s cool. You might as well embrace it.”

“It’s not something you can put down,” Luna says. “It’s part of you. You have to carry it.”

He looks at the book in Fred’s hands. It’s not - it doesn’t feel bad, it’s not calling him to him or whispering in his mind, he doesn’t have an urge to snatch the book back, or anything like that. It’s just a book. But it’s a book that might be able to teach him how to do something cool, something interesting, something he’s good at.

Necromancy doesn’t feel like a drug. He feels good when he does it, and it’s a rush, but it’s not - it would almost easier to push away if it felt like that.

It almost feels like flying.

It’s something he’s good at, and something he enjoys. Like flying, he imagines it’s something he’ll have to practice to get good at. “I wouldn’t know where to start,” he says finally.

Fred thrusts the book back at him. “Well, why don’t you ask?”

“Need I remind you, last time there was a book that talked to us, Ginny got possessed,” Neville says, but he doesn’t sound that put out. Draco and the twins had already cast every diagnostic spell they could think of, and as far as they could tell, there wasn’t anything malicious about it. But intent didn’t always equal effect, so Neville was right, they should be careful.

Harry takes the book, the leather butter soft and warm. “The beginning.”

The book flips open, and smooth writing flows across the page.

**An Introduction To The Art Of Breathing Life**

*Breath control is the foundation of the art of Necromancy. To breathe is to live, and so you must control your breath if you intend to control life.*

Below it is a series of diagrams, showing him how to hold his breath, and exercises to increase the length of time he can hold it.

“What does that have to do with anything?” he asks aloud. His friends are huddled around him, but he can tell from their faces that none of them can read it, and he guesses they can’t see the illustrations either.

The book remains stubbornly still. He gets the idea that now that he asked it to go from the beginning, it won’t move on until does as it says. “Mass reanimation.”

It doesn’t move for a moment, then sullenly flips to the back, the same spell he’d used before curling across the page. He flips to the front, and the pages on breath control are still there, but by the time he goes to the back of the book again, the spell of mass reanimation has faded.
“Good luck with your extra class,” Ron says, clapping him on the shoulder. Harry glares, because seriously, doesn’t he have enough to do? “Hey, at least it’s not math.”

Well, that’s true.

~

Draco is walking down the hall when someone grabs his elbows and yanks him into a broom closet. He expects it to be Susan, since she has a history of it, or maybe his soulmate wanting to make out. It’s neither.

Hermione grips his shoulders, eyes wild. “We forgot to make a plan. How did we forget?”

“A plan for what?” he asks, confused.

“Owls!”

Oh, shit. They should have started studying weeks ago. “Fuck.”

It’s fine. This is fine.

Uhg, they’re schedule is going to be even more packed than normal. He’s tempted to ask Poppy and Filius to put a pause on the lessons, or at least give him time to breathe, but he dismisses the thought as soon as he has it. If they think he can handle it, he’s going to prove them right, even if it kills him.

It might kill him.

Luckily, his soulmate is a necromancer, so.

~

Harry goes down to Hagrid’s cabin, so sure he must have asked for weirder things in the past, but unable to think of what they are.

“Harry!” he says, smiling wide when he opens the door. “Come on in, wha’ can I do for yer?”

He waits until Hagrid’s closed the door, and he could be subtle about this, he could beat around the bush a little. But there’s probably no point. “I don’t suppose you have some creature corpses that I could, uh, borrow?”

Hagrid raises an eyebrow.

“Not like, on hand,” he clarifies. “But if you happen on any in the forest, could you, uh, save them for me? Please?”

Practicing on rats and rabbits and other small animals is getting kind of boring, and the book said he should practice on a wide variety of lifeforms. He has to know kind of what he’s doing before he goes home for the summer, because if he wants Remus and Sirius to continue to let him practicing without throwing an absolute fit, he has to prove that he knows at least a little of what he’s doing. And even then, they’re probably still going to be pissed. They can’t communicate because of Umbridge, well not without him astral projecting again, but he assumes Dumbledore’s been spending a lot of time at his house doing things for the Order on his forced leave, which probably means he told Sirius and Remus about his little necromancy spell.
Theophania and Nagini watch him practice in the chamber, offering a running commentary. They’ve both offered to kill things for him to practice on, but, uh, no thanks. At some point he’s going to need to start practicing these spells on people and not just animals, and the moral implications of that are so tangled he doesn’t even want to start trying to figure out the logistics of it. That is very much a later problem.

Hagrid sighs, but says, “I’ll see wha’ I can do.”

Harry beams. Hagrid’s the best.

~

When Draco steps into Snape’s office so they can have their mandated twenty second conversation about his career (Quinn’s apparently lasted thirty seven minutes, beating out everyone else ever by thirty five minutes and twenty seconds, which is extra hilarious since ze’s not even in their house), he’s thrown to find that Snape isn’t alone. “Filius? Poppy? What are you doing here?”

“Mr. Malfoy,” Snape sighs.

Oops. Right, they’re not alone. “Professor Flitwick and Madame Pomfrey. What are you doing here?”

“They insisted,” Snape says dryly. “And I don’t care. Take a seat.” Well, okay. He sits across from Snape’s desk. Poppy and Filius are in chairs that are on either side of it, and he scoots his chair back a bit so he can more easily see all three of them. “What are your career goals?”

“I’m going to be a barrister,” he says automatically. That’s been the plan since he knew what it was. He’s going to go law school just like his father, and then he’s going to manage his family’s businesses. If he had the time, he’d like to make more things with charms. Maybe even start up a business himself to add to the Malfoy family collection, and he could sell things like shimmering cufflinks and portable skies and singing badges. If Voldemort keeps up his current spending, they’re going to need something to refill their vault a little.

Filius and Poppy share a look. Snape raises an eyebrow. “You seem sure.”

Okay, this is going even more off script. Snape is supposed to tell him that it’s an acceptable option and send him on his way, like he does for literally every other student. “I am.”

“Don’t you think,” Poppy says delicately, “that that’s a bit of a - that it’s not the best use of your talents?”

He frowns, trying to decide if he’s offended or not. “I’ll make a good barrister. I have the grades for it. You know I do.”

“You don’t have to do something just because you’re good at it,” Filius says gently.

Okay, sure, even if that doesn’t make a lot of sense. But, “I’m going to be head of the Malfoy family. Being a barrister is my best bet on being able to manage it well.”

“Say that you weren’t going to have all these businesses to manage,” Poppy says. “What would you do instead, if you had no prior commitments?”

“But I am, and I do,” he says, starting to get frustrated. What’s the point of this?

“Pretend. For a moment.” He’s not sure what the look on his face is, but it causes Filius to smile.
“For me, Mr. Malfoy.”

Okay, sure. If he didn’t have his life all planned out, what would he choose to do? He loves charms. “Get a charms mastery?” he tries, although, actually, he can do that too. It’s not like he has to head the family as soon as he graduates, he has plenty of time. Well, assuming this war doesn’t kill all of them, of course.

“And what would you do with it?” Filius asks.

“Make … charms?” he tries. “I don’t know. What does one do with a charms mastery besides teach and make things? I like making things. Healer then,” he says, because Poppy is sitting right there, and he’s finally gotten to the point where he’s only exploding the hearts about half the time.

“Would working in a hospital make you happy?” she asks, “Going in every day and healing an array of illnesses and wounds?”

Uhg, no, that sounds boring as hell. Of course, put an ill person in front of him, and he’s going to heal them, but that doesn’t mean that’s what he wants his everyday to look like. Unless he got all the really cool complicated ones that no one else could figure out, but he imagines only people who have spent a couple decades doing the boring healing and getting really good at it get to take a crack at that really hard stuff, so. “No.”

Now they’re all staring at him, and seriously, what’s the point of all this anyway? He’s going to be a barrister, just like his dad. If he wants to get his charms mastery or become a healer just for fun, well, he can do that. He has the money, and it’s not like his parents will stop him from going to school.

“What about alchemy?” Snape tries. “Professor Flamel and her husband say you’re rather good at it.”

He’s okay. He’s not as good as Hermione, or anywhere close to as good as Ron. He likes seeing a completed circle and trying to figure out what it does more than he enjoys actually making the circles, even though the part where he gets to do alchemy is super fun.

He shrugs. Snape’s mouth twitches in a way that might have been an attempt at a smile, which throws him completely. “Of course, you do have the grades to pursue a potions mastery, if you so desire.”

He doesn’t. He likes potions, he’s good at them, but they’re really just a means to an end. He makes potions because he wants the end result, not because he enjoys the process or is particularly intrigued with any of it. Being good at potions is useful, so he studies, and he makes sure he’s good at it, but he doesn’t have any real desire to make a career out of it.

“You know what your parents said when they were sitting where you are now?” Poppy asks.

“Mum said she wanted to a housewife,” Draco says, because he’s heard that story, his mum blithely declaring her intention to throw away all her potential because she wanted to see Slughorn cry, and she and his father had been trading letters all year, so she’d already decided she was going to be his wife.

A housewife is the least of what his mother is, but she always laughs when she tells that story.

“And your father said he was going to be a barrister,” Filius says.

Draco stares. “And then they did. What’s your point?” He has things to do, and all three of them know that, Filius especially. Draco’s just about done with his second real academic paper, and he’s planning to finish it tonight and hand it to Filius in the morning. Or, at least, that had been his plan,
until they’d decided to ambush him.

“Just put some thought into it when you have a little time,” Poppy says encouragingly. “Think about your options.”

“Okay,” he says, even though he doesn’t know what the point of it is. He doesn’t have any options, not really. “Can I go now?”

They nod, and Snape says, “Be careful.”


Harry walks into McGonagall’s office and immediately goes for the biscuit tin. He considers sitting in the chair, but why stand on ceremony, they’re five years into this rodeo, surely there’s no point anymore?

“I think being a professional quidditch player would be rad,” he says, sitting on the edge of McGonagall’s desk and stuffing a biscuit into his face.

She raises an eyebrow and leans back in her seat. “I suppose you could do that. Certainly you wouldn’t have any trouble making the national team.”

“That’s because the national team sucks,” he says. Actually, he probably wouldn’t have trouble making it onto any team, since they’d be so eager to have famous Harry Potter playing for them that they might not even care about his ability. That’s just depressing. Could he glamour himself for auditions maybe? “Okay, change of plans. I’ll be a professional glider instead. Fleur’s on the French team, I’m sure she can pull some strings.” Getting a spot just because of his fame leaves a bad taste in his mouth, but he has no problem with cashing in on Fleur’s.

“Have you learned French yet?” she asks, absently brushing some crumbs off her desk.

Crap. “Does India have a gliding team? My Tamil is getting pretty good. Padma and Parvati offered to help me learn Hindi next.”

“They do, but it takes place on enchanted woven cloth instead of brooms,” she answers.

Hold the fuck up. “Flying carpets are real?” Then, before she has a chance to respond, “I want one.”

“How inappropriate,” a sugar sweet voice simpers, and just like that Harry’s grin slides off his face. He twists to see Umbridge in the doorway and scowls. “Dolores,” McGonagall says, outwardly calm but the skin around her eyes has tightened. “I’m in the middle of a career advisory meeting.”

Harry slips from McGonagall’s desk and slumps into the chair opposite her. He likes pissing Umbridge off and giving McGonagall a hard time, but the last thing he wants is to get his head of house in trouble.

“Oh, don’t mind me,” she says, taking a seat in corner. “I’m just here to observe.”

Well, great. “Is there such a thing as a professional toad hunter?” he asks. He can feel Umbridge’s gaze drilling into the back of his head, so he’s definitely going to pay for that later.

It’s worth it for the way McGonagall has to stop herself from smiling at him. “Not that I’m aware of, Mr. Potter.”
“Auror it is,” he says, and feels an edge of satisfaction when Umbridge presses her lips together. “Maybe even the Minister of Magic, clearly anyone can do the job.”

For one, he would never, that job sounds terrible, and for another, Susan would claw his eyes out. Umbridge makes a horrified noise in the corner, and says, “I think not, Mr. Potter!”

“And why not?” McGonagall asks, a gleam of mischief in her eyes. “He has better grades than Cornelius ever did, after all.”

Umbridge turns as white as a ghost. At least this meeting isn’t a total waste.

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Usually, if they have any alone time, they make the most of it by getting hot and heavy or at least making out. Harry can barely keep his eyes open.

“I’m dreaming in spell arithmancy,” Draco moans, his head on Harry’s chest. This usually isn’t the type of moaning he’s doing when they’re alone together. They’re lying on the giant cushion in the middle of the chamber of secrets, and Draco is flopped half on top of him. Harry’s absently playing with his boyfriend’s hair, which is about all the movement he’s capable of right now.

“I didn’t know breathing could be so exhausting,” he says, “but the book was right, it does make a difference.”

Draco blinks. “How far along are you in that thing?” He’s been so preoccupied with his own independent studies that he hasn’t had the time to pay attention to Harry’s deep dive into necromancy, which Harry doesn’t mind. Half the time he’s not sure what he’s doing, exactly, so it’s better that he doesn’t have to try and explain it to Draco. He’s low on time on top of it anyway considering how much time he spends planning their RA lessons.

To their credit, no one in the RA mentions Marietta. Luckily, besides the content of their actual lessons, everyone’s usually too busy talking excitedly about the enchanted sleds Cho, Quinn, and Cedric had set up to get the RA members from one end of the castle to the other. It was absolutely ridiculous and incredibly fun, and he was so, so glad he’d made that their problem.

“Like. Half?” he guesses.

Draco shifts so he’s looking up at him, so Harry obligingly looks down. He’s so, so tired, and Draco’s got dark purple bruises under his eyes and his lips are dry and chapped, but he still has to resist the urge to kiss him. “You’ve gotten through half of that book already? Like you’ve read half?”

“No. Well, yes, but I’ve gotten about halfway through the spells and exercises and all that stuff. I still need to work on breath control,” he says, which would be a great segue into some dirty talk if they weren’t so goddamn tired. “Necromancy is a lot easier to do when I’m not tied to a gravestone and being tortured by Voldemort and all his followers?”


