Summary

Abandonment didn't sit well with Harry. Not at all. After the calamity that was the end of the Triwizard Tournament and the dismissal of his friends over the summer, he decides: enough is enough. He's done. Done with it all. He just wanted to get away. But the Wizarding world, as it happens, isn't quite finished with him. No matter how far he runs, it always catches back up to him. Years after turning from those who left him, Harry is dragged back to that world once more. Many find him far changed from the boy who'd once known. Some - some very few - even like that change. Draco Malfoy just happens to be one of those chosen few.
He ran.

Through the darkness of the street illuminated only by the feeble glare of streetlights. Through the emptiness of suburban Little Whinging, roads lined with static cars bereft of passengers and watching him pass with hooded eyes. Through the silence that was broken only by the distant hum of traffic and the sound of his own footsteps.

Harry ran, and with each step he pushed himself faster. His breath caught in his lungs, each gasp muffled in his ears by the rapid pounding of his heartbeat. It was violent, a flurry of shudders in his chest. It almost hurt.

So much of it hurt. So much.

His weathered shoes, old and worn and falling apart at the soles, flapped against the pavement in audible slaps. The sound of a car passing the distant crossroad revved briefly and then it was gone, but Harry barely noticed. He hardly saw anything at all in the second that he squeezed his eyes closed, blotting out the darkness, the emptiness, the entire street he fled down.

Reality nipped at his heels, and it only made him run faster.

He hurt. He hurt. There was so much irrational hurt and pain and – and frustration that Harry could barely think straight. How, within barely a handful of months, could his life have been so horrifyingly turned on its head? How, with the barest utterance of a madman, could the world become so abruptly wrong?

A flash of green. A flare of horror. A missile of hatred and cruelty and malicious intent. It hurt, and Harry couldn't consider the previous year, the previous months – any of it – without his throat clamping tightly and the urge to hurl the contents of his stomach in repulsive evacuation. And then, afterwards, when it had all ceased and school had ended and the world had fallen into maudlin routine once more…

It shouldn't have happened. It shouldn't have been the same. A boy had died, a monster had returned, and the world still acted the same. It wasn't right.

Every passing day had been a trial. Every morning Harry woke, it was to barely a second of reprieve before reality crashed down upon him once more. A boy had died and he'd done nothing to stop it. If anything, he'd facilitated it. It was Harry's fault. At least in part, it was his fault that Cedric Diggory had died. The need to confess his guilt, to tell someone, to apologise for everything he'd ever done that had led to that point, was a weight welling so expansively within him that he
almost couldn't breathe.

But there was no one there. There was no one to listen. Not his friends, half a country away. Not his godfather, who was dodging the hounds nipping at his heels like the escaped convict he allegedly was. Not his professors, and certainly not the Dursleys. That Harry had spent most of the holidays until that point locked in his room, back pressed against the door and staring into nothingness, was likely a new habit they wholly supported.

There was no one. No one to listen. No one to hear, and no one to denounce that he was a horrible person, that it wasn't his fault, that he couldn't have done anything more. It made Harry angry, because someone should have been there. Angry, and…

Heartbroken. Why wasn't anyone there?

The nail in the coffin, however, had been the letter Harry had received only that night. The letter in reply to his desperate plea that he'd hoped sounded anything but, the demand and urgency he'd sent by owl to Professor Dumbledore when his sanity reached the end of its tether after minimal replies from every other correspondent. Harry had poured everything into that letter – time, energy, desperation, the fervent need to do something to defeat the creature that could so brutally kill someone – and what did he get in reply?

Harry,

I understand your concerns, but know all is under hand. There is nothing that you can do but rest and remain safe these holidays. Your offer of assistance is appreciated, but at present unnecessary. Do you best to enjoy your brief respite.

Yours,

Albus Dumbledore

That was it. That was all of it. Harry hadn't even the presence of mind to tear the blasted letter to shreds. Without thought, with nothing but the urgent desire to get away, he'd left. The parchment hadn't even hit the ground by the time he'd stumbled through the front door.

His breath grew ragged as he left Little Whinging behind him. The glare from the streetlights intensified into greater brightness as the suburbs seeped into thicker congestion. The road flooded with cars, headlights splitting apart the darkness and making a mockery of the night. Horns blared, engines rumbled, and he would swear that even the houses – the closed, warmly lit houses of happy families and oblivious fools – echoed with the sounds of their merriment.

Harry hated them. He was angry, and he hurt, and he hated them. Staggering to a brief pause in the centre of the footpath, chest heaving with the effort, that thought recurred again and again and again. Glaring at the house to his left, the front window open and curtains spread to allow the hint of a breeze to enter through the opening, Harry turned sharply aside from the familial beauty confined by the frame. A hand wiped sweat from his forehead, his throat convulsed with something – a need for company, a need for air – and he was running once more.

How long he managed, Harry didn't know. Where he was going, he didn't know either. All he knew was that Away had never been more appealing in his life, and Harry kicked himself for not considering it sooner. Why had he stuck around? The Dursleys despised him. The sorry excuse for classmates from his Muggle schooling days had never been incentive to attend. Ron and Hermione were ignoring him when he needed them, Sirius was gone, always gone, and the professors that were all he could have turned to were so close-lipped as to be absent entirely.
Why had he stayed? Harry didn't know. It somehow seemed the most logical thing in the world to decidedly not stay.

When he staggered into the stuttering light of a bus shelter, it was to bend double and pant for breath. Hands on his knees, Harry bowed, eyes closing and knees trembling. Everything hurt, aching and protesting for their sudden abuse, muscles sobbing their protest. But it was a good hurt. A different kind of hurt to how Harry had felt consistently for weeks. The pain in his chest was somehow lessened when everything else ached too.

There was a woman sitting in the shelter. Elderly, with a cluster of paper bags propped against her legs, Harry detachedly noted that she hunched on the bench and watched him. He didn't spare her a glance in return. He didn't even care that she watched with a frown visibly deepening as he sunk onto his haunches, forehead pressing into his knees. Harry's breaths didn't really ease any for his slump; if anything, they hitched into gasps that sounded eerily like sobs. His fingers curled into the fabric of his slacks, stretching already worn material, but he didn't care for the risk of a tear. He needed something to hold onto.

"You alright?" the woman asked after a long pause. There was almost real concern in her voice, almost compassion, until, "Are you a nutter?"

Harry didn't bother to reply. He didn't care if she cared about him or, more likely, if she was concerned he was crazy and thus for her own wellbeing. What was she to him? If he'd learned anything over the past days, weeks, months, it was that people – everyone, even those he'd previously considered friends – couldn't be trusted. They didn't care. Why would a stranger possibly care more?

Harry blinked rapidly. His eyes stung. He felt angry, but beneath that feeling was something else, something more, and he hated himself for feeling it at all. Eyes continuing in their pointless blinking, increasingly blind to the blurriness of his vision, Harry curled only more tightly upon himself and waited.

Only when the bus finally drew to a halt alongside him, huffing like a weary beast with fluorescent lights glaringly brightly through its muggy windows, did he straighten. He sniffed. He still ignored the woman as she struggled to lift her paper bags into her arms, and he turned towards the bus. He rubbed briefly trembling hands behind his glasses, smeared a palm over the foolish wetness from his cheeks, and then he straightened. His calves protested each step as he climbed onto the bus.

The driver was a weedy-thin man that reminded Harry just slightly of Ernest Pang, driver of the Wizarding Night Bus. Except that this man was bored. Was disregarding. Was so obviously Muggle it was almost painful to behold.

"Where you headed?" he asked in a tone as bored as his expression.

Harry paused with his hand on the assisting rail, pinned beneath that disregarding gaze. With a swallow, he dug his hand into his pocket and drew forth what could only be described as pathetic: the nib of a quill, a crumpled square of blank paper, some petty change amidst scraps of miscellaneous grey fluff. Harry held it out to the driver, feeling nothing if not pathetically like a child offering a worthless contribution to a charity organisation. Except that his efforts weren't quite so altruistic; that fact only made Harry all the more disgusted with his situation.

"How far can this get me?" he asked.

The Ernest lookalike sighed long-sufferingly. Ignoring the grunt of the woman with her bags waiting on the bottom step of the bus, the man leaned forwards and poked briefly through the
change before snatching it with deft fingers. "Find yourself a seat," he said, jerking his head to the rear of the bus. "I'll boot you off when your time comes." The sound of change clattering into his makeshift till was oddly final and depressingly brief.

The bus itself was dingy. The seats sticky from some unknown substances, the floor even more so, clinging to the trudging steps of every alighting passenger. Gum painted the backs of each headrest in colourfully faded mosaics and the tinny music of some oldies radio channel whined overhead.

The bus was nearly empty – and Harry found himself blessedly relieved for that fact.

He found his seat – the back seat, and wedged into the shadows so deeply he thought maybe, just maybe, the bus driver might overlook his presence of a time. Maybe it would take him further than his scant change allowed. Maybe, hopefully, he might be ignored enough to be taken far, far away. Harry had been ignored enough that summer already. Why shouldn't it work in his favour for once? For this once, to get away, to thrust behind him the misery of the past year that no one seemed to care about. To…

*To do something. To stop all of this and end it all. To… to…*

*To find him. And stop him.*

*To end it all. I just want it to be over and… and to get away.*

Harry's head jostled slightly as he rested it against the grimy window when the bus kicked into motion once more. Staring at his own wan reflection until his eyes – infuriatingly, incomprehensibly – began to blur again with miserable, pained determination, Harry went away.

For a time, no one missed him.

Silence flooded the basement kitchen. Utter silence but for the hollow ticking of the wall clock, with not even the horrified breaths of those present audible enough for notice.

The overhead light was dim. The walls, once pristinely white, were grey, mottled with some pervasive darkness that wasn't dirt or filth but left shadows of its presence as good as. And the smell – there was something about the smell of an abandoned kitchen that never truly went away. Even scrubbed, *Scourgified*, swept countless times, and playing host to dozens of meals, the smell lingered.