No. Well, yes, but it’s hard in fascinating ways. He’s never really gotten his friends’ interest in academic things. Not just Hermione and Draco, who are frankly a little insane, but even Ron’s casual interest in alchemy, even if he hates math, and Pansy’s love of transfiguration, and Blaise and Neville’s ongoing affair with herbology. He likes magic, but he likes it for the sake of it being magic, and he’s never been really invested in something before. He’s good at defense, and he likes it, but it’s just – something he’s good at and enjoys. He’s not passionate about defense, not really.
He is with necromancy. He’s noticing patterns in the spellwork, in the ways he has to move his body and breathe and get everything just right to pull it off. He likes the way the magic feels under his skin, good and warm and familiar, like he’s been casting it his whole life.

“I like it,” he says, because he does. He really, really likes it, and he hopes Sirius and Remus are going to be cool about it all, because he likes it too much to stop doing it just because it scares them. He wishes there was something small and benign he could show them, but reanimating the dead is pretty disquieting no matter what. Except to him, apparently. “Is it weird?”

“Yes,” Draco says, “but there are lots things about you that are weird, so it doesn’t bother me, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Harry glares at him, but Draco’s just smiling at him, fond and small and perfect.

Nagini’s head pops up over Draco’s shoulder. Harry hadn’t even noticed her coming over. "If you two aren’t going to fornicate, can I nap?"

“Please don’t say that word,” he says, because he has more than enough things to haunt his dreams without adding to them.

The statue opens, and Theophania hisses, “Are you making a nuisance of yourself?”

“No!” she says, “They’re not even doing anything, they’re just lying there.”

Abigail lifts her head up next to Nagini, and what the hell, Harry hadn’t even known that she was here. Although Harry supposes he should have guessed that Draco wouldn’t feel comfortable leaving her at the manor without Nagini there to protect her. He can’t magic his parents out of that horrible situation, but he can at least rescue his snake.

She slithers over Draco to curl up on top of them, resting her head on his stomach. "You’re warm."

Nagini hisses angrily, then shifts until she’s curled as much of herself on their legs as she can fit, which is a surprising amount of her, actually. His legs are definitely going to fall asleep like this, but he can’t bring himself to ask her to move.

Theophania doesn’t try to lie on top of them, thank merlin, but she does curl around them, the lights playing off her pretty iridescent scales. “I like snakes,” Draco yawns, snuggling further into Harry’s chest.

“They like you too,” he says, but Draco’s already asleep.

Considering the two snakes and one boyfriend he has on top of him, he’s not going anywhere anytime soon. Harry can’t bring himself to be too upset by it.

~

Draco wakes up this morning with the intent of going to the quidditch game. It’s the last of the year, Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw, and look, Cho’s great, but she can’t carry that team all on her own. Unless a miracle happens, Gryffindor is going to cream them. Millie’s on his arm, chatting excitedly about the game, because she loves quidditch regardless of who’s playing.

They don’t make it to the game.

Instead, Hagrid waves them over from his hut, and since Draco doesn’t take care of magical creatures anymore he hasn’t seen Hagrid up close since he got back. He can tell as soon he sees him
that he’s holding himself too carefully, can see the strain he’s trying to hide in the corners of his eyes. “You’re hurt! What happened?”

Hagrid shifts his weight. “Abou’ that. I could use yer help, if ye can.”

Millie frowns. “Is this about all the time you’ve been spending in the forbidden forest doing something that’s pissing Firenze off?” They both turn to her, and she shrugs. “He can get kind of chatty during class.”

Draco’s never heard of a chatty centaur before, and judging by his face, Hagrid hasn’t either. “Aye, it is. I meant ta show ye and Harry and the rest o’ them a’ the same time, but I need the cover o’ the game.”

Well, that’s not ominous at all, but they agree to follow him into the forest anyway. Draco wasn’t expecting anything, because its Hagrid, it could be a dragon or a nest of pixies or even just a hoard of stray cats. In spite of that, the giant still manages to throw him. “Um.”

He’s even taller than Hagrid, and stronger than him it seems, as he suddenly pulls a whole trees out of the ground. “Grawp!” Hagrid shouts, “Wha’ did I say abou’ that?”

Grawp pauses, blinking. He looks at the tree trunk in his hands and hesitantly hold it out to Hagrid. “Want?”

“No, put it back,” Hagrid says.

His lower lip juts out. “Need it.”

“You do not,” Hagrid says, as stern as Draco’s ever heard him. “Put it back.”

Grawp sniffs and drops the tree back into the hole he tore it from. It’s lopsided. Draco looks around, and it’s like he’s made a clearing here, with what’s probably close to a hundred trees stacked on one end and huge gaping holes in the ground around him, as well as broken branches and smushed fauna everywhere else. No wonder the centaurs are pissed. A giant in the forest is really bad news for everyone who lives in this forest. There’s a reason giants are normally in mountainous caves.

“Hagrid,” Millie says, her perfectly calm voice at odds with her wide eyes. “Why is there a giant in the forest?”

Draco rubs at his forehead. “Is this where you were in the beginning of the school year? With giants?”

He nods. “Dumbledore wanted ta see if I could recruit ‘em before Voldemort, wha’ with me being a half giant and all.”

“Did you?” Mille asks.

He shakes his head. “They wan’ no part in it. Bu’ I’m hopin’ that means they won’t support Voldemort either.”

“So you just took one back with you?” he asks.

Hagrid hesitates, twisting his hands in the front of his shirt, looking more like a nervous first year than anything else. “I - I had to. He’s, he’s slow. The other giants were bein’ mean ta him. It wasn’t right.”
He does seem a little, well, slow. Giants are as intelligent as goblins, even if their language and lifestyle is primitive. Draco’s not going to knock it. He certainly sees the appeal of hiding in the cave in the middle of nowhere and pretending the rest of the world doesn’t exist. “Okay. I understand that you were worried for him. But maybe you’re not the best person to deal with this particular problem? The forbidden forest isn’t a great place for a giant, and clearly he’s hurting you. Isn’t there another giant you could talk to? Grawp can’t be the only slow giant that exists.”

Draco is not well versed in mental disabilities. They’re are plenty of spells and devices that can help disabled wizards, and he’s sure the muggles must have come up with something clever, but he doesn’t know what to do for a giant.

Hagrid opens his mouth, then closes it, again shifting his weight and not quite looking at them.


“What? No,” Draco says, but Hagrid’s eyes are shining like he’s about to cry. “Oh, merlin.”

“He’s my brother!” he says. “Me half brother. But my mother is dead, and none of the giants will take care o’ him because he’s my mother’s son. They hated her for what she did, for being with me dad. So they won’ help him, and I know this isn’t - that it’s not - he’s my brother.”

Draco places his hand on the tallest part of Hagrid he can reach, which is his elbow. “Breathe. It’s okay, we understand.”

Grawp shambles over, and falls to his knees with a thunderous crash. “Hagrid sad?” He hesitates and his shoulders hunch, then he says quietly. “Mad?”

Hagrid shakes his head, rubbing at his eyes and forcing a smile. “No. I’m not mad a’ you, it’s okay.”

“Why are you showing us this?” Millie asks. “Why now, when you’ve been hiding it all year, when the school year is almost over? What’s happening?”

He sighs. “Tonks sent me a patronus with a message from Percy. Umbridge is goin’ to try and force me out tonight. She’s goin’ to make a scene of it. Percy told me ta run, but I’m not gonna do that, not yet. I’m goin’ ta let her make a scene of it. But I jus’ need to know tha’ someone will be here ta look after Grawp while I’m gone.”

“What do you need us to do?” Draco asks.

Hagrid blinks. “Ye - ye’ll really do it?”

“Of course we will,” Millie says brusquely. “You’d do the same for us, wouldn’t you?” It’s a redundant question, because of course he would, because Hagrid at his worst is still better than most people at their best.

Hagrid sniffs and rubs at his eyes again. “Jus’ - jus’ make sure he’s eatin’, and visit him. He gets lonely, and then,” he looks towards the pile of logs.

Right, Grawp destroys things when he’s left alone too long, got it. “We can do that,” Draco assures him, “and you know Harry and the rest will help too. Do whatever you have to do. We’ll take care of your brother.”

Hagrid bends down to gather the both of them in a bone crushing hug. He and Millie do their best to return it, but considering their arms are pinned to their sides, they don’t do a very good job it, but he’s sure Hagrid gets the sentiment anyway.
Harry’s of the opinion that all classes should be cancelled the week before Owls so they have time to study. He wouldn’t use that time to study, but it’d mean he wasn’t struggling keep from falling asleep in astronomy class after playing quidditch. They won the game, and the cup. That means he should just get to nap during class, right? Who cares about stars anyway, they hadn’t ever done him much good.

He’s snapped out of his sleepy daze when he hears the screaming. He looks down and his heart jumps into his throat. Hagrid is outside his hut being attacked by four fully grown wizards, their stunning spells hitting him in unison. It doesn’t seem to do much to Hagrid besides piss him off.

“Hey!” he shouts. He doesn’t realize he’s reaching for his wand until Ron grips his wrist. Why is he trying to stop him? They’re attacking Hagrid, they have to help! Ron jerks his chin over to the entrance of the tower. The rest of the class has run over to the edge to look, so no one else has noticed Millie standing just inside the classroom. She’s shaking her head, looking at him imploringly. Harry glares and stabs his hand towards Hagrid, because seriously, he’s not supposed to do anything?

She matches his glare and makes a cross with her forearms in front of her chest. He hates this, but he trusts Millie. If she’s telling him not to do anything, she must have a reason. They should really learn sign language.

Ron’s scowling, but he gives a sharp nod to Millie, and Harry sees her backing back down the stairs out of the corner of his eyes as he turns to watch everything happening below. Hermione’s going to be upset about dropping this class when they tell her about this.

He relaxes slightly when he sees Hagrid isn’t even casting any magic. Millie was right. Whatever he’s doing, he’s doing it on purpose, because if he was really struggling, if this was a real fight, he wouldn’t just forget that he could do magic.

Of course, McGonagall chooses that moment to go running onto the grounds, moving faster than he’s ever seen her move before. “Oh, shit,” Lavender breathes. Harry feels a seed of doubt. Surely if this was all part of Hagrid’s plan, then McGonagall wouldn’t be getting in the middle of it. Right?

A burst of green magic leaves one of the wizard’s wand, and Harry goes cold. McGonagall jabs her wand in front of her, and a wall of earth erupts in front of Hagrid, absorbing the spell. It would have hit Hagrid if she hadn’t done that.

That was the killing curse. They’re down there flinging unforgivables.

This changes things. His hands curl around his wand, intent on doing something. He’s not sure what, but he is sure that there must be tons of skeletons in the forbidden forest, and he sees no reason he shouldn’t take advantage of that. Or, okay, there are plenty of reasons he shouldn’t take advantage of that, it’s just a struggle to make himself care right in this moment.

“Expecto patronum!” Lavender shouts, and a bright silver zebra bursts from her wand. Other members of the RA raise their wands, echoing her spell, and nearly a dozen bright patronuses sprint down below, Ron’s sea lion among them. They dart in and around Hagrid, hiding exactly where he is from sight, making it harder for anyone to hit him. Even this far away, he can hear Hagrid laughing. Between the everyone’s patronuses and McGonagall helping him, the wizards, who Harry’s pretty sure are aurors, can’t land a single hit.

Hagrid slips into the forbidden forest, and no one thinks for a second that they’ll be able to catch him.
in there, not at night anyway. Harry expects them to give up.

Instead, the four of them turn, and each of them casts a spell that burns bright red. Four balls of red magic hits McGonagall right in the chest. She collapses to the ground mid motion, like she’s a puppet and all of her strings have been cut.

“NO!” Harry roars, snapping out his wand, and he can’t do necromancy like this, when he’s this angry, no matter how tempting it is. If he’s angry, what he reanimates will be angry, and will be that much harder to control. “STUPEFY!”

Some students are running from the front steps of the castle towards McGonagall, but Harry can’t tell who they are, can only see the green and yellow of their uniforms. The red of his stunning spell burns a darker red than whatever they hit McGonagall with, and the auror falls stunned to the ground. By the time the remaining three think to turn to the tower, he’s fired off three more, and they’re all stunned before they can even think to raise their wands against him.

Harry’s blood is boiling in his veins with his anger and his fear. McGonagall and the students are gone, and those sad excuses for aurors better hope she’s fine, they better pray that they didn’t do anything horrible to her, otherwise a stunning spell is going to be the least of their problems.

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Draco had wanted to give the Gryffindors a heads up about what was going on, had called Harry on the mirror a couple of times, but he obviously didn’t fly with it on him, and after quidditch he’d had to run off to astronomy, so there hadn’t been any time. The best he’d been able to do was asking Millie to go and try stop Harry from doing something stupid.

He has a meeting with Poppy to go over the different ways to clear out veins and how to heal them if they’ve been severed. The fact that this is something she can even teach him is impressive all on it’s own. He’s spent practically the whole year working on getting his magic precise and controlled enough to work on something as small and delicate as veins.

They’ve barely gotten started when a hawk patronus soars through the window. Poppy automatically raises her arm for it, and it settles there just like a real hawk would. “Come quickly,” it says with Dumbledore’s voice before fading to nothing.

Poppy curses. Draco wonders if he’s supposed to pretend he didn’t hear that. “Uh.”

“Stay here,” she snaps, “if anything truly awful happens, grab Severus. He’s a crap healer, but he has a potion for almost anything. If I’m going to be gone for more than a couple hours, I’ll get one of my friends in St. Mungo’s to come over.”

“I’m not sure if this is a good idea,” he starts. What if something goes wrong with Hagrid’s plan? But he can’t say that, obviously.

“What would you know about good ideas?” she asks, and okay, rude. Accurate, but rude. “Don’t go anywhere.”

“I’m not qualified for this!” he shouts, but she doesn’t pay him any mind, hurrying towards her office to use the floo to go wherever Dumbledore is. It’s a little concerning that she knows where to go without Dumbledore having to specify. That kind of sounds like it’s Harry’s house, since the Order has been using it as their base.

He spends a half hour sullenly going through her potions cabinet and chucking anything expired. Then the hospital wing doors bang open, and Cassius and Cedric come bursting through, a body
floating behind them. Angelina and Katie are right behind them, wands out and looking extremely panicked. “POMFREY!” Cedric screams, “HELP!”