Abandonment. Regret. Shame, even. It was oddly reminiscent of the pervading ambiance hanging over all members of the room. The Order of the Phoenix had been in a sorry state for many years, but never quite as it was then.

"What do we do?" someone finally asked.

The room shifted with a hint of motion as life was breathed into its occupants once more. "We have to find him, surely."

"We don't even know how long he's been gone."

"Or to where."

"We don't know if he – if he's –"

That particular voice choked off and more than one pair of eyes closed. In regret. In so much
shame it was almost nauseating. How had no one noticed? How had no one seen him go?

"It doesn't matter," someone said curtly. "We'll search everywhere. He will be forever in danger as long as he's without our protection."

"He should never have been out of our protection to start off with," a voice growled, furious and mournful and demanding all at once. "He should have been here, with me."

"Oh, a marvellous idea, Black. Put the boy with a wanted criminal to learn the truly important values of—"

"Severus, please."

"Why is he even here? Get the fuck out of my house!"

"Sirius—"

"I would, but the topic of interest lies in tracking down your utter imbecile of a godson and I, unfortunately, am required to be a part of the search."

"You've always been a bastard, Snivellus—"

"So mature of you, Black."

"You think you can just waltz in here—"

"Believe me, I wouldn't if I didn't have to—"

"Stop."

The voice, firm and pervasive yet quiet, sliced through the bickering like a hot knife through butter. Silence fell once more as all eyes turned towards the elderly headmaster.

His expression wasn't sad, but thoughtful. It wasn't concerned, but frowned in consideration. That, in itself, was reassuring, if only mildly. Since the Order had discovered Harry Potter's absence, he'd been all but silent in his contemplation, staring detachedly across the room as though he were regarding an image upon the far wall. He was about the only one present who seemed collected at the turn of events.

Each of those seated at the table took the situation differently; Sirius exclaimed his horror and demanded leave to search for his godson. Molly shrieked of the foolishness of 'abandoning the poor boy' before dissolving into regretful tears. Hermione fell into wide-eyed silence, and Ron hadn't held a hint of colour in his cheeks since word of his best friend's disappearance had been declared.

Alastor Moody cursed the boy.

Remus bowed his head and murmured apologies beneath his breath – to Harry, to James and Lily, to everyone.

Severus sneered and rolled his eyes, but the tightness drawing lines about his lips was telling.

Not a person was unaffected by the news. Not a single person wasn't struck, personally or otherwise, by Harry's disappearance. Except, perhaps, for Albus Dumbledore, but then, it took a Herculean effort to faze him. Not even the loss of the hope for the Wizarding world seemed to truly concern him.
"We will search for him," he said, his voice low and soft, as contemplative as ever. "We will have all eyes open and all feet to patrolling every region. But." And then he paused.

For a moment, all eyes rested unblinkingly upon him. All watched and waited and many – Minerva, Remus, Arthur – closed those eyes in acceptance of the inevitable. They knew when sacrifices had to be made, even if Dumbledore didn't seem particularly concerned for the possibility.

"But?" Sirius asked, his voice dangerous.

"But there is a war encroaching," Dumbledore finally continued, and somehow, his voice only hinted at graveness. Somehow, he was composed. "Priorities must be addressed. Harry will be found, I assure you, but the greater threat of Voldemort's return is of paramount importance."

It didn't go over well. Not with Sirius or Molly, nor with the Weasley children or Hermione, even if they didn't have much of a say in the matter. Not with Remus, though he held his tongue, nor Minerva, whose lips tightened so severely that they disappeared entirely. Not even Severus, who knew that to shunt Harry's importance to secondary position was to all but give the boy a death sentence.

But the words of Albus Dumbledore were final, and the decision was made. They would search for Harry Potter, but some things were more important.

Harry stayed disappeared. He stayed disappeared for a long time.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: So... what do you think? I know this is a bit of a downer chapter, but I swear it picks up both pace and brightness in those that follow. Promise. Harry's a little bitch, and Draco's an asshole, so... enjoy! Please let me know you're thoughts. I'd love to hear from you, and I'll be posting again very shortly. Thanks for reading!
Earthquakes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It struck like an earthquake – sudden, unexpected, and ground-breaking.

Vibrations rippled through Wizarding Britain in a shockwave that seemed to tremble the ice-laden ground, shaking heaps of thinly piled snow and quaking every standing witch and wizard until their knees knocked. It wasn't physical, though. Not felt in the bones. It went far, far deeper than that.

The tapestry of intertwined magic, the tendrils of woven composition that looped threads into the core of every magical being, abruptly tightened, and not a one stood unaffected. Breaths gasped, eyes widened, and feet slowed in step, their destination forgotten. As one, without direction, every head turned towards London.

What happened in that moment of a cold, winter morning, precious few knew. The only thing apparent was that Magic itself was disrupted, seizing and twitching at the anomaly that plucked at its woven threads. Not a badly so, however. Not badly at all, and every single witch, wizard, and creature innately understood. The feeling was liberation, and relief, and satisfaction in a way that simple 'satisfying' couldn't encompass. A knot loosened, a stain was scrubbed free…

A monster of Dark was blotted from the tapestry of brightly beautiful magic.

Not a single witness but two really understood when it happened just what 'it' was. Just they two, and even they couldn't wholly comprehend the complexity, the impossibility, of what occurred between them. One, a young man barely more than a boy, staggered backwards a step in the graveyard where they'd met, nearly falling to his knees, while the other –

He hadn't a chance. He crumpled like a marionette with its strings cut, mouth sagging open and eyes bulging. A shudder that had nothing to do with the snow and damp seeping through his thin robes convulsed through him. He stared in utter horror at the boy who had ruined him.

"What…?" he gasped, choking, forcing out the demand more terrified than he'd ever felt. He'd never truly known fear until that moment. "What did you do?"

The boy took a gasp of his own. Staggering backwards further, he all but slumped against the snow-peppered headstone behind him. The graveyard itself was in shambles, snow flung and stone crumbled, runnels and gouges in the grounds all that remained of their explosive conflict. Now, there was nothing but exhaustion. Exhaustion, and stunned incomprehension.

The boy shook his head slowly. "I don't know."

"You don't –"

"But you deserved it." The boy was faded, drained, on the verge of collapse himself, but he still managed a glare for the monster before him that was suddenly just a little more human. "You don't deserve magic if you can't use it properly."

The graveyard fell silent but for the whistle of wind weaving between headstones, tombs, and statues. Then the interruption of boots crunching in snow met the merry tune; the boy turned and left the monster collapsed in his wake.
Two wizards had entered the graveyard hours before. Only one left.

**THE END OF YOU-KNOW-WHO?**

For decades, he has terrorised our hearts. Even in his absence, his name was whispered in hushed tones. The threat of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has existed since his first appearance, and only manifested further with his rebirth.

But no more.

The events of the past week have shaken the Wizarding world upon its foundations. You-Know-Who: captured, contained, his threat neutralised. The Ministry of Magic, once bowed beneath attempts at Death Eater corruption, has seized the murderous Dark wizard and confined him in maximum security to await further trial and questioning.

The real question remains, however: how? How was he defeated? Just what phenomenon shook the world of Wizarding Britain this past Wednesday morning? And, more importantly, who is responsible? Speculation remain that…

Snorting, Draco Malfoy folded the *Daily Prophet* with its spread of black and white pictures and beaming ministry faces, thrusting it aside. It was all drivel. All of it was the same shit that had been spewed forth every day for the past week, and sometimes twice a day for the 'special editions' the news-mongering reporters managed to scratch out.

It was utterly ridiculous in Draco's opinion, because they knew nothing. Reading the same headline every day reworded just slightly differently had convinced him of that much.

"Draco, dear, please refrain from making such abominable sounds. It's positively unseemly."

Raising his gaze from where he'd returned to his eggs and sausages, Draco regarded Pansy flatly. She, in turn, stared him down unblinkingly, as disregarding as he of every other diner in the Great Hall picking through their breakfasts. "Abominable sounds?"

With deliberate care, Pansy turned from him and stroked a lock of hair behind her ear. She pursed her lips as she briefly scanned the length of Slytherin's crowded table. "You sound like a hippogriff with a head cold."

"And you've had so much experience with hippogriffs, have you?"

"You'd be surprised."

"I can assure you, I certainly would be." Draco speared a sausage with more brutality than was necessary and popped it into his mouth. "It's warranted, anyway."

Pansy crinkled her nose as she watched at him sidelong. "Now, I know you have better table manners than to chew with your mouth open. It's nothing short of slovenly."

"Abominable and slovenly all in one meal," Draco said with a languid smirk. "I only do so for your benefit, Pansy. You know that."

"Please refrain," Pansy replied. Then she nodded to the discarded *Prophet*. "It was the same tired story, then?"

Draco didn't bother replying. The answer lay in more than just his close-lipped dismissal of the
January the fourteenth, nineteen-ninety eight. It was a day that would go down in history, a day that would be committed to books and records, and likely drone from old Binns' mouth in years to come when he was still lecturing in monotonous historical tutelage. Draco had felt it, that Wednesday morning when everything had changed. He and everyone else in his Defence class had frozen at the flood of relief, freedom, wonder, that coursed through them. His magic had sung. And, like a magnet turning towards a lodestone, he'd felt himself turn in his seat in the direction of what he would only later learn was London's compass bearings.

Voldemort, it would be announced in an unprecedented night edition of the Daily Prophet, was done. Finished. Over. He was 'locked up', as was declared, and Draco couldn't help but believe the blabbering of the reporters' words; not only had they presented a picture of the homicidal madman, but Draco felt it. In his magic. He and everyone else, for that matter.