“She’s not here,” Draco says, rushing over. “What’s all the fuss—”

It’s McGonagall. She’s so pale that she looks dead, except for the sickly red glowing in the veins of her neck. It’s a poisoning spell, he thinks in horror. They haven’t covered that yet.

“Get her!” Angeline snaps. “This is important!”

“Put her on the bed,” he says, trying to tamp down on the hysteria clawing its way up his throat. “We have to get Snape.” Both Cedric and Cassius’s faces twist. “What? What’s wrong?”

“No one’s seen him since last night,” Cassius says. “Quinn had a meeting this morning with a whole bunch of Potion Masters so she could demonstrate her ghost solidifying potion, and Snape was supposed to be there, but he wasn’t.”

“Well, maybe he’s just an asshole,” he says, even though he knows that’s not the case. Quinn is one of the very few people Snape actually likes, and he’s been working with her on this potion for years. He wouldn’t miss it, not if he could help it.

“Are you fucking serious right now?” Katie says. “Forget about Snape! McGonagall needs a healer!”

Fuck, she’s right. “Call St. Mungos,” he says, “Poppy has some floo powder in her office.”

Angelina grabs his shoulders and shakes him. “We don’t have time for that! Everyone knows you heal, and you’ve been studying with Pomfrey all year, there has to be something you can do!”

“I,” he hesitates. He’s never done anything like this before, except maybe Ron’s hand. He looks towards McGonagall, and he can see the pattern of her veins just based on the poison glowing through her skin. If the floo connects, who knows if they’ll even be able to convince a healer to come through, if there’s even on available. They don’t usually answer calls from Hogwarts since the castle has Poppy, who’s the best of them. So, they’re right, they can’t waste the time. “Cassius, Cedric, guard the door. Don’t let anyone through, especially whoever did this to her, but literally no one unless they’re a healer.”

They nod, and he turns towards Katie and Angelina. “You two are going to help me.”

“We don’t know anything about healing,” Angelina warns even as she pulls off her robe so it doesn’t get in her way, Katie doing the same behind her.

“It doesn’t matter,” he says. “I mostly want you here because you’re both girls.”

They’re confused until Draco vanishes McGonagall’s robes, leaving her in just her underwear. “Ah,” Katie says.

“Sorry Professor,” Draco says, even though she can’t hear him. He needs to see be able to see the path the poison is making, and to do that he needs to see her skin. Once it makes its way to her brain, he’s fucked, he can’t do any of that stuff. So he needs to slow down the spread of the poison before it gets there, and it’s originating in her heart, which, just, great. But he’s been working on hearts for months, so, this is fine. “Please don’t explode.”

“Um, actually, maybe you shouldn’t do this,” Katie starts, but it’s too late for that.
“Segnis!” he casts, pointing his wand at her chest. The magic leaves him in a rush, and she doesn’t die, so that’s nice. He picks up her hand and presses his fingers against her wrist, searching for her pulse. If it worked, her heart rate should have dropped to about thirty beats per minute. Which would be dangerously low at any other time, but right now he needs her heart to keep beating because he needs her alive, but as slow as possible. The slower her heart beats, the slower the poison is spread throughout her whole body, and the more time he has to save her life.

He doesn’t mean to see it. He vanished her clothes because he needs to see her veins, all of them, and he picked up her hand so he could check her heartbeat.

For a moment he thinks he’s looking at a dark mark, and that everything he thought he knew about McGonagall is about to be thrown on its head. But it’s not a tattoo. It’s a soulmark, on her right forearm, the exact place where a dark mark goes.

It’s a snake, curled into a figure eight shape with it’s mouth open wide. All it’s missing is the skull, and it would be a perfect match.

He turns her arm over, but when he looks up, Katie and Angelina are watching him. “I didn’t see anything, and you didn’t either, got it?”

They nod. “Did you do it? Is she healed?”

“No, I just slowed it down,” he says, tapping his wand against his hand. How does he do this? The poison magic is a physical thing, but it’s going to take more than a bit of dittany. He has to remove the spell, and then heal its effects. And he better do it quickly if he doesn’t want McGonagall dying on him.

The incantation he used on Ron and Dobby’s hands won’t work because this curse isn’t warded, it’s just a bitch. He could – he could try and overpower it? Poppy was supposed to let him practice a vein clearing spell tonight. It’s meant to do things like break up plaque and cleanse it of impurities, it’s not designed to tackle poison spells, and surely there has to be a spell that is designed for that, there has to be a better way to do this.

He just doesn’t know what it is.

“Please tell me either of you have an idea of how to get that crap out of her?” Draco asks. “I have an idea, but it’s a very bad one, and likely to fail.”

Katie shakes her head, but Angelina says, “Can’t – can’t you just – get it out? Is it a thing inside of her? Can you take it out?”

Oh, duh , he’s been thinking about this in completely the wrong way. Magic is only as useful as his imagination. So instead of trying to save her using magic he doesn’t know, he should save her using the magic he does.

He’s been casting blood replenishing spells for years.

“Winky,” he says, and his house elf appears in front of him in a crack. “Get all the blood replenishing potion you can, from my stores and the family one, and Snape’s if you can get into it.”

“Yes, Master Draco,” she says, before disappearing.

He summons several buckets and goes over to the medical cabinet to pull out a surgical knife.

“Oh,” Angelina says nervously. “What are you doing?”
“The poison is in her blood,” he says, “so I’m going to drain her poisoned blood and replace it with fresh blood. Even if I can’t get all of it out that way, it should dilute it enough that she can fight the rest off herself.” Which is all way easier than trying to nullify the poison and heal its effects on her blood, if slightly effective. But the magic he can do is better than the magic he can’t.

“You were right, that is a very bad idea, don’t do that,” Katie orders.

“Actually, this is my better plan,” he admits. Winky appears with her arms full of little potion bottles. He starts sorting through them, pulling out the ones that have gone a little pale, a little off. They’re effective, but weaker than when they were fresh, which is what he wants. He wants them potent enough to work, but not so potent that it’ll interfere with his spells. “I can layer the application of the potions and spells if I’m very careful, but I also have to be careful about where I’m bleeding her.” He huffs out a breath. “Some leeches would be great about now.”

Katie says a spell he doesn’t recognize, twists her wand, and one of the buckets is full of leeches. He stares. “What? Summoning living creatures is my specialty.”

He picks up the bucket and hands it to her. “Put these on her neck and upper chest. I’d rather not puncture any major veins there if I don’t have to. Don’t touch the leeches once they’ve ingested the poisoned blood, levitate them off of her once they’re full, and place a new one down. Not in the same place, and makes sure they’re all about three inches apart.”

Katie nods. Draco picks up her arm with one hand, holds the scalpel with the other, and takes a deep breath.

Then he cuts into her basilic vein, carefully directing the flow of blood into a bucket. They’re not that big, each of them only capable of holding a pint to make this easier on him, so he waits until it’s about three quarters full before healing her arm. She looks even paler than before but her heart is still beating, and she’s still breathing. That’s the part that matters. “Magis sanguis!”

A little color returns to her cheeks. The glowing along her chest isn’t as bright, and it’s grown patchy around her chest and neck where the leeches are draining her blood.

Angelina has one of the pale potions he’d put aside clutched into her hand. “How am I supposed to give this to her? She’s passed out!”

“I’m going to have to wake her up,” he says reluctantly. “Hold her down. If she tries to get up, don’t let her.” Angelina nods, and Draco taps his wand against McGonagall’s forehead. This would have been a really handy spell to know when he was trying to heal his father last year. “Afipnizo!”

Her face creases in pain first, then her eyes flutter open. “Professor, it’s okay,” Angelina says clearly. “You got hit with some spells, and you’re going to be okay, but you can’t move, okay?”

McGonagall’s eyes are unfocused. She’s not all there, not that Draco can blame her, but her voice almost sounds normal when she says, “Yes.”

“Drink this,” Angelina say, lifting the blood replenishing potion to her lips.

“Slowly,” he warns, and one of them must be listening to him, or maybe McGonagall really is that out of it, but either way it takes her nearly a fully minute to drink whole potion, and when she’s done her head thumps back against the bed, exhausted. Now that she’s semi-conscious, he makes sure to cast a pain numbing spell before cutting into her again. He has to drain the new, clean blood out with the bad, which is the one downside of this.

He has to repeat the process three more times before the poison inside of her is down to a
manageable level. He could maybe do it one more time, but the spells and the potions and draining
the blood is all a strain on McGonagall’s body, to the point where she just straight up falls asleep
during all of it until Angelina waking her up to take the blood replenishing potion. Her body will
take care of the rest on it’s own, and he doesn’t want to make it that much harder for her by putting
her through another round of bloodletting, potion, and spell just to remove what would probably be a
negligible amount of poison from her blood.

He doesn’t know what McGonagall wears to bed, so he just summons one of his mother’s
nightgowns, which is long and silk and pale blue. Then he realizes it doesn’t cover the soulmark on
her forearm, and he summons the robe to match. His mum has like forty of them, and this one isn’t
even her favorite. She won’t mind, if he she even notices at all.

He hears yelling outside the hospital wing doors. It’s possible there’s been yelling this whole time,
and was just too focused on not killing his transfiguration professor to pay it any attention. Katie
casts a nervous glance towards the door, then looks back to McGonagall. “She wouldn’t want
anyone to see her like this.”

“Poppy’s room are through her office, I’ll put her in her bed,” he says, leaning down and placing one
arm under McGonagall’s knees and the other under back before lifting her up and tipping her against
his chest. It’s only when he looks up at them does he remember that he’s supposed to be a slimy
Slytherin, wannabe Death Eater, and that this isn’t exactly matching up with his actions. “Uh.”

“Thank you,” Angelina says. “Get out of here after that, we’ll deal with whoever is causing a fuss
behind those doors and keep an eye on McGonagall. If we need you, I know where the Slytherin
common room is.”

Of course she does. Well, she is dating Fred. “Thanks,” he says, and then retreats to Poppy’s room
before he can do or say anything to damage his reputation more than he already has.

The portrait leading to Poppy’s room swings open without him having to ask, and then helpfully
directs him to her bedroom, since he’s only been here a couple of times. He has to use his knee to
pull back the covers, and then he gently lays McGonagall on the bed, pulling the blankets up to her
shoulders and tucking it in around her. She’s fast asleep and her heart rate is back to normal. She’s
going to have a really crappy next couple of weeks, but. She’s alive.

“I’m really glad you’re not dead,” he tells her. She doesn’t even twitch.

Good.

“Winky!” he calls out, and then she’s in front of him. “I don’t suppose you know where Harry is?”

“He is being in your classroom, with all your other friends,” she says. “I is telling them where you
are. Would you like me to be taking you to them?”

He nods and holds out his hand for her to grab.

If it was just the talk he had about Hagrid and Grawp, or even McGonagall being hurt, maybe that
could wait until tomorrow, maybe he could just pass on a message and tell the rest of them to go to
bed. But it’s not.

Snape is missing. Dumbledore asked Poppy to come immediately, even though it meant abandoning
the hospital wing.

Draco doesn’t think those two things are a coincidence. He thinks they’re related.
Something has gone horribly wrong.

Chapter End Notes

megalania-prisca has done several gorgeous pieces for siat that you can view here (she's added more since the last chapter!)

a-side-of-fries made a couple really cute sketches that you view here

vikingeegs drew an absolutely gorgeous pic of draco and his patronus that you view here

megoivoy did an adorable drawing of albus and nicolas that you view here

dyinginjapanese did a great sketch of harry and theophania that you view here

fandoms-are-my-lifestyle made a wonderful edit for zaira zabini that you view here

feel free to follow / harass me at shanastoryteller.tumblr.com

if you're worried about social media imploding but still want to keep up with me and my writing, you can sign up for my weeklyish (sometimes ever other week) newsletter
“How’s McGonagall?” Harry asks the second Draco walks through the door.

“Alive,” he answers, “and looking like she’ll stay that way.” They all sigh in relief. Before Harry can ask him any more questions, he continues, “Pomfrey was called away by Dumbledore, and Snape is missing. I think something happened with the thing they’re guarding, something to do with the Order and Voldemort.”

“Missing?” Pansy asks. “We saw him yesterday.”

Hermione says, “But not this morning.”

“And he missed his appointment with Quinn this morning to defend zir potion, which he would never do. If he’s left, it means something important has happened.” He winces and turns to Harry, “So. I think, we should try and find him. Or at least check on that door that everyone’s so worried about.”

It only takes Harry a half second to figure out what Draco’s asking. “You want me to astral project? To find Snape?”

“No,” Ron says, “absolutely not, Harry’s not risking himself for Snape of all people.”

Millie frowns, but doesn’t protest.

“Only if he can do it safely,” Draco insists. “You think I want him to risk himself more than he has to? At least to check the door, I don’t know if he’s even capable of finding Snape. The Point Me spell isn’t working, so either he’s cloaking himself, or he’s dead. Either way Harry won’t be able to find him on the astral plane.”

Ron scowls, but Harry places his hand on his back. “I can do it. It’s fine. It’s not dangerous. Not for me.”

Blaise’s eyes narrow. “Is this a having a ridiculous amount of magic thing, or a necromancer thing?”

“Both?” he tries. “It’s not going to drain me like it does other people, especially since I’ve learned how to breathe properly, and I’m not going to get stuck. I know how souls are supposed to fit inside people.” It’s something he’s always known, somehow, something instinctual. It’s why even when he has no idea what he was doing, when he was bleeding energy and magic all over the place, it didn’t kill him. People get stuck outside their bodies, can’t figure out how to survive outside of them or how to sustain them, and they’re stuck out there until their bodies die, until the energy drain kills them.

But that won’t happen to him.

He’s a necromancer. He’s a Mother. He knows how to come home.

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“Are you sure?” Hermione insists.

“Look, it’s fine. I’ll be quick,” he says.

He lowers his mental shields, and he doesn’t even have the chance to say the spell, to reach for his
wand, none of it. As soon as they’re open a crack, it’s like being hit with the mental equivalent of a sledgehammer, and he can feel himself stumble and fall to the floor, even as his mental self is pulled to a different place.