The weekend had arrived early in a cascade of letter-bearing owls and sobbing families storming the gates of the school. The war, as it had been acknowledged if only distantly felt, was over almost before it had begun. When Voldemort had resurfaced, when he'd been reborn nearly two and a half years before, it had been to wreak havoc upon the minds and sanity of all those within the Wizarding world.

And now it was over.

There had been deaths, it was true. Muggle deaths and, more importantly, Wizarding deaths. Families had been torn apart, children wrenched from their parents, and more than one 'good' witch or wizard had been corrupted into joining Death Eater ranks.

Not Draco, though. He'd avoided succumbing, and for the very reason that most bowed in obedience. There was no threat upon his person as was used against the weaker minds of the populace; Voldemort had nothing to hold over him in the absence of his parents.

To say that Draco was removed from the war as a result, however, would be a fallacy. More than that, it would be disregarding the slander that still befell him as a result of carrying the Malfoy name; his mother may be dead, his father mostly there in the confines of Azkaban prison, but 'Malfoy' was still associated with 'Death Eater'.

It didn't matter that Draco wasn't of the ranks himself.

It didn't matter that he'd as soon serve Voldemort as he would cut out his own tongue.

It didn't matter that he hated the heinous creature who had taken so much from him already.

For Draco, he had no place – not with the Death Eaters, who he refused to join, nor at Hogwarts, where staff and students shunned him for what he was. None, that was, besides the company of likeminded and similarly shunned souls.

Like Pansy. Pansy, who was even then regarding him with continued distaste as he deliberately made a mess of his breakfast.

"That's disgusting," she said as he stirred his decimated sausages into his runny eggs in what was admittedly a riotous mess.

Draco smirked at her. "If you don't like it, don't watch."
"It's hard to look away. Like a train crash."

"I appreciate being likened to something so riveting."

"So, was it?"

Draco looked up from his mess – it indeed looked disgusting, and delightfully so – to raise an eyebrow at her. "What?"

Pansy sighed and gestured to the paper again. "I don't suppose they've anything of interest to mouth off about?"

Draco snorted again and Pansy's eyelid twitched. "Nothing new. The same tired tunes. Who did it, and is this finally the end, and all that jazz."

Pansy picked daintily at her toast. "You'd think they'd actually do some groundwork before so openly revealing that they know nothing."

"One would," Draco agreed.

"Or at least find something more interesting to talk about."

"Or that."

"Like the trials." Pansy took a deliberate bite of her toast, frowning down at the smear of jam as though it personally offended her. "I can think of two rat-bastards I'd rather read about."

Instinctively, Draco glanced around them. He wasn't surprised in the least to see more than a few pairs of eyes turned their way, several heads cocked as though listening in. His gaze bowed those heads into embarrassed diversion, but it hadn't been missed. Draco knew, just as Pansy knew; every other student at Hogwarts, every single one who held nothing but fierce satisfaction for Voldemort's demise and no such strings attached as the children of Death Eaters, watched those very children as though waiting for them to snap.

Pansy wouldn't be one to so snap. Her 'rat-bastard' parents were even then facing trial and a life sentence in Azkaban. Blaise's mother was under house arrest, and he couldn't care but to regret he wouldn't be able to return home for Easter. Not Vince, who had been his father's carbon copy, nor Greg, who had always held a soft spot for his elder sister even when she'd been enveloped into the Death Eater clans. They'd both dropped out of school, but not for such reasons. Draco, though…

He didn't care. He'd loved his parents, but it was the detached kind of love that evaporated upon necessity. They were bound by name and blood, but affection had never been forthcoming between them. Draco regretted his father's incarceration, had even hurt for his mother's death, but… that had been nearly a whole year ago.

Malfoys moved on. They stood tall and they endured, even in solitude. Draco might be striding forth in something of an unconventional manner, and without the entailments of his family name, but stride he did.

Besides, unconventional had become his brand. He wore it as comfortably as he'd once worn his superiority. That 'unconventional' couldn't help but smirk upon glimpsing watchful, disdainful eyes yet thirstily open ears. It brushed aside association with anyone but Pansy and Blaise almost exclusively. Sometimes Theodore was worth his time, and even more rarely Daphne, but never anyone further. Vince and Greg might have been a 'sometimes' too, even with their Dark allegiances, but they were both long gone.
Many people had disappeared over the previous Christmas. Maybe they'd known that, some way or another, the war was approaching its end.

"I can think of more than two people I'd rather read about," Draco said, a touch louder than was expressly necessary. He slouched onto the table, elbow propped and chin dropping to his palm as he turned to Pansy. "Maybe Skeeter should do a piece on the current residents of Azkaban."

Pansy didn't miss a beat; she picked up on his play immediately. Sniffing, she regarded her toast with the same distaste she'd turned upon Draco moments before. "How boring. The only person of interest in there currently is Lestrange –"

"I beg to differ."

"- and there's only so much bat-shit crazy that can be allowed into the headlines." She took another bite and paused to swallow before continuing. "Lucius Malfoy," she said, pointing her toast at Draco, "is not crazy enough."

It was all a ruse. A performance for the slightly less aversive Slytherins that surrounded them both and yet always kept their distance. Draco thoroughly enjoyed himself in his acting; there was something so thrilling about all but spitting in the judgmental faces of his fellow students.

"I don't know," he pondered aloud, glancing sidelong at a fifth year who tried – and failed – to appear as though she wasn't listening to them. "He's pretty crazy. Used to all but torture house elves for fun."

"Yes, but all pureblood families do that."

"It's better than kittens, I suppose."

"Is it?"

"Markedly. Kittens are adorable in their hideous awkwardness."

"Watch yourself, Draco. Someone might begin to think you actually like something in the world."

"Perish the thought," Draco said, and punctuated his demand with a slopping swirl of the mess on his plate. Pansy flinched in a way that wasn't an act at all.

"Just what are we perishing?"

Draco didn't glance over his shoulder at Blaise's arrival. He didn't shuffle up the bench to give him room to sit with them, either, because there was no need; a veritable force field existed on either side of himself and Pansy, more than enough space for Blaise to seat himself.

Which he did. In a flurry of robes and easy swagger, Blaise fell into the seat and immediately turned to the sixth year at his side. "You might want to shuffle down a little further," he suggested offhandedly. "I might sneeze and infect you with evil."

The boy's lip curled but, hilariously enough, he followed Blaise's suggestion with laughable promptness. Draco still didn't turn towards his friend but he knew without looking that he flashed him a grin almost too brightly white in his dark face. Blaise always smiled like a shark that had just caught a whiff of blood in the water.

The chatter throughout the hall rolled around them as students filed through the Great Hall doors, the later-arriving professors stately as they took their own seats. There were decidedly fewer
residents of the castle after the previous week, with many students abruptly drawn home into the blubbering arms of their families, but the room was still heavy with noise.

Not too heavy, however. Not heavy enough to drown out Blaise's usual overloud voice. "What are we talking about?"

Pansy rolled her eyes. Draco grunted and swirled his sausage and egg disaster again. "You can't just intrude upon a conversation and expect it to replay itself."

"Actually," Blaise said, and Draco could hear him still smiling, "I can and I absolutely do. Tell me before I start nagging you, Draco. You don't want me to nag, do you?"

Draco didn't. He sorely didn't. Blaise was a primary example of the stubborn persistence of pureblood descendants; they were like a bloody dog with a bone.

He might have folded. Draco might have sighed and straightened, resigning to allowing Blaise into the 'conversation' as he was want to request a leading role. He didn't get the chance, however. That morning, a full week after the world of Wizarding Britain was changed forever, the entrance of a pair of intruders would drag that change through Hogwarts' front doors.

The boom of the front doors must have been intentional. An announcement, perhaps, and unnecessary, but surely intentional. Draco knew unnecessary posturing when he heard it.

It served its purpose, though. Heads turned even before the intruders stepped into the Great Hall. Every distracted head did so as well when they passed through the double doors.

The ministry rep was tall. Broad, head high, dressed in impressive robes of deep scarlet. Not an Auror, Draco wagered, but something related. Definitely law enforcement. A handsome man for more than just his appearance, his charisma and confidence clung to him as he made his swaggering way down the central aisle of the hall itself.

Draco saw him. He saw the man and felt a flicker of curiosity well within him – a curiosity exacerbated by the boy he dragged in his wake.

The boy was indeterminately a boy at first. Maybe it was the unfashionably long hair raked into a messy high tail and hanging down his back, his fringe loose and surely blinding him as it flopped across his face. Maybe it was the oversized jumper that all but drowned him, or his skinny legs, or the fact that he was just a little hunched upon himself in a way that made features themselves difficult to discern.

Not that it mattered. The more interesting part was that he was indeed being dragged – or as good as – by the arm and by the ministry rep in said rep's striding wake. He didn't quite stumble, but there was enough reluctance to give him an awkward step.

The Great Hall fell beneath a hush. Conversation died as eyes turned, Slytherins and outcasts and every other students for once of one mind. The sound of footsteps became abruptly deafening, the click of heels ringing on the marble floors.

The rep drew to a step before the professor's dais and head table. Dumbledore was already rising to his feet, McGonagall at his side, when the boy all but stumbled into the man when he swung him to a similar stop, arm still captured in his grasp.

Surprisingly, the rep spared a glance for the boy. An almost apologetic glance. He didn't loosen his hold, however, as Dumbledore captured his attention with a brief word. "Inquisitor Gyeong, how
unexpected to see you."

"Is it?" the supposed Inquisitor said. "You were told to expect us today."

"We were told to expect a certain someone; not, however, with the company of an Inquisitor."

Draco had always disliked Dumbledore. Not hated – he only had the space to hate one particular Dark Lord and his followers – but disliked strongly nonetheless. He smiled too much, and oftentimes with more than simply a smile. He wore his age and supposed wisdom as one would a casual jacket, as easily shrugged on as discarded, and with a cloak of entitlement thrown into the ensemble. Even then, his wrinkled face was drawn into a pleasant, welcoming smile that was just slightly merry, just slightly amused, as he stared upon the intruders from his exalted height.