His friends are going to be pissed.

He’s in the ministry, and he’s pulled through and past the door the Order has been guarding, through a bunch of twisting rooms that he barely has the time to notice, before he slams to a stop in the middle of a large room with tall ceilings.

There are large bookshelves with glowing orbs nestled on their shelves, like balls of glass filled with light. It’s an incomprehensible number of shelves, but he’s been pulled towards a section near the back, one labeled *Prophecies, T* in big block letters.

There’s a couple dozen Death Eaters in a circle, and Voldemort is in the center, his hand fisted in someone’s hair.

It’s Snape. He’s so thoroughly beaten that his face is one big bruise, and he’s hunched over himself. He’s got a bloody nose that’s dripping over his lips and chin, and there are several places where his robes look wet, and Harry can only assume it’s blood.

“Why can’t I pick it up?” Voldemort hisses, yanking Snape’s head upward so he can glare into his eyes. “It has my name, it’s mine, why can’t I lift it?”

“I don’t know,” he croaks.

“You do,” Voldemort insists, “and you better tell me before I lose patience, traitor. The only reason you’re not being skinned alive is because I can’t torture information out of a corpse.” One of the downsides of not being a necromance, Harry supposes. “If you have no more information to give, then I have no reason to keep you live.”

Snape remains stubbornly silent.

Voldemort raises his wand, and Harry shouts, “STOP IT! Don’t!”

He freezes.

No one reacts, but Voldemort turns his head to look right at him. “Ah, Potter. Come for a little visit?”

That gets a reaction out of Snape. He starts struggling, trying to turn his head to look where Voldemort is, but he just looks past and through Harry. No one but Voldemort can see him, which makes sense, he’s not astral projecting this time, didn’t even get the chance to try. “I’m pretty sure this is your fault this time, dragging me here. Don’t hurt him. Let him go.”

“Why?” he asks, almost sounding genuinely curious. “He’s never been a friend to you. He tortured you, harassed you and your friends, hated all of you every second of your time at school. What do you care if I kill him?”

“I care,” he says, because he does, he always cares.

“Strange,” he murmurs. “Very well then, Potter, I’ll give you a chance to save him, if you *care*. Come and get him. I won’t kill him. For a little bit. Just come on in and rescue him, since you care whether he lives or dies. But you have to do it alone. Any hint that you’ve told your professors or Dumbledore or anyone in the Order, I will kill him, and we’ll all be gone long before anyone will be able to do anything about it. The only thing that will change is that you’ll have Severus Snape’s
blood on your hands.”

“I can’t break into the ministry on my own,” he argues, mind whirring. Is he going to do this? Is he really doing to do this, something so insane, for someone who doesn’t even like him?

Voldemort makes an expression with his lipless mouth that’s an approximation of a smile. “Very well. Bring your irritating friends if you must.”

“Don’t,” Snape croaks, looking in the place just to the left of where Harry is, clearly basing this just off of where Voldemort is looking. “Don’t come.”

Voldemort kicks him in the ribs, and Harry hears something snap. Snape crumples to the ground. “STOP!”

“I said he’d be alive, I didn’t say what condition he’d be in,” Voldemort says. “If you want him back in any sort of salvageable shape, I’d hurry.”

Harry’s about to curse him out, but then there’s a yank at his navel, and the next thing he knows he’s flat on his back in the middle of his classroom.

“A little warning next time, yeah?” Ron asks, face hovering over him, along with his other friends.

Draco is scowling. “Seriously, you couldn’t even make it to the floor first? Really?”

“I didn’t astral project, Voldemort used our – whatever the hell link we have to pull me to him,” he says, “and I have good news, and bad news.”

“Okay?” Hermione says. “I want the bad news first.”

“Too bad, it’s the same news.” Blaise rubs at the bridge of his nose. “He’s figured out Snape is a spy and is torturing him in the Department of Mysteries, and I may have sort of implied, or perhaps explicitly said, that we were going to break into the Ministry and rescue him.”

Harry manages to count to five before everyone starts yelling.

~

Draco doesn’t have a high opinion of Snape. He doesn’t like him, doesn’t enjoy his presence, and wouldn’t miss him if he never saw him again. That said, he’s his head of house, and his potions professor, and leaving him to die seems wrong. Someone should go rescue him.

But like hell if Harry’s going to be the one to do it. “No. Sorry to Snape, I am, really. But no. It’s not like he’s your friend or your family or your bloody godfather or anything. There’s no reason for you to risk your life to save him. He’s a bastard, and we all know it.”

“We can’t just leave him there,” Harry insists.

“So send Dumbledore a fucking patronus and call it a day,” Draco says, “They clearly know he’s missing, if not where he is. That’s probably why Dumbledore called Poppy away.”

Harry rolls his eyes. “If we do that, Voldemort will see them coming, and he’ll kill Snape. Are you okay with that? I’m not okay with that.”

“I can live with it,” Draco says, even though it makes his insides squirm. “What I can’t live with is you getting killed trying to save him. This is ridiculous.”
Harry is glaring at him, but Draco glares right back. Walking into the middle of a Death Eater meeting is suicide, and he’s going to be really pissed if Harry makes him a widower before they’re even married.

Millie clears her throat and says. “Not - look. Whatever we decide - what you decide - fine. Sure. I don’t care. But I just want to know if that’s who we are.”

There’s a moment of silence, and Pansy nudges her in the side. “What do you mean?”

She crosses her arms and kicks the floor, hunched like a little kid. “I mean, I just mean. None of you hesitated in Diagon Alley, with those Dementors. Draco didn’t hesitate last year when he threw out a shield and made himself a target for Fleur’s rage. What I mean is, if it was our friends, would we hesitate? If it was someone we weren’t friends with, but liked, someone we thought was a good person, like Shackbolt, wouldn’t we go? If it was my aunt, who kind of hates me, or Draco’s father, both of whom are Death Eaters, we’d still go, wouldn’t we? But not for Snape. Is that our line? We’ll risk our lives for each other, for people who want some of us dead, for people who either don’t know us or don’t care for us, for people we don’t even know. But because we don’t like Snape, because he’s unpleasant and mean, we leave him to die. It doesn’t matter that he’s on our side, that he’s our professor, that he’s Quinn’s friend, that he’s risked his life again and again to keep Harry safe, even if he’s horrible to him. We don’t like him, so he dies.”

Well, fuck. When she puts it like that.

She glances up, sees that they’re all staring at her, and flushes. “I’m not - I don’t particularly want to go charging into the ministry to get killed, but I just want us to be sure we’re thinking this choice through. Do we save everyone, because that’s who we are, because that’s what we’ve always done? Or do we pick and choose, and is our personal dislike our only metric for denial?”

Ron curls a hand into a fist and slams it down on a desk hard enough that the legs break and it collapses onto its side in pieces.

“Ron!” Hermione says, appalled.


Draco can’t believe this. Ron, of all people. But Millie has a point too. Is he willing to draw the line at Severus Snape?

Harry grabs his hand, “Look, we’ll be smart, and quick. It'll be fine.”

“You’re talking like I won’t be there,” he says.

Hermione shakes her head. “You can’t! If anyone sees you - your parents-”

“I’m not going to sit back here while you go out there and risk your lives to save my shitty head of house. You’re not going alone. You go with me, or not at all,” he says.

Blaise snaps, “Look, I understand you don’t want our friends to get hurt when you could help, but are you seriously willing to fuck your whole family over because of it?”

“Of course not,” he says, because what is he, an idiot. “I’m going to be there. That doesn’t mean anyone has to know it’s me.” They all stare at him comprehendingly, and he sighs. “Stasis charms last about ten years. Harry, you still have that polyjuice potion from second year, right?”

“I forgot about that,” Ron says, while Hermione’s face twists. Her nose twitches like she’s feeling
the phantom sensation of whiskers.

“It’s still risky,” Blaise says, but he doesn’t look angry anymore, which is good. Angry Blaise is rare, and all the more terrifying because of it. He’s like Zaira that way. Draco’s pretty sure if Zaira ever raised her voice at him he’d burst into tears.

He shrugs. “Yes. But it’s a risk I’m willing to take.” He doesn’t want anything to happen to his family, of course he doesn’t, he’s been going to all this effort and lying for years to prevent it. But he doesn’t want anything to happen to his soulmate or his friends either.

Harry searches his face for a long moment, then beams. He pulls him close, then hesitates, and Draco’s very aware of Millie’s presence. Mille, who knows every secret but this.

“Oh, just kiss,” Millie says, “I haven’t told anyone before, I won’t now, but watching you look at each other like the cover of a harlequin novel is painful.”

They both twist to turn to her. “You knew?”

“Just because I’m not in Ravenclaw doesn’t mean I’m blind,” she says, and Hermione snorts while Ron turns around in a poor attempt to hide his laughter. “I have seen you two interact. I know everyone else just thinks you’re lovestruck and in denial, but I know that two aren’t actually that dumb.”

Unbelievable. “You could have said something,” he says, scowling. Harry makes a sound of agreement beside him.

Millie waves her hand, “You could have told me the truth. But whatever, can we please focus on the more pressing matter at hand. Snape? Ministry break in? Voldemort?”

Uhg, fine.

Pansy bites her bottom lip. “Draco’s right. I’ll come too.”

“No,” he says. “Pansy, absolutely not. Your family is just as tied up in Voldemort’s mess as mine is.”

She points furiously at the Gryffindors. “And they’re just as much my friends as they are yours. I’m going. We have the polyjuice to spare, don’t we?”

Unless they’ve been guzzling it, yes. And as long as they don’t spend more than handful of hours fighting Voldemort.

“Wait,” Hermione says, eyes narrowed. “Not that - Pansy, I have no problem with you coming. But if we’re using the polyjuice on ourselves, why can’t we use it on someone who can really help us? Like an adult?”

Oh, shit, that’s a good point. “It would have to someone we trust, and who’s in the castle, since it’s not like we can arrive from different places. That’ll be a dead giveaway they’re not actually with us.”

“Well, I’d say let’s grab McGonagall or Hagrid, but that’s not really an option anymore,” Ron scowls.

“Sprout?” Millie offers.

They all make a face. “She’s a brilliant herbologist, obviously, but I don’t know how good she’d be in a fight.”
Draco groans, because he’s an idiot. “Alright, everyone, split up. You go get some hair, and let’s meet in the greenhouse.” He pauses. “You might want to gather the militia, too, actually. Or at least send a message.”

“We can’t break into the Ministry with a couple dozen teenagers, we have to be more subtle than that,” Ron says. “Also, where are you going?”

“No,” Draco agrees as he walks towards the door, ignoring the latter question, “but we’re going to need a distraction.”

～

Harry pokes Colin in the side and says, “Hey.”

He looks up from the photos he’s sorting, and his friendly smile drops as soon as he gets a good look at Harry’s face. “Hi. Are you going to do something stupid?”

“What kind of question is that? I need some of your hair,” he says.

Colin sighs. “Do I get to know what’s going on?”

“No,” Harry says.

“Can you at least tell me what you’re going to with it?”

“Also no.”

“Why do I even bother?” he asks. Harry doesn’t say anything, as he’s assuming that question is rhetorical. “Fine.”

He pats Colin on the back. “Great! I need your brother’s too. And for you two to hide in the chamber of secrets, for, oh, probably the rest of the night to be safe.”

“Okay, seriously, why?” he demands.

Harry says nothing.

He throws his hands up. “Okay, fine, whatever.”

“Thanks Colin,” Harry says genuinely. “Also, I’m going to need a set of you and your brother’s clothes.”

～

Draco knows the password to get into Filius’s bedroom, because it’s less a password than it is a complicated charms ward that took him the better part of three months to work out in third year.

“Hey,” he says, walking in. Filius looks up from his cup of tea, eyebrow raised. He doesn’t even have the decency to act surprised. “We know where Snape is being held, and he’s being tortured by Voldemort. We have a chance to rescue him, but only if we go alone. Feel like drinking a polyjuice potion and helping us sneak into the ministry? Harry is leading this little disaster, obviously.”

Filius blinks. “That is an incredibly bad idea.”

“Do you have a better one? Keeping in mind that if the Order gets there before we do, Snape dies.”
“If you have polyjuice, why doesn’t the order just come here and pretend to be you?” Filius asks. “Also, are we no longer pretending that you and the Gryffindors aren’t at each other’s throats?”

“You spend more time with me than any other professor, if you hadn’t figured it out by now I’d have been disappointed in you,” he says.

“I figured it out once you and Miss Granger started editing each other’s papers,” he admits. “If it helps, the rest of the staff is split on whether or not you and Potter genuinely hate each other or if you just need to - ah, never mind.”

“Discussing your students’ love lives is unethical, and also if there’s a betting pool I want in,” he says. Merlin, they’re so bad at this. The only saving grace is that Voldemort and his Death Eaters had never seen him and Harry interact, not really. “We don’t have enough polyjuice or time for that. If we don’t hurry up, Snape will be dead by the time we can even attempt it. But if you want to conveniently send a little message to the Order so they know to come to our rescue, that’d be really helpful.”

Filius scratches his nose to hide his smile. “And what if I try to stop you? Will you obliviate me too? You’ve at least gotten better at it since third year.”

He knew that Filius had known about Marietta. He’s a little surprised Snape told him about the first time. “I haven’t, actually, the second time was Hermione. And you won’t. Are you coming or not?”

“I could restrain you all, take the polyjuice myself, and pretend to be Harry and sneak into the ministry myself,” he says.

“You could, but you won’t, because you know choosing the least bad idea is better than the more ethical worse idea, so you’re not going to stop us from doing something stupid, because it would attract too much attention, because you don’t want Snape to die, because we’ve all been in equally bad or worse situations before, because you’re curious about what will happen, and you want to see what we’re made of, if we work well together and what we’re all like when we’re not pretending to hate each other, and you’d rather be beside us protecting us than on the sidelines or going and dooming it all to failure by trying to go on your own,” he finishes, glaring. “Can we go now? You do remember the part where I said we were on a time crunch, right?”

Filius says nothing for a moment, and Draco’s about ready to give up when he says, “It seems as if I should have remembered that all that time I spent with you, you were spending it with me too. You would have done well in my house.”