Draco didn't like the man, but he suffered him. He didn't have to like the suffering either, though.

Gyeong grunted, sparing a glance for the boy at his side. "I was instructed to act as an escort, as needed."

"As needed?" Dumbledore echoed.

"Yes, sir."

"Is it needed?"

"Bloody well is not."

All eyes that weren't already turned, that were distracted by Gyeong and Dumbledore, shifted towards the boy in his grasp. The boy who, even then, struggled with something like careless effort to tug his arm free. He tipped his head towards the Inquisitor in question, though he must have surely been unable to see something through his stupid fringe. "Do you mind?"

Gyeong opened his mouth to reply, but the boy raised his captured arm slightly and spoke over him. "I'm not a bloody escape artist, nor a criminal – or so I've been told. Can you let me the fuck go?"

His words rung through the room, not quite indignant but a demand nonetheless. Draco felt his lips twitch, as much for his words as for the Gyeong's brief fluster as he snatched his hand away as though burned. The boy took a deliberate step from him, shoving his sleeve-muffled hands into the pockets of jeans so ripped and holey it was difficult to discern if they were fashionably so or not. Then he turned towards the head table. "I'm here as requested, Dumbledore."

"As I can see, my dear boy," Dumbledore replied, his smile fond. It was disgusting to witness. "I thank you for your compliance."

"Well, it was that or be dragged kicking and screaming," the boy said, shooting Gyeong a pointed glance that triggered a touch of redness to well in his cheeks.

Draco bit back an amused snort. Not a single other person in the room, student or professor, spoke. It was like watching a stage show – and it was far more interesting that the usual breakfast monotony. Draco settled his chin more comfortably in his palm with the expectation of enjoying the performance.

Only to straighten when Dumbledore spoke. To not quite gasp as everyone else in the hall seemed to but to stare with a different kind of intensity. To abruptly deafen lose interest in anything else, become blinded to the Inquisitor, the headmaster, and anyone else, because –
"I'm sure nothing quite so crass," Dumbledore said. "You are welcome in our halls, Harry, and I hope you enjoy your return, even enforced as it is."


Harry Potter.

The disappeared Harry Potter.

The vanished Boy-Who-Lived who'd… who'd…

Draco wasn't alone in thinking he'd died long ago. It was almost like seeing a ghost, and even more so because he hadn't recognised him immediately. Maybe it was that hair. That fringe. That oversized jumper or those skinny legs or the fact that he wasn't wearing his horridly typical glasses as he should be.

Dumbledore said something else, and Potter replied, but Draco hardly heard them. Blaise's contribution in his ear bespoke his thoughts perfectly.

"No fucking way…"

'No fucking way' indeed. First Voldemort's defeat, his capture and indefinite incarceration, and now this?

That day, an unremarkable day in January nineteen-ninety eight, everything tipped on its head with further changed. The Wizarding world would never be the same again. Draco found he was sorely delighted for that fact.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you so, so much to all of my wonderful commenters! I can't thank you enough for your lovely words; it's been so wonderful and supportive! I promise a longer chapter next time - I swear!
Potter disappeared.

Or at least he disappeared from where Draco could see him. Likely it was to be swept away to the headmaster's office, or with his ex-Head of House, McGonagall. Draco didn't know and no one else seemed to either – a or so Draco gleaned from overheard conversations, for no one expressly told him. Not that he was intentionally listening, but…

"That was Potter, right? Harry Potter?"

"I can't believe it. He's back?"

"Where's he been?"

"He's back now?"

"It was really, truly him, right?"

And, from the more objectionable members of the school, snide murmuring to the effect of, "Of course he'd come back now, since You-Know-Who is finally gone."

Draco objected to that particular overheard sentiment on a number of counts, and none of which had anything to do with any indignation on Potter's part. He couldn't care for Potter himself – of course not – but…

The Dark Lord wasn't entirely gone, for one. For two, the fact that the fourth year Ravenclaw who'd spoken still called him 'You-Know-Who' was utterly pathetic, even after years of habit. And three, if anything, Draco considered Potter's resurfacing to be nothing if not understandable given the circumstances. Why shouldn't he show his face now that the threat was over?

Everyone knew that Voldemort had held a vendetta against archenemy and boy-threat, Harry Potter. Turning tail and fleeing was surely a reasonable response to such violent and deadly intent. Draco was hardly one to judge; the main reason he still attended Hogwarts at all was because it provided a modicum of safety to otherwise shunned individuals such as himself. If anything, disappearing off the radar was about the most relatable thing Potter had ever done.

Draco dutifully told himself he didn't care, nor have any interest in, Potter. He allowed that he didn't hate him anymore – had he ever hated him? – for he knew what true hatred was. Even their schoolyard rivalry had faded in Potter's years of absence. Draco didn't care about Potter. Never.

But he couldn't deny that he was maybe a little curious.

The fact of the matter was that Potter had disappeared. Years ago, and after that climatic finale of the Triwizard Tournament that had heralded Voldemort's revival. No one knew where he'd vanished to, and though whispers and wonders had persisted in the years since, Potter had all but faded from thought. He was gone; it was as simple as that.

But then the darkness had begun to descend. The Ministry grew unhinged, straining at the threat that seeped like a bloody stain across pale carpet. It darkened – and then brightened again before that darkness could get a foothold in what was still a baffling, unexpected, and wondrous turn of events. Had it really only been a week ago that Voldemort had been defeated?
Now Potter appeared again.

Draco disliked Hogwarts. He disliked the majority of its residents, and even some of those he considered his friends most of the time tested him more often than not. The professors were a bunch of bastards, none removed enough from the war to look at a Malfoy, or a Parkinson, or a Flint, or a Carrow, without twitching slightly and turning aside. Even Snape, Head of Slytherin House himself, was far from removed from the situation.

Draco didn't know what to make of Snape. He never truly had. For years, and then particularly so after his mother's death, he'd done his best not to think much of him at all.

The fact of the matter was that Draco was biding his time. He would wait in Hogwarts until he finished his NEWTs. At Hogwarts, despite being seventeen already, he was still considered student and minor enough to pose little threat to the 'good' witches and wizards of the world. In the relative isolation of the Scottish highlands, where not even Death Eaters bothered to poke their noses, he was relatively safe.

Draco bided his time, waited, and pondered a future he had little enough interest in but to hope he survived it. There was nothing truly outstanding about his circumstances, and certainly nothing more than taunting his fellow students with performances he enacted alongside Pansy and Blaise.

Not until Potter, that was.

Except that Potter had disappeared. Again. He'd barely stepped into the Great Hall, had barely been revealed for who he was, and Draco had barely been afforded the chance to stare and consolidate this Potter with the boy from his past, before he was leaving again.

The Great Hall was frozen in a state of stunned silence at Dumbledore revealing words. Draco knew he wasn't the only one who stared. For Potter and Dumbledore, they seemed entirely oblivious to their audience that watched in slack-jawed rapture.

"Mr Gyeong, your services will no longer be required," Dumbledore said, and then he'd dismissed the Inquisitor with a smile and a deliberate turn of his head that would have been barely short of insulting from a lesser man. He smiled gently at Potter, wrinkled cheeks crinkling further in a way that appeared nothing if not genuine.

It wasn't, of course. Draco doubted there was little truly genuine about the old man anymore, if there ever had been. He was a fraud, through and through; evidence of his fraudulence was hardly needed to illustrate that fact.

"Harry, my boy," Dumbledore continued in that sickeningly kindly voice, and Potter turned blankly towards him. "Perhaps you could join me in my office?"

And that was that. To the silent, staring eyes of every student, every professor, and the dismissed Inquisitor who apparently hadn't the brains to take his leave, Dumbledore descended from the staff dais and strode down the length of the Great Hall. He paused only briefly at Potter's side, murmuring something that must have been magically Muffled, for the hush in the room would have otherwise made it audible. Then he'd continued past him.

Potter stood for a moment longer. His shoulders were still a little hunched, hands still shoved into his pockets, and his bangs obscured more of his face than they left visible. Then, with a long-suffering sigh that would have been loud even without the hush, he turned and followed after Dumbledore. Their footsteps through the Entrance Hall echoed in sharp relief before dying into the distance.
The Great Hall and its diners unfroze only slowly. It started in whispers, then in a ripple of movement, then those whispers and movements rose into a chorus of conversation and scrambling bodies making for the doors. Even the professors seemed afflicted with curiosity, and within two minutes more than half of the Hall had emptied.

Draco remained seated. He stared unblinkingly at the doors to the Great Hall. What… the fuck? Potter's arrival – it wasn't good or bad, necessarily, but it was certainly unexpected. Inexplicable. Potter, all but dragged into the school by an Inquisitor and practically embraced by the headmaster without any of the sticky discomfort of an actual embrace, and now he was… Draco was used to unexpected, was familiar with not knowing what was going on, but Potter…

"Well, that was entirely random."

Shaken out of his stupor, Draco glanced towards Pansy. She and Blaise were far from being the only occupants remaining at the Slytherin table; Slytherin, it seemed, still possessed enough sense of decorum to know when scrambling in the departed wake of the headmaster was a fruitless endeavour. Still, Draco, Pansy and Blaise were likely few of only a handful that weren't even attempting to subtly slip from the room.

"Do you take pride in stating the obvious, Pansy?" Draco asked, straightening himself from his momentary shock.

Pansy glanced at him sidelong as she took a final bite of her toast. "Someone had to."

"No, actually, they didn't," Draco said at the same time Blaise folded both arms onto the table and dropped his head atop of them with his customary grin. "I thought that was my job," he said.

"Apparently she deems you needed of a day off," Draco said.

"Ah. How nice of you, Pansy."

"She is nothing but nice, you know."

"Shut up, the both of you," Pansy said, glaring at each of them in turn. Her face twisted, nose scrunching as though the taste of buttered toast had abruptly turned sour; entirely predictably, too, for Pansy hated being considered 'kind' about as much as Draco did. "I merely comment in deference to the surprise Potter presents. How entertaining."