“I would have done well in every house,” he says. “Can we go now?”

He sighs, but gestures for Draco to lead the way. “Minerva is going to kill me.”

“Look at the positives – maybe Voldemort will kill us all, and you’ll never have to confront her about it,” he offers.

“I think perhaps you have skewed definition of what positive means.”

~

The twins are not thrilled about being left behind on this adventure, but even they can acknowledge that if anyone can successfully cause enough chaos at Hogwarts that no one will think to look too closely on who is or isn’t there, it’s them. Neville is equally unenthused, but considering the plant aspect of their little plan, he has to stay behind in order for it to work. They agree to spread instructions to the rest of the RA, which only leaves a couple more problems.
“You can’t all come with me,” Harry says. “This is ridiculous. We need to be at least a little stealthy.”

“You’re going to go save Severus, and I want to help,” Quinn insists.

“Can you fight?” Ron asks bluntly. Ze opens zir mouth, and he corrects, “Can you fight well?”

Cedric lays a hand against zir back. “They’re right. Quinn, this isn’t exactly your specialty. On the other hand, I was a Triwizard champion, and I’m going to be entering the auror training program next fall. I’m going.”

Ze scowls, but doesn’t argue any further. Cho wraps an arm around zir shoulders. She doesn’t look thrilled with her fiancé going off on a suicide mission, but she doesn’t say anything against it either.

Ginny taps her wand against her chin. Harry hadn’t been dumb enough to suggest that she be left behind, and neither had her brothers, even though they don’t look happy about it. Luna doesn’t have any sort of expression on her face besides faint concern, which isn’t abnormal, so he has no idea what she’s thinking. “Look, I really do think we should cap out at eight. And even that is pushing it. Anything more and Voldemort might take us seriously, which we don’t want.”

He ticks them off on his fingers as he counts. Him, Draco, Ron, Hermione, Blaise, Pansy, Millie, Cedric. He’d stolen some hair off Dean’s comb for Blaise when he couldn’t find the man himself, while Hermione had grabbed some hair from Lavender and Parvati and sent them down to the chamber with the Creeveys.

“Make it nine,” Draco says, appearing behind them.

He’s not alone.

“Flitwick?” Hermione demands.

Luna waves at her head of house. She doesn’t seem surprised to see him, but Harry rarely sees Luna seem surprised over anything, so.

“Hello children,” he says, raising an eyebrow. “Do you have a plan on how to get to the ministry?”

“I can’t exactly fit everyone on my motorbike, Umbridge is watching all the floo networks, and brooms won’t get us there quickly enough,” he ticks off. “We could summon Payne, and maybe another wyvern?”

“Can we practice just, the smallest amount of subtlety?” Draco asks. Harry rolls his eyes. “Don’t the thestrals like you? They’re intelligent, supposedly, why don’t you ask them?”

He stares. “Most of you can’t see them.”

“Don’t need to see them to hold on,” Ron points out. Hermione looks faintly green, which isn’t a great sign. “Anyone who’s going to take some Polyjuice potion, now’s the time. It’s time to go break into the ministry to save our shitty potions professor from a man with the worst nose job I’ve ever seen.”

How does Ron even know what a nose job is? He’s blaming Hermione.

“Everyone, try not to die,” he says before heading toward the exit.

“You know,” Flitwick mutters, “I always imagined the beginning of these adventures to be more
dramatic than this. Oh, before we go, Miss Lovegood - that’s a lovely necklace you have there. Fabulous bottle caps. Might I borrow it?”

Harry rolls his eyes. 

~

On the plus side, the thestrals know exactly where they’re going, so Draco doesn’t have to steer or pay attention to anything that he’s doing. That means there’s nothing preventing him from pressing his face into the thestral’s bony neck and closing his eyes until they’re on solid ground again.

When his eyes are closed, it just feels like he’s riding a winged horse. It’s only when he opens his eyes and looks down into nothingness that he has to resist the urge to panic.

He’s at least doing better than Hermione. She’s sandwiched between Blaise and Ron, and blindfolded, and she still looks terrified.

They land in front of the ministry, and Draco gratefully slides onto solid ground. “Thank you,” Harry says earnestly, addressing what is probably a large crowd of the thestrals around him. “Can you head back to the school? We have another way to get back.”

Blaise is still looking at Harry like he’s insane, but Ginny is petting the air next to her, so maybe Blaise is just especially freaked out by the death horses, which doesn’t seem like him, but Draco’s not going to judge.

“So what, do we just walk in?” Cedric asks. “There are definitely people in there right now, even if it’s the middle of the night.”

Draco shakes his head and starts taking them around to the back. “No, of course not. We’ll take the Wizengamot entrance.”

“You shouldn’t know where that is,” Flitwick says, but he’s a lot worse at hiding his amusement with Dennis’s face. It’s probably the lack of facial hair.

“My dad has been cozying up to the Wizengamot for thirty years. If he didn’t know where it was, I’d be disappointed,” he says, tapping his wand against the wall in a specific pattern so a tunnel opens up in front of them.

“I’m actually more surprised he told you,” Millie says.

He bites back on a wince. His dad used to tell him everything, all the boring stuff and the interesting bits too. There were times when his dad was so busy that the only time they could get together when he was a kid was sitting in his dad’s lap and listening to him talk through a case or his day until he fell asleep. Lucius likes the idea of having escape routes, of Draco having them if he needs them. That’s why he’d told him about the Wizengamot’s secret tunnel.

They arrive in their chambers and they have to cut through the courtroom to get to the main hallways. “Okay, that’s as far as I got,” he says, “who knows how to get to the Department of Mysteries?” Now that they’re inside the ministry, he reminds himself to be more careful with his words, not to give away that he’s not actually Colin Creevey. He assumes Voldemort has a monitoring spell on all the hallways. That’s what he would do, anyway.

“I know the way,” Flitwick says, “Follow me.”

They trail behind him, and Draco wonders if that in and of itself gives too much away. If that was
actually Dennis, they probably wouldn’t have brought him to begin with, but they definitely wouldn’t let him put himself in the most vulnerable position without a fight. But since it’s not Dennis, and is instead Flitwick, their professor and a dueling champion, they are.

“Once we get there, there’s a hallway, and then a bunch of revolving doors,” Harry says. “I’m not sure which one we have to take.”

Flitwick reaches back and pats Harry on the arm. But he only repeats, “I know the way.”

Right, of course. Flitwick is in the Order, and presumably knows exactly what Voldemort is after, and exactly where it’s being kept. Which is probably where they’re holding Snape.

Well, at least they don’t have to worry about getting lost.

When they make it to the door to the Department of Mysteries, there’s someone slumped against the door. They rush forward, but she’s too pale, and Draco knows as soon as his hands touch the icy skin of her neck that she’s past saving.

She’s been dead for so long that her body has gone cold.

“Oh no,” Pansy breathes.

Millie tries to pull him away, but he resists, frowning.

This is impossible. It should take about twelve hours for the body to be cold, but it’s impossible that she’s been dead that long. Twelve hours ago this hallway would have been bustling with people, it’s been maybe four hours, and she shouldn’t be cold already. Not this cold.

“We have to go,” Millie says.

He digs his fingers into the skin of her neck, searching for a pulse, but after several long seconds nothing happens.

“Do you recognize her?” Blaise asks.

He shakes his head, but Harry says, “I do.” They turn to look at him, and his eyes are pinched at the corner. “Her name is Kashvi.”

“It’s just,” he starts, then hesitates. Colin wouldn’t know enough about decomposition and the human body to be suspicious of a cold corpse, would he? He looks at Hermione beseechingly, and she takes a deep breath before determinedly stepping forward.

She jumps when she touches the woman, pulling her hand back. “She’s freezing.”

“She’s dead,” Ron points out before frowning. “Already? That’s fast.”

It’s strange. He doesn’t like strange things, not like this, not now.

Harry sighs and grabs the back of Draco’s robe, pulling him back, and this time Draco doesn’t resist.

“I’m really sorry about this,” Harry says, and he’s confused until he presses his wand against the woman’s forehead. He opens his mouth, frowns, then says, “She’s not dead.”

“How can you,” Ginny starts, then cuts herself off. “Ah.”

This whole pretending to be something they’re not is really annoying. He turns and says, “If they’ve
used a freezing charm against her, she can still be saved, but she’ll need help. She needs a mediwizard.” Someone who’s not him, even if he wasn’t hiding his identity and in the middle of a rescue mission. “We need to get her St. Mungo’s.”

Flitwick’s eyebrows are pushed together. The obvious solution would be for him to make a portkey, except he’s pretending to be a thirteen year old, and that type of magic is incredibly difficult. Draco’s not even totally confident in his own ability to make one without killing the passengers.

“We leave her,” Blaise says.

They all turn to face him. “We can’t!” Harry says.

“How long does a freezing charm like this last?”

Both Draco and Flitwick know the answer, and neither of them can say it.

“A little over a day,” Hermione says.

“So she’s not going to get any worse before someone finds her in the morning,” Blaise says. “We keep going. We’re vulnerable enough as it is. No one’s staying behind to levitate her to St. Mungo’s, when she’ll be just as frozen now than at daybreak. If we haven’t moved her by then, someone else will.”

If they all get killed, he means.

“He’s right,” Ron says, placing a hand against Harry’s back. “Come on. Let’s get going.”

Harry hesitates, but then he nods, getting to his feet. Cedric takes out his wand and casts, “Protego!”

A soft blue shield covers her. It’s all the protection they can afford to give her, considering the situation.

Flitwick leads them through the department, and he doesn’t hesitate in the revolving room of doors, but Draco grabs his shoulder, holding him back when he tries to move toward it. It makes the most sense for Flitwick to go first, but he can’t go first, because he’s in Dennis Creevey’s body.

“I’ll go,” Cedric says. It’s logical. He’s the oldest after Flitwick, and Head Boy. He’s going into the auror program and was a Hogwarts Champions.

Draco still doesn’t like it.

Cedric grips the doorknob, and the rest of them move out of the way. Just in case. He opens the door, and -

Nothing happens.

Cedric pokes his head through and goes, “Okay. It looks clear.”

“This is ridiculous,” Harry says, grabbing the back of Cedric’s robe and yanking him back. “I’m the one he wants, we’ll walk first together.”

“Shouldn’t we put you in the back then?” Ginny demands, but they all ignore her. Draco sighs.

They’re in a huge room, covered floor to ceiling in rows of shelves. On them rest glass orbs, each faintly glowing, with neat labels between them.
“Wait,” Ron says, “are we in the Hall of Prophecy? Britain doesn’t have this many prophecies. There has to be thousands here.”

“There have only been a few hundred verified prophecies,” Flitwick says, eyes darting around them. “Unverified prophecies, however, are much more prevalent.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Harry explodes. “Voldemort was after a prophecy all this time?”

“Yes, Mr. Potter.” The whole group flinches, except Draco, because for the first time he actually feels afraid, and he can’t bring himself to move at all, even if it’s away.

“Mr. Malfoy,” Harry greets, looking at his father. Why isn’t he wearing his mask? “Is there something I can help you with?”

Draco snorts before he can help himself, finally relaxing. It’s fine. This is fine. It’s not, really, because he’s going to have to fight his father, and if absolutely anyone could figure out that it’s really him, then it’s his dad. But it’s too late to worry about that, because he’s already found himself in this situation, and he just has to deal with it.

“Yes,” he says. “Follow me.”

He turns his back on them, leading them through a twisting combination of turns through the shelves. Draco wants to yell at him. Why would he turn his back to them? They’re all good fighters, Harry and Cedric especially, why would he make himself that vulnerable?

A really annoying thing about this is that if he doesn’t get killed, he won’t even be able to yell at his dad for being an overconfident idiot, since he supposedly won’t know anything about it.

Flitwick grabs his arm and squeezes, something he can get away with because they look like brothers right now, and then he jerks his head to the side, gesturing down a hallway full of prophecies to the left of where they’re walking.

Shit, that’s a good idea.

Draco reaches out and taps Blaise and Ginny on the shoulder. They look back at him, and he points down the right side of the prophecy hall and then presses a finger to his lips. They nod, and Flitwick and Draco break away, going left. He watches Ginny tap Pansy before disappearing down the rows of faintly glowing prophecies, and Pansy does the same to Millie and Cedric.

In worse news, he won’t have to yell at his dad for being so stupid to turn his back to the enemy, because Voldemort will definitely do it for him when he shows up with most of them missing.

~

Even Harry winces at the crucio Lucius receives when he shows up with only the three of them, him, Ron, and Hermione. Lucius stumbles back into the row of Death Eaters, lifting his hood and putting his mask back in place so there’s nothing to tell him apart from the other Death Eaters besides his shaking hands.

Harry had sensed the others peeling away behind them, until they were all that was left, and hey, that’s a good play. Divide and conquer is a valid strategy, he thinks. He’ll ask Ron later. He knows they’re there, and that they’re planning something, but right at this moment, it’s just him and his two best friends standing against a dozen Death Eaters and Voldemort himself.

At least this time Voldemort’s wearing clothes, and Harry isn’t tied to anything. This situation has a
ton of positives. “Potter,” he says, red eyes narrowed.

There’s a beat of silence, so Harry returns, “Riddle. Where’s Snape?”

Voldemort snarls, but what did he expect, his dumb pretentious title doesn’t include a last name. Unless it does. First name Lord, second name Voldemort.

This is a really inappropriate time for him to laugh.

Voldemort snaps his fingers, and a Death Eater steps aside while another one tosses the crumpled form of Severus Snape in front of them. “Shit,” Ron breathes.

He looks even worse than when Harry astral projected here. He’s bleeding and bruised, his eyes mostly swollen shut, and he’s shaking, probably the result of too many crucios. He twists his head to look up at them, and his lips pull back in a snarl. “I – told you – not to – come,” he pants, the effort of speaking enough to exhaust him.

“I’ve never listened to you before,” Harry says, “I don’t know why you think I’d start now.”

Snape either smiles or grimaces. He honestly can’t tell which.

“Okay,” Ron says, “what is it that you want Harry to do?”

“Why do you think I want him to do anything at all?” he asks.