"Entertainment is always appreciated," Blaise said with a comfortable sigh. He could find comfort in lying sprawled on a stone floor, Draco would wager.

"The demise of the Dark Lord barely a week ago wasn't exciting enough?" Draco drawled.

"Watch how you name our dear lord in the presence of company, Draco," Pansy said as she looked over his shoulder. Her eyebrow rose and Draco suspected she was terrifying the living daylights out of some first year or other.

"It's certainly better than all that 'You-Know-Who' bollocks that still persists," Blaise said with a yawn.

Draco couldn't help but roll his eyes. Blaise himself had adhered to that very 'bollocks' as much as anyone else until the Prophet had announced that there was less fear to be felt from a captured man. Captured and incapacitated, they said, if not how, like a dog in a muzzle.

Rising from his seat – and ignoring Blaise's grumble as to his departure when he 'hadn't even eaten
yet’– Draco slung his book bag over his shoulder. It wasn't particularly heavy; he hadn't really brought any books to class for months. "Like we need more 'entertainment' this year," he said.

"Amusements still tickle my fancy," Pansy said, rising too.

"You're both leaving me?" Blaise asked, pouting indignantly.

Draco ignored him. "That doesn't fit the stipulations of this year, as you always remind me," he said. "There is one goal and one goal only."

"To finish the year --" Pansy began.

"- avoiding the unnecessary --" Blaise continued.

"- and surviving to escape out the other side," Draco finished. He nodded curtly. It was as much a reminder for himself as his friends, and the thought helped a little to shunt Potter out of his mind. "If the pair of you can't do as much as ignore the trivialities that crop up on occasion with a semblance of level-headedness, then I'm afraid I'm going to have to disown you both."

Pansy smiled indulgently, and Blaise rose to his feet, picked up the toast rack, and followed after them as they wandered from the Great Hall. There would be no disowning.

That was the truth of it. The reality. The decision, even. Draco was going to get to the end of his seventh year, complete his NEWTs, and that would be it. That would be all of it. He didn't think beyond that endpoint, and he didn't allow himself to become distracted by passing bright sparks of interest. No bloody Potter, certainly. No club activities, either, or quidditch, or prefect duties, since he'd elected to step down from the position the previous year. No attempting to make himself seem better, seem good and trustworthy, to the prejudiced bumpkins he would see no more of as soon as he stepped outside of the school's front gates for the last time.

No playing to anyone, and that included those who expected Draco to be The Malfoy. He carried the name, but The Malfoy? He was no longer just his name. His father would be writhing in his cell if he realised just how little Draco maintained the family ideals.

At the end of the day, Voldemort's defeat was a wonder and a triumph that benefitted Draco in all the right ways, but besides the fact that it had happened, it held no immediate importance. Not to Draco. Just as Potter's return wasn't going to change anything. It was interesting -- only a little, Draco reminded himself -- but it was just that. An interest.

If only Draco could inform the rest of the school of just how trivial Potter's non-appearance was. It might have helped had he been able to convince himself of that fact, too. He settled for ignoring the disruption to the best of his ability.

Unfortunately for him, just as much as Voldemort had been an unshakeable topic on the tip of every tongue for a whole week, so too had Harry Potter become. More so, even, because he was fresh news, and he was here at Hogwarts. He was the Boy Wonder from the past who had disappeared without a trace. He was interesting -- and there was no escaping becoming caught up in the thrall of excitement. There was no deafening himself the whispers or speculations.

Transfiguration found whispers running amok that Draco couldn't truly ignore. He muttered imprecations to Pansy about the stupidity of the simple-minded that had her only regarding him with a flat stare before rolling her eyes.

Lunch was a mess of more whispers and audible speculations, the words 'Harry Potter' thrown around with such frequency that Draco suspected the first years at least must have been solely
chanting his name. He mentioned as much to Pansy and Blaise with a pointed glance towards said first years. Blaise threw a potato into their midst. It managed to explode and splatter to an outburst of indignant shrieks. Draco deemed it very satisfying.

And yet that satisfaction died when Charms arrived that afternoon to more talking, with dinner that was a deafening sea of yet more whispers of ‘Potter’ and ‘why’ and ‘how’. Even in the Slytherin common room that evening, not a single student appeared to be speaking of anything but Potter’s arrival for more than a heartbeat or two.

"Have you finished that homework for Herbology?" was followed seconds later by, "It was definitely him, right?"

"You're sitting in my couch," was met by, "Have you heard any further news about Potter?"

And, "I'm probably going to go to bed. How about you?" was chased by speculations of, "I honestly can't believe he'd come back? Why? Where's he been?"

'He' became synonymous with Potter, which in Draco's opinion was rather frustrating given that Voldemort had acquired a similar title in recent weeks. It was annoying. Vexing, even, and particularly so because it wasn't doing Draco any favours in ignoring his own increasingly bloated curiosity. He'd glared more of his juniors into silence that afternoon than he had in the entire week preceding, so fiercely that Blaise was left snickering.

"I think you're almost more feared than Pansy, now, Drake," he said.

Pansy speared him a glare before smiling dangerously. "Blaise, do I need to twist your balls off again?"

"Again?" Draco asked, not bothering to glance towards either of them from his homework. The graffiti he drew in the margin of the library book's was unfolding swimmingly.

"I've heard the regrowing process can be somewhat discomforting," Pansy crowed.

"Spare me that," Blaise said with a laugh, but he did subside. It was always difficult to tell whether Pansy truly meant her words or not; Draco had learned it was often better to simply play safe.

His humour died rapidly, however, because the common room persisted with its chatter. It was annoying. It was frustrating. It was even infuriating to the point that Draco considered hexing most of Slytherin house into silence; he knew he could do it after having done just that exactly twice before. But regardless of all that…

It was kind of interesting. 'Curious', Pansy had said. She had that right, at least.

Scratching inky splodges into the margin of his library book, Draco thought about Potter as he couldn't quite help himself. It was impossible not to, what with the murmurs surrounding him in the common room and the image of him all but disappearing like a ghost through a wall set on constant replay in his mind. Draco had a few of those; Potter entering the hall, him leaving, his distinct absence since – and the animated excitement that had erupted throughout the seventh year cohort replay in his ears once more. It hadn't left him alone anymore than his thoughts of Potter had.

"Harry's really come back?" Weasley asked of McGonagall as soon as she stepped into the classroom that morning, right after Granger's blurted, "Is he alright?"

McGonagall didn't get a chance to even open her mouth before every other Gryffindor leapt forth
with their own questions.

"Where's he been?"

"What's he been doing?"

"Has he really come back to school?"

"Where is he now?"

McGonagall was forced to silence them. Quite literally too; for a moment she'd thrown a Silencing Charm like a blanket over the classroom of triggered Gryffindors and expectantly waiting listeners. She held up an unnecessarily placating hand, and it was only when Silenced mouths closed that she spoke.

"Mr Potter has been through many a trial in his… absence," she said formally. "He is returning for the final months of this school year to acquire a qualification, as directed by the Ministry and agreed upon by Mr Potter himself. At present, Headmaster Dumbledore wishes to speak with him in privacy, but should any caring student feel the urge, questions will be posed to Mr Potter directly. In moderation." McGonagall all but glared around the room as though to still potentially wagging tongues.

It didn't work, of course. As soon as the Silencing Charm lifted, voices were blabbering with even more questions.

"So he's staying?"

"But where's he been?"

"How long will he be talking to Dumbledore?"

"Isn't it kind of strange that he's going to be finishing school after missing nearly half of it? That's entirely irrational, in my opinion."

That last was from Pansy. Draco would have known it was Pansy who spoke up even if he hadn't heard it directly from her, almost bellowing in his ear for her proximity and apparent need to make herself heard.

Heads turned towards her. Towards them, as it were, for by and large, most 'Malfoy, Parkinson, or Zabini' interruptions were considered a group effort. Draco smirked; it was decidedly amusing to behold Granger's hateful glare and Weasley's face mottling in a spotty flush. They weren't the only ones to express such fierce loathing; disapproval radiated from more than just the present Gryffindors.

McGonagall diffused the accusations – all of them, including those that had yet to arise – almost without ceremony. "I repeat," she said sharply. "Mr Potter will answer any further questions posed, and only should he wish to. I would request maturity from our seventh years to set an example for our younger students. Mr Potter has been through a trial; peppering him for answers is unwarranted and unworthy of the students of Hogwarts."

She spoke with finality, as though 'unwarranted' and 'unworthy' were apt deterrents for questioners. Maybe they were for some; Granger bowed her head, nodding a little in sad understanding. Weasley winced slightly, and every other Gryffindor adopted expressions of chastisement in varying degrees. Even some of the Ravenclaws – and definitely the Hufflepuffs – grew subdued.
Not the Slytherins, however. Draco considered such was likely because Pansy, Blaise, and himself were the only Slytherins in the room.

For Draco, at least, McGonagall’s words had the opposite effect. It was a habit of sorts that he'd found himself falling into, one that was as amusing as it was necessary. And that was that he didn't do what he was told. Or, more correctly, what was expected of him.

Don't ask Potter questions? Hell, if Draco hadn't wanted to before, he certainly did now.

Draco had lived much of his life doing exactly what was expected of him. Whether that was being a Malfoy protégé, a snooty Slytherin, or a merciless bully, he fulfilled each expectation as they arose. But no more. The Malfoy image was cast out of the window with his parents' absence and Voldemort's tarnish of his name. The 'snooty Slytherin' faded into oblivion when the majority of Slytherin had turned their backs upon him, and the merciless bully…

Well, Draco had never truly considered such uncharacteristic of him, so it was hard to entirely shrug off. Besides, tormenting ignorant fellow students who spouted foolish nonsense was thoroughly enjoyable. Even more so when those very students sought to spit upon him more often than not.

Draco told himself he wasn't interested in Potter – not where he was, where he'd been, nor why he was really back. Apparently, however, some more demanding part of his psyche disliked abiding by his own stubborn instructions.

At lunch, Draco pretended not to keep an eye out for Potter. In class, it was merely chance that had his ears pricking at each mention of Potter, accidental that he was mostly-turned towards the door to the room throughout. And in the Slytherin common room, that he doodled and pondered instead of studying… Draco knew he was smart, but studious was no longer an image he filled. Thinking about what he probably shouldn't was far more riveting. Besides, no one had access to his thoughts. Or they shouldn't have, except –

"Are you thinking about Potter?"

Pausing in his drawing, Draco drew his gaze slowly towards where Pansy sat at his side. "What?"

Pansy wasn't a master of Legilimency. Draco was about ninety-five per cent sure of that. She was, however, remarkably – and frustratingly – perceptive at times. She smirked as Draco glanced towards her. "You're wearing that expression."

"No I'm," Draco said shortly, then, "What expression?"

"You gave yourself away, Drake," Blaise chuckled.

"I'm not wearing any expression."

"Yes you are," Blaise said. "It's the 'thinking about Potter' expression."

"How ridiculous."

"You're not going back to your obsessive fixation again, are you, Draco?" Pansy asked chidingly.

Draco stabbed his quill through the page of the library book before raising his gaze to regard Pansy with hooded eyes. She only quirked an eyebrow in response. "Pansy," he said slowly and deliberately, "I have made certain to become curious about exactly nothing in the past two years. I do not become 'obsessively fixated'."
"Yeah, you're pretty good at that whole 'uncurious' thing," Blaise pondered aloud.

"You've learned to disregard what interests you," Pansy corrected, pointed the feathered tip of her quill towards him. "And it's taken practice and exposure. Potter, however, has been absent—"

"I am aware."

"...and as such, teaching oneself to disregard his presence is a skill you haven't needed to practice. Hence, obsessive fixation."

Draco stared at her flatly. Then he drew his gaze sidelong around the common room. Just to make sure. Just to be certain that no one could listen in and overhear their conversation. He likely hadn't needed to; Pansy wouldn't have raised the topic if there were such a risk. It was harder to pretend if the world knew they all pretended.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Draco said, closing the book with a snap. He dropped his quill on top of it before stretching both arms overhead. "Potter is passing fancy—"

"A fancy?" Blaise said with a smirk.

"- and pass he will. I have no interest in him whatsoever." Then Draco rose to his feet.

"Where are you going?" Pansy asked with little real curiosity.

"For a walk," Draco said, already turning away from their isolated table.

"Don't get lost," Blaise called after him.

"I'm not a bloody idiot, Blaise."

Their exchange garnered a few glances, but only a few. The common room was slowly beginning to thin in numbers as evening deepened. Curfew ticked closer on the serpent-handed clock above the fireplace, and for the goody-two-shoes of the house—or even those who simply valued their education enough to attempt to avoid a detention—such meant turning in for the night.

Not Draco, though. He was a legal adult, a seventh year, and he could do whatever the fuck he wanted. Besides, it would be a relief to escape whispers of 'Potter' that echoed as much in Draco's own head as from the lips of stupidly persistent gossip-mongers.

The corridors were empty. Lights were dimmed. Draco's footsteps resounded with every step, and he found he quite liked the isolation it insinuated. He often took himself upon such walks for that very reason.

Shoving his hands into his pockets, Draco drew away from the Slytherin dungeons. His feet tracked a familiar path, climbing stairs and descending corridors, not searching in particular but seeking solace in the one place that was truly Draco's. Away from glaring eyes that he didn't really care about. Away from wagging tongues that seemed to speak of little besides 'Harry Potter' and 'You-Know-Who' these days. Just... away.

Of course it would be in such escape that he actually stumbled upon Potter himself. There was a certain sense of poetic justice to that inevitability.

Few places in Hogwarts were truly secret.

There was the Come-And-Go Room that Draco had learned the existence of in his fifth year, which
was something of a hidden treasure trove. Or it would have been had a clutch of Gryffindors not found it first and made it their ‘secret place’. It became significantly less appealing with the prospect of disallowed entry when in use or, worse, stumbling upon one such Gryffindor when they’d requested the room outfit itself in garish décor.

There was the professor's staff room. Not the common staff rooms, the ones that students had access to and knowledge of, but the one that was a sanctuary for full-time teachers that doubled as full-time nannies. Draco couldn't blame them for needing a retreat to coddle their sanity; it would likely abandon them otherwise. Yet even that staff room wasn't hidden from the upperclassmen.

The kitchens weren't really a secret for anyone higher than fourth year, and each House had their own network of corridors that many attempted to keep hidden from other Houses but were communally known by anyone with a brain and pair of eyes to see with. Secret rooms, hidden stairwells, windows that could be climbed through rather than trekking to the nearest door should one have the animalistic urge to scale a wall.

Draco knew most of them. He'd made a point of knowing, not because he needed to know but because he wanted to. There were none that were interesting anymore. Nothing remarkable. Except for his balcony.

Draco had deduced that it was only accessible to legal adults at the very beginning of his seventh year. Such a restriction ensured that those who had access were whittled down to professors, seventh years, and the older – if not necessarily more mature – members of sixth year. But to Draco's knowledge, no one else used it. In his opinion, the reluctance to discover his little hidden cove likely had to do with the fact that it required something of a leap of faith to access.

Climbing the third floor stairwell and spiralling within the inner foundations of the Clock Tower, Draco stepped out onto the fourth floor landing. He proceeded to climb further, following the wooden steps that were almost a ladder and the spread of the giant pendulum and network of cogs itself. He could have climbed higher still, for the Clock Tower itself was usually empty and abandoned, but to do so would be to risk being deafened with every striking of the bells on the upper floors. Draco might appreciate silence from his fellow students, but he still valued his sense hearing.

Instead, he strode towards the pendulum. Towards the cogs and wheels, weaving through the narrow path that barely looked like a path at all, and towards the glass-faced dial of the giant clock. He paused, instinctively raised a hand to touch the frosted glass, before stepping through it.

There was a brief moment, a heart-stopping second where Draco plummeted through empty air. Then his feet touched the marble spread of his balcony. A short fall, barely a foot, and a sudden touchdown. Then he was breathed in frozen winter air.

Night blanketed the balcony. Draco's breath plumed whitely in front of his face. It was cold, freezing, even, but perhaps not as cold as winter promised. The balcony was magical, after all. Never quite as battered by the weather as could afflict it, nor as starkly visible as it most definitely should have been from the courtyard below. Draco had never asked anyone to check, of course, for to do so would be to alert unsuspecting classmates to the existence of his clock balcony, but he suspected it was indeed hidden from view.

Grey-veined marble floor. Pale, sandstone balustrade of hourglass-shaped shafts and smooth tops. Barely ten steps across, the balcony was modestly sized yet big enough to feel a sense of confidence in its stability. Its magical stability, most likely, which was even more reassuring.
Draco felt himself smile as he often did upon stepping onto his little haven. This was his. Entirely his. Wand drawn, he strode into the empty darkness of the night, savouring the almost smug satisfaction that accompanied knowing the existence of the balcony, muttered "Lumos", and –

He paused in step.

Draco liked his balcony just as it was. He liked its magical-ness, its isolation, the fact that it seemed to be his entirely. It was an escape, a chance to get away and rid himself of the drudgery that was school life if only momentarily. To escape students who spoke too much and too often of imprisoned Dark Lords and wayward Boys-Who-Lived.

It was not the kind of context Draco wanted nor anticipated finding that very Boy-Who-Lived. Wasn't he supposed to be disappeared into Dumbledore's clutches? was Draco's first thought. And then, nipping on the heels of that thought, You've got to be fucking kidding me.

Potter hadn't noticed his arrival. Or perhaps he had and he was ignoring Draco, which Draco wouldn't put past him. He was Potter, after all. Instead, he sat perched atop the balustrade, legs dangling over the edge, with his head tipped upwards as though studying the sky above.

Draco hadn't noticed him at first. He likely wouldn't have noticed him through the darkness if not for his own Lumos. Draco was already regretting having cast it at all; it wasn't like he needed to see. If he hadn't, maybe they could have pretended they didn't know one another were there.

But Potter was, and he had. That Draco was a little blindingly curious didn't help matters. If anything, it made it worse; he'd been actively trying to ignore that curiosity, if only because everyone else had been just as curious. If Draco strove for anything, it was to avoid cohering to how every other bloody seventeen-year-old in the school acted.

It would be particularly difficult to ignore thinking of Potter now. Maybe I should just leave, Draco thought, then immediately smacked the idea aside. No, I won't let him have one up on me. This is my balcony, after all.

That, and Draco was stupidly curious. And maybe just a little smug that he was the first one to see Potter after he'd up and vanished that morning.

So instead of turning aside, Draco took himself to the balustrade. He stopped. He peered over the edge and very pointedly didn't look at Potter. Draco was going to enjoy his solitude, just as he'd sought, whether Potter was by his side or not.

That conviction lasted all of about thirty seconds. Thirty long, long seconds, and Draco was detachedly surprised that it endured even that long; he and Potter had never been in such silent proximity for so long in the past.

Draco couldn't help but glance sidelong. Or stare, more correctly.

Potter appeared entirely relaxed. Too relaxed, even, his head still tipped backwards and face bared to the night. His fringe still covered most of his eyes, but those eyes were closed. He barely moved, with only the barest breeze fiddling idly with his messy tail where it hung down to back.

That must be magical, Draco thought. No way could he have grown it that long in – what, two and a half years? It looks a little ridiculous. His fringe, too. And his stupid jumper. Why are his clothes always so baggy? And – bloody hell, does he not know a simple Mending Charm? Patch your fucking jeans, Potter.
Draco’s inner monologue continued on a detached level, but he barely heard it. Or he tried not to, though he heard enough to consider himself more than a little bit of a hypocrite for it; Draco was hardly the image of pristine attire and decorous semblance. Maybe once upon a time, but now? He couldn’t even recall the last time he’d put a comb to his hair; he made a point of not recalling, in fact.