“Because we’re still alive?” Ron rolls his eyes. “If you were just trying to lure us here to kill us, we’d be dead already. I’m assuming the only reason any of us are alive is because you know Harry won’t help you if you kill us.”

Voldemort stares at him for a long moment, then points to a shelf right next to him and says, “Pick that up.”

Harry cautiously steps forward. He’s pointing to a prophecy, and Harry doesn’t understand what’s going on until he reads the spidery writing underneath.

**Tom Marvolo Riddle (?) and Harry James Potters**

Okay, seriously, what the fuck?

“Gladly,” Hermione says, raising her wand and casting, “Mobilicorpus!”

Snape bites back a scream as Hermione’s spell straightens all his limbs and he goes floating into the air. Harry knows he’s probably pissed right now, but it’s better if Snape can’t move for what comes next. Ron reaches into his pocket, flicks something out from his hand and shouts, “Butterbeer!”

The butterbeer cap, turned portkey by Flitwick before they left, glows as it hits Snape in the chest.

“Accio portkeys!” one of the Death Eaters casts. He doesn’t recognize her voice.

Harry reaches for his own portkey and manages to snatch it out of the air just as it goes for her, but it tugs itself free from his fingers and goes sailing into her hand. He sees eight more bottlecaps come flying into her hand from across the room. Okay, well someone managed to keep hold of theirs and they have one left. They just need to get together to use it.

It’s possible to portkey out of the ministry, just not into it.
Bellatrix hadn’t casted fast enough to stop Snape. He’s gone in a swirling flash of light. At least one of them got out of this.

Voldemort roars, pushing himself to his feet, his wand in his hand. “Bye!” Harry shouts, bolting down the rows of prophecies.

He hears Death Eaters screaming as they run. It’s a good thing none of them noticed that all those other bottle caps had come from behind them.

When the bottle caps get ripped out of his and Filius’s hands, he has to resist the urge to scream. No! They were so close.

Well, they’d come together in case this happened, so. Otherwise they would have just sent Harry and Flitwick in with some portkeys and called it a day.

“Bye!” he hears Harry shout, and he steps out from behind the shelf, casting “Fulger!” right at Bellatrix’s back, who’s the one that had taken their portkeys. He hears everyone else casting their own offensive spells, and then they’re running, darting through the shelves as the Death Eaters give chase.

“Not as anticipated,” Filius says, throwing a blinding charm over his shoulder.

“At least we’re not tied to a gravestone,” he answers, grabbing Filius’s wrist to yank him back down a hallway. They won’t be expecting them to double back, and since they can’t see them, well. “It’s too bad we don’t have more space. We could summon Payne.”

“Who’s Payne?” Filius asks.

Draco doesn’t answer, raising a hand to Pansy as she darts past him. She shakes her head, saying that she doesn’t have a bottlecap. Shit. Maybe they should have asked the thestrals to stick around. A couple dozen dark grey bunnies hop after her, and then into the fray. He hears several thumps and curses as people trip on them and fall to the ground. He’s surprised she managed to find enough dust in this place to transfigure bunnies out of it.

He smells the smoke before he sees it. “Hermione,” he groans. Trapping them all in a burning room is not the best plan she’s ever had. She always goes for fire. “We need to get out of here. Expecto patronum!” His peacock spills from his wand, and he says, “Find everyone. Tell them to towards the door.” They shouldn’t be wasting time going in circles to confuse them. The faster they get out of here, the better.

He flies into the air, going high over the shelves. He’ll only last until Draco casts another spell, so he hopes he’ll be quick about it.

Harry ducks under a shelf, crawling on his hands and knees so all the spells go too high. “You know, maybe being tied to a gravestone in the middle of a graveyard wouldn’t be so bad right now. At least I’d have some materials to work with.”

“Materials,” Ron echoes behind him. “Hey, Hermione, do you think all these shelves are made from the same type of tree?”

“Maybe! I don’t know! Did you expect me to check?” she demands, then a beat later says, “I don’t
know how to do that, I’m worse at nature manipulation than anything else.”

Ron tugs on Harry’s pantleg so he’ll stop moving. “Cover us,” he says, and Harry grumbles as he pushes himself into a crouch, wand in hand. Staying in one place is basically asking to get murdered. Ron turns to Hermione. “You can do advanced arithmancy in your head, right?”

“Obviously,” she says.

Ron traces his wand in a circle against the floor, leaving behind a mark wherever his wand touches. “Good.”

~

Of course Ginny is the one who managed to hold onto her bottle cap. “How’d you do that?” Draco demands, shifting out of the way of the auguamenti that Millie throws down the hall. He almost absently sends a lightning charm after it, ignoring the pained screams. He really hopes none of those people were his dad.

“I cast a permanent sticking charm on it and stuck it to my shirt. The downside is that I’ll have to throw out my shirt after this,” she explains while setting up several invisible ropes along the ground. He doesn’t ask if she got the idea for a trip wire from George and Fred.

The permanent sticking charm is a really good idea. Why didn’t any of them think of that?

There’s a golden sunburst of light, then a wave of heat, and shit, that has to be Hermione. “What the fuck,” Ginny mutters, shielding her eyes as she looks into the glare.

“What is wrong with you people and your lack of self preservation skills?” he demands, grabbing her wrist and yanking her away down the hall. Thankfully, Millie and Filius follow him without any further prompting, because they don’t want to die, he’s assuming.

He feels the moment the reaction takes effect. All the warmth is gone and it’s freezing, he can even see his breath, and they’re plunged into darkness except for the soft glowing of the prophecies. There’s a groan like a tree snapping in half in the middle of a storm, and then everything’s moving.

For a moment Draco’s disoriented by it, and thinks that it’s the floor pushing them forward, but then he adjusts. It’s all the shelves flinging themselves backwards and twisting together, prophecies stubbornly sticking in the shelves so they’re absorbed into the rolling mass of wood, twisting and pulsing in a way wood was never meant to do, and then surging upwards.

“Protego!” Filius snaps just in time as bits of the ceiling come raining down on them. The mass of wood has twisted itself into a gross approximation of a tree, growing upwards until it bursts through the ceiling.

~

“Did you mean to do that?” Harry asks, darting away from the shelves of prophecies being sucked into Ron and Hermione’s circle.

“No,” Ron says, “but hey, it’s a nice, uh, distraction?”

“We were trying to make a barrier!” Hermione moans, “I told you I was bad at organic material manipulation!”

“Do you think I could reanimate a dead tree?” Harry asks. He’s like, ninety percent sure the answer
is no, but he’s also pretty sure no one’s tried it before.

Hermione has to jump over a shelf hurtling towards them to keep from being swept up in the mess. “I think this isn’t an appropriate time for these types of thought exercises!”

Well, if Hermione is saying it’s not time for thought exercises, then it must be true.

They catch up with Blaise, Cedric, and Pansy up closer to the door, which is nice. At least they listened to him.

Blaise is just watching the living wood tornado with a completely blank face, while Pansy is casting something he can’t see, and Cedric stands in front of them both, wand held out in front of him.

“Oh good, that’s almost everyone,” he says, clapping Blaise on the shoulder as he passes. “Mostly everyone. Ron and Hermione did this, and assuming they’re still with Harry, they should be fine.”

“Are we just going to leave this like this?” Blaise asks.

Draco turns around to look at it. “Uh. Yes? Look, if I wanted to undo their reaction, I’d first have to know what it was, and then I’d need twenty minutes and some scratch paper. My sincerest apologies to the Department of Mysteries.”

“The door is locked!” Pansy cries, and Draco cranes his neck to see a complex series of wards shining in front of her. She’s unraveled the edges, but that’s it. Still, considering this was likely made by several of the best wardmasters the ministry could get their hands on, that’s pretty good. “All the - the whatever the fuck that is has freaked it all out, and it’s gone into emergency shut down!”

Filius curses. Draco doesn’t see the problem. “Okay, well, as soon as we find Harry and the others, we’re out of here, so.”

“Portkey magic is impossible under the ministry’s shutdown wards,” Filius says grimly. “It seems as if we’re trapped here. For the time being.”

Oh, bloody hell.

“You’re kidding me,” he says flatly. “Can’t you undo it?”

Filius glances at the wards and says wryly, “Maybe with two hours and some scratch paper.”

Ginny rubs at her temples while Millie’s mouth twists to the side like it always does when she’s displeased with something.

Blaise sighs. “You called the Order, right?”

Filius nods. “I did expect them to be here by now,” he admits.

“Well, the angry tree isn’t going to keep them occupied forever,” Cedric says. “Do we have a plan? Keeping in mind, we can’t go back into the shelves for cover, since eventually we’ll be out of them.”

Millie presses her lips together, staring up at the still growing monstrosity. Draco’s pretty sure it’s pushed through another floor. This is going to be so expensive to fix. “So. We’ve all heard of Jack and the giant beanstalk, right?”

“No,” Blaise says immediately, even though he’s obviously heard of the story. Zaira told it to both of
them when they were kids.

Ginny’s eyes light up. “That is such a good idea!”

“No, it’s not,” Pansy says, but she doesn’t look as upset about it as Blaise does.

Draco finally gets it, watching the rising fused tree. “You’re going to need ground cover,” he says, “because otherwise you’ve just made fantastic targets of yourselves. Once you get high enough they’ll be able to see you, which is mean they can hit you.”

“Ground cover for what?” Harry asks, panting as the rest of them finally pop out of the shelves. “None of you died! Good job.”

“Ron,” Blaise says, “what the fuck did you do?”

Ron raises his hands defensively in front of him, then points to Hermione. “It was her math.”

“My math was perfect!” she cries, and of course that’s what’s upsetting her most in their current situation. “If anything, it was your placement, you were so sure about putting the red lion on the fifteen degree angle-”

“Um, if we hadn’t done that, it would have blown outward instead of inward, and we’d all be dead, so I’m still sticking by that one,” he says.

Pansy claps her hands. “Guys, seriously. What’s the plan?”

“You lot climb on the angry tree and ride it out of here,” Draco says, “Fil - uh, Dennis and I will stay down here and cover you, then go up last.”

“No,” several people say at the same time, Filius louder than the rest.

Draco rolls his eyes. “He can’t cover it alone. If he tries, you guys will never make it out, and there’s no point in us all dying. Filius and I are the best at protective charms, and we’ve both been trained to duel, so we’re the logical choices. Two of you hop off at the first floor and stay at the edges of the giant hole so you can cover us on our way up, if you’re so worried about it. But the only way this stupid insane plan works is if some of us stay behind to make sure the rest of you get out of here safely.”

“I can do it on my own,” Filius argues.

There’s the sound of yelling, then sizzling. That’s Voldemort and the Death Eaters cutting through to get to them. They’re running out of time, which means they don’t have time to argue about this. “You can’t, and if you try, my friends are going to die, so we’re not going to do that.”

Harry narrows his eyes. “I’m staying behind too.”

“That’s stupid,” Millie snaps, “You’re the one they want, you’re the last person we’d leave behind.”

“Exactly, I’m the one they want,” he says, “So I’ll make excellent bait and distraction while the rest of you escape. I’ll go up after the rest of you have.”

Draco opens his mouth to argue some more, but Ginny asks, “Ron? What do you think?”

They all turn to him, and he runs a hand up and down his face. “It – just, strategically speaking, they’re right. That’s the safest play for the most of us. But I don’t like it.”

“I will go last,” Filius says firmly. “I’m an Order member, your professor, a dueling master, and the only one here old enough to legally drink. Get going.”

Cedric looks vague offended at that. “I am eighteen years old—”

Pansy rolls her eyes, shoves her wand into her hair, and sprints for the groaning tree like structure thing. “You just blew your cover, you know,” Blaise points out to Filius.

“Something tells me they’re not paying attention right now,” he says dryly. “Go.”

Blaise claps his shoulder, then goes after Pansy. There’s a shout, way too close, and then Filius is casting a protego just in time to stop a red beam of light from hitting him in the face.

The Death Eaters pour into the space near the door, flinging spells as soon as they’re close enough. Everyone else bolts.

Draco checks that Filius is suitably distracted, grabs Harry and drags him down a couple of inches, which he doesn’t normally have to do, to kiss him as passionately as he can in five seconds.

“Honey,” Harry says, pulled between smiling and wrinkling his nose in disgust, “that’s Colin’s face.”

“I’m not going to die without kissing you first, so get over it,” he says. “Now go and be distracting.”

“Yes dear,” he says cheekily before darting around the protection of Filius’s shield and blasting off a curse the second he’s clear of it.

Draco would love to keep watching to make sure his boyfriend doesn’t get killed, but if Filius is going to be maintaining a shield while throwing offensive spells at them, that means it’s up to Draco to make sure his friends don’t die while being carried upwards by Ron and Hermione’s curse against mankind.

~

“Expelliarmus!” he casts, then uses the springboard spell to jump into the air and grab the wand out of the air. He casts a frankly horrible feather light charm on himself to carry him forward, then cancels it as soon as he’s above the Death Eater who’s wand he’s just stolen.

He falls on top of her, causing her to scream as they both go crashing to the ground. He scrambles to his feet, but she’s either unconscious of faking it, and as long as she’s not trying to kill him or his friends, he doesn’t really care which.

“Potter,” growls a familiar voice, and he spins around to see that Voldemort and his creepy red eyes are way too close for comfort. “Can’t you just die?”

“See, funny thing Riddle, I was just about to say the same thing to you,” he says, gripping his wand. What he wouldn’t give to be in a graveyard right now.

Voldemort snarls and raises his wand. He doesn’t get past the first syllable of the killing curse before a knife comes flying down and buries itself in his shoulder. He pauses, looking at in confusion, then glances upward just in time to jump back from four more knives that embed themselves in the hardwood right where he was standing.
Harry looks up to see Ginny glaring down at them, her hair loose around her shoulders and a half
dozens more knives held between her fingers. She’s gotten a lot better at that since the summer. Does
that mean she’s been practicing? When has she been practicing? Ginny’s so scary.

“What on earth,” Voldemort mutters, pulling the knife out of his shoulder and dropping it to the
ground.

He doesn’t bleed.

He doesn’t bleed.

What the fuck. That’s so messed up.