Silence persisted throughout the balcony. Surprisingly comfortable silence too, given that Draco’s monologue continued throughout and his privacy was invaded. His balcony was no longer quite so secret anymore, and that irked him. But strangely enough, as he leaned upon the top of the balustrade and told himself that he wasn’t studying Potter as he stared at him almost without blinking, that irking was all that existed.

They’d been rivals once, but apparently not anymore. Draco had been almost convinced he’d hated Potter, but… No, not anymore.

Potter had disappeared. The spitting flames of aggravation and competition had dwindled, and there no longer remained even softly glowing embers to rekindle the fire. It was simply… gone.

Draco registered that as he stared. As he watched. As he begrudged the violation of his isolation while acknowledging that begrudging was about all he felt. That, and curiosity, because –

"Are you just going to stare all night?"

Draco blinked. He was staring, but it wasn't obvious. Leaning with elbows propped atop the balustrade and face turned towards the abyss of the night-swathed grounds, his Lumos-lit wand tucked into his elbow, Draco knew he wasn't obvious. He had long ago mastered the art of staring without appearing to. Besides, Potter still hadn't even opened his eyes. He couldn't possibly have –

"Silent treatment too, now?" Potter murmured in continuation. "Who knew you could actually hold you tongue?"

Draco opened his mouth. Then he closed it. Then he opened it again and paused. Sighed, and then, "You've got my hands tied, here," he said.

"You mean tongue-tied?" Potter said.

"No, actually," Draco replied. He raised a hand, dropping his chin atop his palm, and made no attempt to hide that he was staring anymore. "I meant what I said."

"Of course you did."

"I always mean what I say, Potter."

"Even with all that bravado?"

Draco blinked. For how quietly Potter spoke, for the fact that his lips barely moved and he hadn't budged an inch since he'd started talking, there could have almost been a third person upon the balcony. Almost – but not quite, because Draco had been staring for long enough to know that it was definitely just Potter.

"Who knew?" he said flatly.

"Knew what?" Potter barely said.

"That you have a grain of wit left in you."
Draco smiled a little smugly in a way that was mostly a farce. "As I've heard, the common theory was that you went insane and ran off a cliff somewhere. That, or that you'd joined Voldemort's forces and gone fully Dark. I believe the speculations are about fifty-fifty."

He was watching Potter closely enough that, even in only the thin light of his *Lumos*, even through the mess of Potter's overlong fringe, he saw the very second his eyes fluttered open. Slowly, blinking, he stared directly upwards. "Huh."

"Offended?" Draco couldn't help but ask. It wasn't like he particularly cared if Potter was – or at least he cared no more than he did about annoying the pants off the next person – but a bone-deep urge to ask still rose within him to ask.

"About which part?" Potter replied. He still hadn't turned, still stared upwards.

Draco shrugged a shoulder. "Any of it. All of it. I would think that Saint Potter himself would have some objection to being called a follower of Voldemort. Or at least the crazy part."

"Well, they wouldn't be exactly wrong," Potter said.

Draco blinked. And stared. Again. Curious didn't even begin to cover it. Not quite horror, either, nor objection, because Draco all but shunned most Death Eater allies, but definitely curiosity.

"Well, I'll be. Saint Potter –"

"That's a terrible nickname," Potter said.

"Regardless of heinous nicknames," Draco overrode him, "I never would have expected you to join Voldemort."

"Just as I never would have expected you to grow a pair of balls and actually say his name," Potter retorted.

More staring. Then Draco couldn't help himself; he snorted in an abrupt burst of amusement. Still not annoyance, he realised, just as he realised their exchange was perhaps the longest they'd every spoken without coming to blows. How odd. "They were always there, Potter."

"Were they?"

"Of course. I just keep them tucked out of hexing range."

A beat of silence rung between them and then, surprisingly, Potter uttered a soft snort nearly identical to Draco's. "Very wise of you."

"I am nothing if not wise."

"You got it wrong, you know."

"I'm never wrong." Draco paused, frowned, and turned his head just a little. "About what?"

Potter, for reasons unknown, still wasn't looking at him. That fact was strangely dissatisfying for reasons Draco could only attribute to the past; he knew he'd once favoured being the centre of attention. Once, it had been both good and bad attention, as any limelight he could attain was surely favourable, but he'd grown out of that. Attention was still good, but not so much.

Clearly, enough of it still remained, however, and right alongside his urge to poke at Potter, that he
felt a touch disgruntled when it wasn't provided to him.

"About Voldemort," Potter said. He kicked his legs slightly before hooking his ankles in their
dangle. "I didn't join him. But," he raised a hand to pluck idly at his fringe in a way that didn't wipe
it from his eyes even slightly, "I suspect I might be a bit barmy."

Incredulous laughter bubbled from Draco's lips before he'd registered his amusement this time.
Shaking his head, he closed his eyes briefly. Potter was barmy. He always had been. It was just
strange – hilarious, even – that he was actually admitting it. Draco's breath plumed before him with
each puff of laughter; he hardly even noticed that he was a little cold anymore.

"I knew it," he said.

"What?" Potter asked, and Draco's sidelong glance once more showed he'd closed his eyes again.
Murmuring, closing his eyes, barely attending to the conversation… it was a annoying. Not overly vexing, but annoying nonetheless.

"That you were crazy," Draco clarified. "I always knew it. Not, however, crazy enough to join the
Dark Lord."

"So it's the Dark Lord now?"

"Sometimes."

Potter kicked slightly once more. "Thanks for the faith, I guess. I never knew you thought that well
of me."

"You're a goody-goody, Potter," Draco said, slouching more comfortably onto the balustrade.
"Little Boy of the Light."

"Lucky me."

How curious. Draco felt a smile touch his lips. Potter seemed almost resentful of the association.
"Meaning?" he couldn't help but ask.

Potter didn't reply. Stupid Potter, Draco thought, because he was dressed in a poor excuse for a
jumper, sitting silently on a cold but not quite freezing balcony, and he was ignoring him.
Regardless of the fact that they were no longer rivals – no longer? Draco didn't think so, didn't feel
it was so – the urge to nudge for his attention rose within him.

Pansy had once called him strange for that.

Blaise had professed somewhat lewd speculations of a similar regard.

Draco pointedly disregarded them both, but couldn't overlook the niggling urge to demand
attention. "Maybe not entirely barmy," he said, turning to face Potter more fully. He stared him,
eyebrows raised despite Potter's dismissal. "But certainly lacking in politeness."

"Huh?" Potter said without moving his lips.

"It is common courtesy to actually turn your radiant attention upon a conversation partner, Potter,"
Draco clarified. Maybe it was a little direct, a little telling of Draco's disgruntlement, but he didn't
care. Besides, Potter was interesting enough to allow him that.

Potter raised a hand to pluck redundantly at his fringe once more. "Now, why would I do that?"
"It's polite."

"And you'd know all about politeness?"

"It's expected, then."

"I'm not one much for doing what's 'expected' of me."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Objectionable, aren't you?"

Potter dropped his hand back to his lap. "Always."

"And rude."

"That too. Though I, at least, have an excuse."


Barmy Potter might be, but he knew how to play the waiting game. Surprisingly, for Draco had never thought he was a patient person in the past. But then, Draco had accumulated his own degree of patience. Maybe Potter had hoarded a sum of it, too?

They waited. And waited. The breeze picked up slightly, and Draco decided it maybe was cold enough to warrant a Warming Charm. But Potter had been sitting outside for longer and he made no move to even draw his own wand. Draco would be damned if he'd cave first; he had his pride to protect.

Waiting. Waiting. The cold grew, the silence stretched. The darkness deepened. Draco stared for a long, long time, until he finally snapped with a click of his tongue. "Alright, I'll bite."

"What?" Potter murmured distractedly.

"What's your excuse?"

"Huh?"

Draco rolled his eyes again. That they were having a civil conversation was surprising. That Potter was still annoying? Not so much. "For your rudeness, Potter. Were you perhaps dropped on your head as a baby?"

Potter kicked his legs once, twice, then stopped. "I'd have no idea. Probably."

"You're dodging."

"I'm blind."

"You're –" Draco paused. He blinked. Frowned. Then, "What?"

Potter finally attended to him properly. Blinking his eyes open, he turned his gaze upon Draco. Dark, intent, definitely focused, and yet… blind? Draco didn't – he wasn't –

A sweep of his fringe aside, and Potter finally freed his face from its curtaining mess. "Accidents tend to happen when you'd being chased by a Dark Lord and his minions," he said matter-of-factly. "Been blind for two whole years, actually."

Draco stared for a different reason entirely this time. He stared at Potter's eerily watchful eyes –
eerie, because blind? Impossible when he stared back like that – and then at Potter's face itself. At the scar revealed on his forehead. At the multitude of scars.

The spider webs. The scars, crisscrossing in pale patterns that seemed to almost glow. Were they opalescent? Maybe. Draco wasn't sure, but the scars…

As it happened, Potter was very interesting indeed.
Harry swum from sleep like a child paddling through lukewarm bath water. A slow climb, a sweep aside of the clinging folds of that sleep, before with a deep breath that flooded his lungs with crisp, chilled air, he was blinking his eyes open.

Morning met him. Warmth and brightness and the spread of open skies untouched by even winter clouds. For a long moment Harry wasn't sure where he was; such wasn't a particularly unfamiliar state to find himself in, given that he'd woken in just such confusion countless times before.

By the River Thames after a fleeing escape? No, the smell of drifting river didn't reach him.

A safe house, magically hidden and all but impervious to Death Eaters? Of course not; there was no roof over his head.