Not wanting to waste the opportunity Ginny’s given him, he goes running the other way, deciding to
use the shelves closest to them for protection while he still can.

Would it be very weird of him to start keeping corpses on him, like in a bottomless bag or
something? Probably. But some tiger bones would be just be, so useful. It’s a shame Voldemort
hadn’t decided to fight him in the basement where Blaise says they keep all the magical fossils. If he
had access to some dragon bones, this fight would have been over and done with in ten minutes.

It’s too bad they didn’t summon Payne before the wards went up, even if the space is a little cramped
for it. A wyvern would be nice about now, and the giant hole in the ceiling and the shelves being
sucked up has really freed up some space.

There’s a sound like an explosion, and the door is blasted open with a stream of light purple smoke,
and then a handful of Order members are pouring in. Not exactly the kind of backup he was looking
for, considering they’re still outnumbered, but Fleur is front and center, sending a huge fireball
straight for Voldemort, which makes him take even more hasty steps away.

Dumbledore steps through, eyebrows pushed together and mouth in a firm, furious line.

“About bloody time!” Flitwick snaps. “What took you so long?”

Dumbledore pauses, taking his eyes off Voldemort to look at Flitwick. “Filius, is that you wearing
young Mr. Creevey’s face?”

“Priorities!” Harry shouts, running in the other direction towards the door now that it’s open. Or,
well, the hole in the wall, technically. A quick glance shows him that everyone but Millie has
managed to make it to the next floor, probably because she spent more time trying to drown the
Death Eaters coming after her than climbing. Considering the three soaked and unconscious bodies
around her, he can’t exactly say it was a wasted effort. She looks up, looks towards the door, and
then goes running for her closest exit, which is horizontal rather than vertical.

Harry grabs Draco’s hand and tugs him through the door just as Sirius steps through. He grabs
Harry’s shoulders, stopping him from going forward. His eyes are wide and terrified, and his grip is
tight enough to bruise. He also looks angrier than Harry has ever seen him, and he’s including that
time he was two seconds away from murdering Pettigrew. “Lecture later,” he says urgently.

“Lecture now,” Sirius snaps, then looks up to see Dumbledore and Voldemort dueling, about a
dozen Death Eaters that are still standing and coming for them, and Millie diving to hide behind
Flitwick as a Death Eater tries to literally slice her open. “Lecture later.”

“Fight now!” Tonks calls out, pushing past them to get into the fray. Percy follows behind, wand in
his fist.
“Um,” Draco says, “can Percy even fight?”

Sirius looks Draco up and down, then says, “Really? You too, Draco? Did half of you take Polyjuice before doing this? One stupid decision wasn’t enough, so you had to double up?”

“Realistically, this was several stupid decisions all stacked atop one another,” Harry says. By his godfather’s glare, he’s not amused.

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What the hell, Sirius had barely glanced at him before placing him. He stares down at his hands, confused, because it’s been close to an hour since he last had a sip of Polyjuice potion, so it’s probably about time that he drink more, but he still looks like Colin, right? He still has Colin’s hands, so he presumably has his face, he’s even wearing the kid’s clothes, what could have tipped Sirius off, he’d only asked a question, and one that it wouldn’t be weird for Colin to ask, right? He’d been in the same house as Percy for two years.

He still staring his hand when he figures it out.

“Shit,” he says reflexively, looking down at his wand.

He’s had his wand out this whole time. It’s not especially distinctive, long and bendy, stained a brown so dark it looks black and a diamond cut along the tops and bottom of the handle, hardly noticeable. Not anything flashy, not like Ginny’s red wand with runes curved up the sides, but distinctive enough if one knew what to look for.

He’d spent the summer with the Death Eaters in his house. How many of them knew what his wand looked like? And no wonder his dad hadn’t said anything when they’d all peeled off. He knows that Draco doesn’t support Voldemort, and here this kid shows up, using his son’s wand. Standing like his son too, since he knows his dad notices those types of things.

Well, just great. Maybe he should have just gotten killed when he had the chance. This is going to be a really awkward conversation later.

He’s pulled out of his thoughts when he hears a scream.

“Millie!” he shouts, pulling himself from Harry’s grip to go running back into the room.

“No!” Sirius grabs his arm and yanks him backwards. “I’ll get Millie. You two get out of here.”

“Not without Millie,” Draco says stubbornly. Harry nods. Sirius rubs at his nose, irritated, and Draco asks, “Would you have left James behind?”

He pauses, then says, “Just – wait in here. Don’t go causing more trouble.” He slips through the door and into the fight without waiting for an answer, which is nice, because it means they don’t have to lie to him. Also, he really doesn’t think they caused this trouble, they just reacted to trouble that was already happening.

“Got a plan?” Harry asks. “I’m assuming we’re not going to actually wait here.”

“You know, you’re going to feel very guilty when you give your godfather a heart attack,” Draco says.

They hear another shout. It sounds like Percy. That question about him being able to fight was serious. Where the hell was everyone else? The Order had so many members, so why were they
fighting Voldemort himself with only a few of them? Remus should be here at least, considering it’s where his soulmate and godson are.

“So, we could stay here, relatively safe, listening to people get hurt,” Harry says. “Or.”

“Yeah, yes, okay,” he sighs, “you know the wards are still in effect, they just managed to destroy the door, so I can’t summon anything helpful, if that’s what you’re angling for.” With the wards not allowing anything to leave or enter them, he can’t summon anything at all, helpful or not.

“Not exactly,” he admits. “You said your first year levitation weight was five hundred pounds. What is it now?”

“Why?” he asks, dreading the answer.

Harry looks towards the fray, and what in there could Harry want him to levitate – what the hell is in there that weighs over five hundred pounds anyway –

“I can’t lift the alchemy tree monster,” he says.

“Well, not with that attitude,” Harry says. Draco is going to strangle him. “What if I blow it up first?”

“That’s insane,” he snaps. He shifts his weight from one foot to the other, and admits, “Okay, maybe if you blow it up first.”

“I mean to do that,” Harry says, five minutes later, looking at the several missing walls from the room they were just in.

Draco is red faced and sweating from his effort to keep the chunks of wood and shard suspended in mid air, and not killing them all horribly. “You have the worst plans.”

“Yeah,” Harry says, because he does. Ron’s the planning person. Then again, his plan ended up with a giant Frankenstein tree monstrosity, so maybe none of them are the planning person.

“Albus!” Filius snaps as he trips over his pants and has to pull himself upright. “Get out of the way!”

Harry stares. Why are his pants so long? But then he watches him shrink down even further, Dennis’s face already twisted into wrinkles and bushy eyebrows.

By the time he looks to Draco, he’s almost entirely himself, pants several inches too short and Colin’s shirt straining against his shoulders, his long platinum blonde hair hanging down his back. “Your face!” he hisses, pawing at his pocket for the vile of polyjuice potion. He glances at Millie, and sure enough, she’s back to looking like herself, and looking very uncomfortable in Lavender’s clothes, which are a couple sizes too small for her.

“No time,” Draco grunts, and when Dumbledore finally puts more than a foot of space between him and Voldemort, he snaps his wand forward in front of him. All that suspended debris follows the direction of his wand, piercing Voldemort and shoving him back several feet as he’s covered in roughly a ton of wood and prophecies. Which are surprisingly sturdy, given that he hasn’t seen a single one so much as crack through all of this.

Millie taps herself with her wand to expand her clothes, and Harry’s not fantastic at charms, but he casts a quick expansion charm against Draco’s back to do the same, so at least they fit semi-properly. “Can we go now?” he asks urgently.
Dumbledore is staring. “Mr. Malfoy.”

Harry’s going to scream. There’s a groan, and then there’s an inferno in their corner of the room, and they all jump several steps away. His first instinct is to look towards Fleur, but she seems just as startled as the rest of them.

A pale, scowling figure steps out of the flaming wreckage, and Voldemort snarls, “Well, if it isn’t young Draco Malfoy. I should have known.”

“Oh, fuck,” Draco says faintly.

Harry rubs at his eyes. The fire has burned away all of Voldemort’s clothes, and seriously, how many times is he going to be forced to see this man naked? Hasn’t he suffered enough in his life?

There’s a moment where they’re all just staring at each other. Then Voldemort’s lips pull back into a grin. “Perhaps I shall kill you first, and then present your father with your mangled corpse before I kill him too.”

“No thank you,” he answers, raising his wand. There’s Voldemort and a maybe a half dozen Death Eaters left. It’s not bad odds.

The hair on the back of his neck raises, and then there’s a prickle of sweat in the same spot, and Harry shouts, “Not again!”

Draco is hauled backwards by his soulmate, and he’s confused until there’s an absolutely blinding explosion of light, which leaves them all dazed for several long seconds. When he blinks away the spots from his vision, he sees all the shelves of prophecies are back exactly where they were before, although of course the damage to the walls and ceiling is still there.

He looks up just in time to see Ron and Hermione scrambling out of sight from the edge of the giant hole in the ceiling.

“I guess they found some scratch paper,” Filius says faintly.

Draco opens his mouth, considers his options, then turns around and runs. “Bad plan!” Harry shouts, following him back into the main hallway full of doors.

A moment later Millie joins them, Sirius’s arm around her back and pushing her forward. although there are still sounds of fighting. “Please tell me we’re running away to join our friends and letting the adults handle this?”

“Yes,” Sirius growls.

“Us all in the same room together is too much,” Draco says, “we need to divide and conquer.”

At that moment, two Death Eaters burst into the room behind them, and five seconds later Voldemort is there. He’s wearing a robe now. How did he summon a robe, Draco wonders as they seemingly pick a door a random and go running, Voldemort and a couple Death Eaters on their trail. Did he take it off one of the unconscious Death Eaters? But no, it looks like it fits him, and his proportions are too long and skinny for anyone that’s here, or anyone that isn’t a praying mantis.

Harry is moving like he knows where they’re going, taking them through several twisting doors and hallways, but when they step through door and find a themselves caught on a dead end with nothing
in here but a stone arch with a ragged veil hanging from it.

“We have to go,” Sirius urges.

Voldemort must have summoned it, which means the wards are back down again. Maybe they’d only activated in the first place because all the prophecies had moved, which is why Ron and Hermione had gone through the effort of putting them back.

The door is shoved open, and then Voldemort and his Death Eaters are there, wands outstretched. This is fine, it’s four against four, completely even and fair odds.

Merlin, they’re all going to die.

“Too late!” Millie shouts, flinging her wand in front of her to cast auguamenti, her wand shifting into the opening move for a electricity hex afterwards.

Voldemort snarls and casts, “Dilacerant!”

“No!” he shouts, casting a hasty protego over Millie. So hasty that it bounces Voldemort’s curse away instead of absorbing it.

When the cutting hex sinks into his shoulder and rips it open, blood immediately drenching his side, he has no one to blame but himself. Well, and Voldemort, of course.

~

Harry heart jumps to his throat when he sees Draco’s skin burst open, the magic settling deep into his skin and ripping it apart, and for a moment it’s easy to push away the voices curling at the edge of his consciousness, the ones he’s been hearing ever since they opened the door down this hallway. Millie screams from behind Draco’s shield. “Stupefy!” he snarls, aiming for Voldemort’s chest, but unsurprised when he steps back and out of the way. He just wants his attention off his boyfriend, wants Draco to have a chance to heal himself, since it’s not like the rest of them are any good at it.

But Voldemort barely glances at him, lips pulled back in a grin, “If you insist on dying first, I’m happy to oblige.” He raises his wand, and Draco’s gripping his bleeding shoulder with his dominant hand, and is struggling to raise his wand with the other. His blood is seeping through the cracks of his fingers, and his borrowed shirt is soaked through. How much blood can he stand to lose? They have to do something now!

Sirius and Millie are busy fighting two of the Death Eaters, while the third just stands by Voldemort’s side, starring at them.

The tattered veil from the arch in the corner flutters as if in a breeze, even though they’re indoors. **Mother**, it whispers, mother, mother, mother, may we come home now? **Mother** it’s dark.

Death magic pulses thick and heavy around it, and Harry doesn’t know what it is, but it’s not something he’s interested in messing with. Not without at least another decade of necromancy under his belt, at least. He heard it as soon as they passed through the door, and he led them all to it without really thinking about it, and he’s starting to believe that that may have been a mistake.

Voldemort raises his wand. “Ava-”

Sirius twists around, eyes wide, and Harry slices his wand down, halfway through a wind spell strong enough to knock Voldemort into the wall, but neither of them get a chance to do anything at all.
“Reducto!” a voice cries, and Voldemort stumbles and lets out a cry of pain as the spell hits him square in the back.

For a moment, no one moves, no one breathes. Harry knows that voice.

“Dad?” Draco whispers.

The Death Eater who had attacked Voldemort lifts his hand to his mask and tosses it to the ground, uncaring as it shatters. Lucius Malfoy stares back, eyes wide in fear, but not lowering his wand either. “Don’t – don’t. He’s my son.”

“You would choose your son over me? Over your safety, over your own life? Over your wife’s life?” he hisses.

If anything, that question just seems to make Lucius more sure of himself. “Yes.”

Voldemort snarls, but he doesn’t make it more than a step forward before the very same cutting hex he’d cast comes straight for him and hits him in the leg, ripping it open.

The second Death Eater tosses her mask aside. Underneath is piercing grey eyes and platinum blonde hair, something familiar about her chin. “We pledged our lives to you. Not my nephew’s.”

“Sophie,” Voldemort growls.

Wait, Sophie Malfoy? Draco’s aunt?

~

Draco can’t breathe, and it has nothing to do with his still bleeding wound. Had they stuck close to Voldemort during this fight on purpose, just in case they had to do this? Is this is why they’d all done so well against so many Death Eaters? They’re good, but they’re not that good, not as disadvantaged as they’d been. His father doesn’t surprise him, even though he hadn’t expected it, but Sophie does. He’d known Sophie loved him, because she’s family, and his family is a lot less dysfunctional than Harry’s, minus all the murder. But there’s loving him, and there’s turning her back on Voldemort for him.

He looks to the last Death Eater, who’s just standing and staring at Millie, who’s stopped attacking her, and now they’re just – standing there. Then she turns, putting her back to Millie, putting herself in between Millie and Voldemort, and removes her mask.

He’s seen her before. He met her when he went to pick up Millie this past summer.

“You can’t have our children,” Ophelia Bulstrode says clearly. “I don’t care if they stand against you. They’re not yours to take away.”

Millie’s mouth falls open, and she stutters, “But – but you hate me!”

Ophelia doesn’t twitch. “I hated your filthy muggle mother, I hate your father for choosing to fail this family by being a coward and a fool. I don’t hate you.”

“How touching,” Voldemort sneers, “Very well, if you insist, you can all die together!”

Sirius and the other adults attack, and these are much better odds, maybe they won’t die.

Except, for all his incompetence, Voldemort is strong. He commands power, and he commands it well, at least with magic if nothing else, and Draco really hopes he’s not going to be forced to watch
his father and aunt be murdered in front of him.

“Draco!” Harry grabs him and shakes him, and when did he get over here? He turns, and Millie’s at
his other side, pressing her hands against his shoulder, and she looks scared, why does she look so
scared? Her aunt is here, she should be less scared than she was before. “Draco, you have to heal it,
okay? I don’t know how!”

“Heal what?” he asks, and why does his mouth feel weird, almost numb. “Are you hurt?”

“No, you are!” Millie says, and he looks down, to where her hands over his, pushing them down into
his shoulder, smearing his blood over her skin and clothes.

Oh. Right.

He tugs his hand out from under Millie’s, and the gush of blood that comes out along with it kind of
nauseating. He can’t do anything complicated, he doesn’t have the focus for it, and if he tries he’ll
just fuck it up. He takes his wand into his non dominant hand, points it at himself, and casts,
“Episkey.”

His stomach lurches at the sensation of his skin reluctantly pulling itself back together. It stops the
bleeding at least, but not much else. “I still have muscle damage,” he says, “and I’ve lost too much
blood.”

He looks at his shoulder, considering. Can he do a blood replenishing spell right now? He can’t see
very well, black spots dancing across his vision. But his shoulder is right there, it’s not like he can
miss.

There’s an arm around his waist, and he doesn’t realize he’s started to fall until he’s already half
collapsed against his soulmate’s side. “Hey,” Harry says urgently, “don’t – don’t. Come on, just – do
something more, okay, one more spell to help yourself, okay?”

Draco tips his head back to stare into bright green eyes. He loves his eyes. He loves his Harry. “I
love you.”

Harry freezes, making a strangled sound in the back of his throat, and Millie mutters, “Oh, merlin.”

What? He does, of course he does, it’s obvious, it’s so obvious, it’s a wonder the whole castle
doesn’t know about it, all of Britain, the whole world. “Now’s not the time for that,” Harry says,
“You lost a lot of blood. What’s the blood replenishing spell again? Mag sang? Something like that?
I can cast if you tell me!”

That’s alarming enough that it almost jolts him back to lucidity. “Don’t – don’t do that. You’ll put
too much power behind – behind it, and I’ll explode. Very messy.”

“Then do it yourself!” he says furiously, and a moment later snaps, “Keep your eyes open!”

He jerks his eyes open, not sure when he closed them. “You’re supposed to say it back, you know.”
He’s not worried about it, but it’s the principal of the matter. He told Harry he loves him, so Harry
should say it back.

They don’t have to say it, because obviously they do, but they’ve never said it before, and Draco
thinks that they should start.

“How about this,” Harry says through gritted teeth, “if you don’t die, I’ll tell you I love you, okay?
I’m not going to tell you I love you only to have you die on me, so.”
“I can’t die, I have two more finals,” he points out. Dying would be unacceptable, he’s been studying for weeks. He slumps a little more fully against Harry. “Not – no blood charms. You’re bad at them,” he informs him, and this time he feels his eyes sliding shut, even though he’s trying to keep them open. Harry doesn’t want him to close his eyes, and he wants to do what Harry wants. Except when he doesn’t, of course, but keeping his eyes open should be easy. Why is it so hard?

“DRACO!” Harry shouts, and he sounds upset. He doesn’t like it when Harry’s upset.

He shifts his head forward to press a kiss against his soulmate’s neck, then mutters, “It’s alright. I love you.”

Harry doesn’t have to say it back, but he likes saying it, so that’s what he’s going to do.

Millie is shaking him, but he can’t even find the energy to try to shrug her off, instead succumbing to the darkness clawing at the edges of his consciousness and letting the rest of his weight fall against his soulmate.

Harry kind of wants to cry, but he doesn’t think that will help anyone. He slowly sinks to the floor, taking Draco down with him and placing him on the ground, his head in his lap.

“Is he,” Mille starts, then shoves her fingers against Draco’s neck instead of finishing that question. “He’s alive.”

Harry nods, staring down at him. He doesn’t know what’s wrong, and he doesn’t know what to do, if he’s passed out from blood loss or shock or something else entirely, or how to help even if he knew what was wrong.

Someone screams, and he looks up in time to see Sophie fall to the ground, the smell of sizzling flesh in the air. He hopes she’s okay. He blinks, taking in the fight he’s been ignoring for the past few minutes.

The first thing he notices is that they’re all way too close to the veil, and he wants them to move away from it. If he unfocuses his eyes a little, he can see dark hands reaching out of the veil, waiting, and seriously, he would feel so much more comfortable about this little battle to the death if they would all move about ten feet to the left. Sirius is limping, Lucius seems to have lost use of his right arm, and agony ripples across Ophelia’s face every time she moves, but she’s still standing.

“Enough!” Voldemort roars, and then he uses the same wind spell Harry had been thinking about using earlier, sending them tumbling back, and he hears the clatter of a wand falling to the floor.

Sirius goes tumbling towards the veil. Harry’s already half slid Draco onto the floor when Ophelia reaches out, grabs the front of Sirius’s shirt, and yanks him over her and rolls them both against the wall.

Lucius is still standing, but his hands are empty, his wand lying on the other side of the room, close to none of them. If he summons it, will he be able to get it to Lucius in time? Or should he levitate it, and try to get it into Lucius’s hand instead?

“Shit,” Millie breathes, already on her feet, eyes darting between Voldemort and Lucius.

“Well, well, what are you going to do now?” Voldemort taunts, something like glee spreading across his face. His robe is shredded and burnt, like they’ve landed several hits against him, but he still seems unhurt. He walks forward and places his wand underneath Lucius’s throat. “You have no
wand, Lucius. This is how you die, wandless and pathetic.”

Yeah, no. Harry’s lifts his wand, but then the door to the room bangs open.

Dumbledore sweeps into the room, the rest of the order members crowding into the room behind him, and there’s a lot of new faces, Kingsley and some other aurors in the Order among them.

Lucius doesn’t take the opportunity to run, or get out of the way, which Harry thinks would have been the smarter play. Instead he uses Voldemort’s momentary distraction to curl his right hand into a fist, takes a step away, pulls his arm back, and punches him as hard as he can right in the middle of his flat nased face.

The force and surprise of it sends Voldemort back a couple of steps, causing him to trip on his ripped robe.

Voldemort falls backwards into the veil and vanishes beneath the stone archway.

Lucius doesn’t even take the time to see him fall, instead immediately turning on his heel and rushing to Harry and falling on his knees in front of him. His eyes are blown wide and his hands hover over his son, like he wants to touch him, wants to fix him, but he doesn’t know where to start.

“He’s alive,” he says, then takes Lucius’s shaking hand and presses his fingers against Draco’s wrist so he can feel his son’s pulse for himself.

Sirius has just pushed himself to his feet when there’s a horrific screeching sound, like metal against metal, and something bursts forth from the veil.

It’s not Voldemort, although it is, but not like he was before. He’s not a person, he doesn’t have a body anymore, instead he’s just something like a ghost, red eyes and a screaming mouth hurtling past them. Several people dive out of the way the door, and Harry’s ears are still ringing even after he’s gone.

He’s back to what he was in first year, his body snatched from him by the veil, even if for some reason it was unable to hold onto his soul too.

“He needs a healer,” Lucius says urgently, turning to look at the Order. “Which of you can heal?”

Dumbledore is still looking at the veil with a peculiar look on his face. “Did you really just – was that actually–”

“My son,” Lucius snaps, “is hurt. Are you going to do something about it?”

“There’s more coming,” Kinglsey says brusquely, ignoring both Dumbledore and Lucius’s questions. “More aurors and the minister too. Anyone who doesn’t want to get stuck explaining what they’re doing here has to leave.”

Millis scrambles to her feet, and goes over to her aunt, helping her upright.

Percy adjusts his glasses. “Cornelius can’t find me here.”

Tonks nods, shoves his shoulder, then calls out, “Cousin, you really can’t be here!”

Sirius rubs his head, and then pulls Ophelia to her feet. Sophie is stirring too, which is good, because it means she’s not dead. Remus pushes through the crowd, many of whom are already leaving, making their escape before they need to explain themselves. Remus glances at Sirius, but runs to
Harry first. “Are you okay?” he asks, then says, “You’re grounded forever.”

Harry reaches up to grab Remus’s arm and asks, “Do you know any healing charms?”

“Not many,” he says, glancing down at Draco. “If he’s stable, we’re better off getting him to Madame Pomfrey. My spell will just be something else she has to work around. She’s back at the castle.”

Harry nods, hesitates, then reaches for Lucius’s shoulder. He meets the older man’s gaze and says, “You need to go.”

He shakes his head. “No, I’m not – I can’t leave him.”

Harry squeezes and says, “You have to go. Take your sister, and Millie’s aunt, and leave. There’s no good reason for you to be here, and you’ll just come under questioning.”

“There’s a whole room full of Death Eaters who are going to Azkaban,” Kingsley says, “You’re welcome to join them. I rather think you should be joining them.” He glances at Harry, who gives him the most offended look he can muster, and he just sighs. “But if you leave, I won’t stop you. A few other Death Eaters got away too, so it won’t be that suspicious if there are a couple less than Fudge expects.”

“I can’t leave him,” he repeats stubbornly.

Harry hesitates, but says, “You can’t help him from jail, okay? You have to go. I’ll take care of him, I promise, I’ll make sure he’s okay.” He takes a deep breath, then says, low, “I’d do anything for him. Just like you would for Narcissa.”

Lucius’s eyes widen. He looks to his son’s hip, then back at him. Harry nods once, answering the question he can see in Lucius’s face. He hopes Draco isn’t mad at him when he wakes up, but he’s assuming he really doesn’t want his dad to go to jail.

“Fine,” he says quietly, then pushes himself to his feet, going over to haul his sister’s arm over his shoulder.

Sirius walks over, absently reaching out for Remus’s hand as he looks at Harry.

“Lecture later,” he reminds him, “You and Remus have to go too. I don’t want you going to jail either.”

Sirius leans down and presses a kiss to his forehead. “Don’t – don’t ever do that to me again.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry says, instead of promising anything. He hates making promises he can’t keep. He considers thanking Sirius for coming for him, but he’s pretty sure that’s one of the things Remus and Sirius don’t want him thanking them for.

He sighs, but runs his hand through Harry’s hair before letting Remus tug him out of the room.

Draco is still unconscious, his head in Harry’s lap. His fingers against his pulse is pretty much the only thing that’s keeping Harry from panicking. Draco needs help. He’d stopped the bleeding, and repaired some of the damage, but he needs help, and everyone who can’t be caught here needs to leave before they can leave, since Draco is – he doesn’t know, but no one seems that concerned, not as concerned as he is, and he almost wishes Lucius was still here so had someone to panic with him. Flitwick is too busy making portkeys for everyone to help out, otherwise Harry would be begging for him to do something, for his peace of mind if nothing else.
He notices the edge of long purple robes before anything else, and he looks up to see Dumbledore standing there, looking down at him with his piercing blue eyes over his half moon glasses.

“What?” he asks, too tired for games or tricks or politeness. “Shouldn’t you be leaving too? You know if Fudge finds you here he’s just going to twist it into something else to keep you away from Hogwarts, and then we’ll be stuck with Umbridge forever.”

“Oh, between Percy, and Fred and George’s recent exploits, I do believe the Weasleys have Umbridge handled,” he says, which, what? Is that supposed to make sense to him? “You know – you are aware that this isn’t over. That he’s still out there.”

“I’m not an idiot,” he says, because he’s tired, his soulmate is hurt, and he and his friends almost died. Again. “Voldemort’s lost his body before, and he came back. He’ll come back again. Probably a lot faster this time around, since he knows how to do it.”

“Yes,” Dumbledore agrees, still looking down at him. Harry’s so tired. Why do they have to have this conversation now? Can’t it wait? Dumbledore reaches out, like he’s going to touch his shoulder, then hesitates and pulls his hand back. “I’m very proud of you, Harry.”

“I’m not the one who got rid of Voldemort’s body,” he points out.

Dumbledore glances away, and Harry follows his gaze. Millie is over at the corner, watching them, with everyone else, with Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Cedric, Pansy, and Blaise. Half of them are glaring at Dumbledore. Maybe slightly more than half. It seems like they’re waiting for him to leave before they come over, which is all the more reason for Dumbledore to get a move on, so he can wait with them for this all to be over instead of alone with his unconscious boyfriend.

“That’s not what I was talking about,” Dumbledore says gently, looking back at him before stepping away towards the door.

His friends immediately surge forward, talking over themselves as they ask questions and try to explain where they were and what they did. Ginny worriedly pokes at Draco’s shoulder with her wand, and Pansy is demanding he tell them if he’s hurt, and he has to bite down on a smile despite everything.

The is far better than being tied to a gravestone with Voldemort and his followers, all alone.

Chapter End Notes

sorry this took so long, i’ve had a vicious cold for the past two weeks that’s almost entirely gone now, but it really threw off my writing schedule. there will be one more chapter of phoenixes don’t take orders, then on to the next book! i’ve outlined through sixth year, so we're not done yet :)

citrusvoid has done several gorgeous pieces for siat that you can view here (she’s added more since the last chapter!)

mizzy636 and kerov have made a very cute siat universe list you can view here

dyinginjapanese made a super cute art of harry, draco, and the snakes in the chamber that you can view here
marvellouspotter made an amazing and magical hermione gif that you can view here

feel free to follow / harass me at shanastoryteller.tumblr.com

End Notes

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