An open field, a rooftop that was his temporary sleeping quarters, someone's front garden, or living room, or the spare bed they'd lent him – each possibility flickered past in bare seconds. Then Harry felt the hard flatness of marble beneath his back, beheld the utter stagnation in the air but for a thin breeze, and heard the sound of birds echoing.

Harry knew that sound. He knew it even if, in the past he'd not understood what it was. How blissfully ignorant he'd once been, to so disregard something as telling as a bird call. And not just any bird call; capercaillie were all but extinct in many areas. The distinctive burping echoes of the male populace in what must have been the Forbidden Forest resounded distinctly in his ears.

Harry was good with sounds now. He'd grown somewhat attentive to them over the years. A product of necessity, but then instinct, too. Being blind did that to a person.

Or mostly blind, anyway.

Sitting up, Harry raised a hand to his face and scrubbed his eyes. He blinked, opened them to the blank darkness that had greeted him upon every awakening for years. Then he nudged his magic to life. "Are we going to fumble through the morning again rather than work together like mature adults?"

He felt his magic. He felt it blink its own eyes open, rear its head, and then quiver to life. In a warm rush, the kind of warmth that was an exaggeration of that which had cocooned him throughout the night and driven away the cold, Harry felt it well forth and tingle across his skin. His ears rung for a moment before honing, the burping croaks of the distant capercaillie sharpening. He felt the tickle of the morning breeze caress the few inches of his skin left bare, plucking at the fine hairs at his nape and trickling through every gap and hole in his clothing. He smelt – winter, cold, clean, something tangy, like pine – and he almost tasted those smells upon his tongue. And then, with another blink, he Saw.
It wasn't quite seeing in the traditional sense. Harry hadn't beheld anything with his actual eyes for years. But as magic flooded his senses, he Saw. He Saw the reflection of magic like sparks and glitter coating his surroundings, giving the balcony upon which he lay a form. He Saw the drifting flutter of more magic on the air, swirling like dust motes and yet even more beautiful for their riotous colour – blue, red, green, violet, the spectrum no one ever saw but him because their eyes were too limited. As he climbed to his feet, pushing himself from the floor, Harry Saw with a brief glance the impression of his hand where it had left its own residue upon the marble like a print in sand. Green, it was. Green in more shades that he could count.

Harry couldn't see – but his magic still let him See.

Stretching his arms above his head, Harry yawned widely. It wasn't far into the morning, he noted, the sun barely peeping over the distant horizon. It was likely that sun which had awoken him, the barest touch of its magical light and the thin excuse for solar warmth. It certainly hadn't been the resounding strikes of the bell in the Tower behind him had woken him; his magic had instinctively stoppered his ears to that inconvenience.

Stepping towards the balustrade, Harry draped himself across its top, dangling his arms into space. With magic fuelling his gaze, he drew his Sights around the spread of the grounds below him. Hogwarts. The descending, snow-laden side of the hill upon which the school perched. The half-frozen lake at the base of that hill, and the forest stretching like a dark, clustered crowd of looming trees from its side, morphing shadows of magic clinging to stout trunks as they stretched into the distance. Harry could make out Hagrid's hut, the earthy browns and greens that swamped it adding thick definition to the lines of walls, and the residue of flame adding an golden orange glow to the dissipating smoke puffing from its chimney.

The courtyard below Harry was empty. The coloured, magical footprints of passing students that he'd stared briefly upon the night before were all but swallowed up by the most recent, white-blue peppering of magic-laced snow that had settled the night before. It was so obvious, so apparent, even to his eyes that Saw with only magic, that Harry couldn't help but stare. He'd not been quite so capable of Seeing with such clarity for a long time. Not for a long, long time.

That didn't make his return to Hogwarts any more favourable, however.

"We believe that, given your circumstance, who you are, and your age –"

"And incomplete education."

"- yes, and your incomplete education, that it would be best should you return to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

 Barely days ago, Harry had stared up at the purple-coated definition of the Ministry of Magic's Head of Education. The man's magic wasn't as thick as many Harry had seen – and certainly not as dense as that of the monster he'd suppressed not a week before – but it was strong enough. Certainly strong enough to impose a Restraining Charm should he wish to employ one.

As someone who'd never learned how – nor felt much inclination to learn – Harry had a modest if begrudging respect for the man as a result. It was a shame, really; he seemed a bit of a prat for his pompous bluster.

Harry stared across the table to where the man stood rather than sat before him. Rossen, his name was. Rossen and his assistant Clarke, whose only contribution seemed to be muttered additions to her boss's spiels. Harry had more respect for Clarke than he did Rossen, despite her lower status; she was most likely the brains and the organiser of the pair of them.
At that moment, however, in the room that felt like an interrogation booth with little but chairs and an empty table to fill the sparseness, Harry wasn't feeling terribly respectful. Granted, he didn't hold much respect for anyone anyway, but...

"You're sending me back to school?" he said flatly.

Rossen shifted in place. "Yes."

"To – what, finish my education?"

"All wizards and witches must complete at least fifth form education," Clarke said. She didn't shift in momentary discomfort to accompany her words. It was all the more reason to afford her marginally more respect, if Harry could bother to offer it.

"And you think that not even six months back at Hogwarts will be sufficient?" he asked.

Harry eyed the both of them sceptically as they fell into silence. Idiots. Utter idiots. Surely they could see the stupidity of their decision – or, more likely, the decision of the Ministry as a whole. Harry wasn't stupid; he knew why they'd made such a choice. It didn't take a genius to figure it out.

Rossen shifted again. His purple magic dimmed slightly in a way that Harry had long ago deduced meant defensiveness. His words didn't quite show it, however. "I understand that this decision might be somewhat dissatisfying to you, Mr Potter –"

"Don't call me that," Harry sighed, briefly raising his gaze to the smears of magic upon the ceiling. "Everyone bloody-well calls me that. I'm so over it."

Rossen paused. Harry's magic caught a glimpse of him glancing towards Clarke before he turned back to Harry and cleared his throat. "Alright then... Harry?" Another pause, then he continued with slightly more confidence. "Harry, it is as necessary for yourself that you complete your education –"

"For me?"

"- in order to better understand your current circumstance –"

"I have to know that?"

" – and to best determine your level of competency."

"Hold on." Harry frowned, held up a hand and briefly closed his eyes. "I can't believe I'm actually hearing this."

Rossen shuffled in his increasingly annoying discomfort. "Hearing what, Mr Potter?"

*He's a dumbass,* Harry couldn't help but think. *What's it been, less than a minute since I told him not to call me that?* For the moment, that fact – that he was called by his surname as so many others had so frustratingly done – irked Harry. Then the annoyance dissolved into an alternative form of exasperation. *He's a hypocritical, paradoxical dumbass.*

"You told me yesterday that I was some kind of magical miracle," Harry said. The sarcasm and ridicule in his tone echoed in his ears.

"And we stand by that assessment," Clarke said with a nod.

"Because I defeated Voldemort or whatever, right?"
Rossen flinched at the name, and even Clarke's modest blue magic contracted, shrinking slightly in her discomfort for the name. "You are the awe of the Wizarding world, Mr Potter," Rossen said with surprisingly less cow than his flinch deemed him capable of.

"So I'm supposedly awesome at magic, some kind of hero who can defeat Dark Lords… and you're sending me back to school?"

Silence met his words. This time, even Clarke shifted awkwardly. Harry was only detachedly satisfied that she, at least, realised the utter foolishness of the situation. The larger part of him…

Frustration didn't begin to cover it.

Harry had been alone since he was fourteen. Two and a half long years of fleeing, fighting, pain and torture, and more fleeing. He'd persevered to shake himself free of the threat of Voldemort that had forever clung to him by stoppering it himself. Harry had been scared more often than he could count, scared to the point that fear hadn't even been a feeling so much as a constant companion. He'd grown used to that fear. It had fuelled him.

Harry wasn't even sure he felt fear anymore.

He ran to escape the Wizarding world and all it entailed, because it wasn't enough for him. From the moment he'd been told he was a wizard, he'd been saddled with a title and a responsibility. Even without being directly told, the unspoken duty of 'freeing the world from the Dark Lord' had clung to him.

So Harry had run from it. From the world, if not from his duty, because regardless of how utterly foolish it was to consider he was the best solution for freedom from threat, that particular threat chased him and demanded confrontation. Harry ran, and when threats turned to blows, he fought back tooth and nail.

Necessity had driven him. That had developed his magic in unexpected ways. That necessity gave him eyes when an exploding curse had shattered his glasses into his face and blinded him. Necessity taught him to embrace his magic as he'd not been taught at school, to accept it not as a tool but as a part of him – because that's what it was. And magic…

Magic liked that. Magic, Harry had learned all on his own, was less of a tool and more reminiscent of a person unto itself. It appreciated being used, and it appreciated being valued all the more. Voldemort hadn't understood that. It was that incomprehension which had, inevitably, led to his downfall.

Harry knew he didn't perform magic in the 'right' way – or at least the way that the Ministry and the Wizarding world deemed right. He knew that, by and large, he couldn't cast even half of the spells that the average graduate student knew. He didn't know Wizarding history, couldn't brew a potion to save himself, and what little he knew of plants was founded mostly upon determining what was edible, what was useful, and what wasn't worthy of his time. Harry knew he wasn't 'competent' in terms of educational standards –

But then he didn't want to be. Fuck the world and all of its people, because he was done with filling its ideals. Unfortunately, the world resolutely denied being dismissed.

Rossen was clearly uncomfortable with Harry's words. Of course he was, because he was a dumbass but he wasn't so stupid as to misunderstand the truth of them. With magic sharpening his ears, Harry heard him swallow thickly, just as he heard Clarke's fingernails scratch on her notepad in anticipation.
Clearing his throat once more, Rossen finally spoke. "I understand that this might be perceived as unorthodox, Mr Potter, but it is the only solution possible for you."

"For me to what?" Harry asked flatly.

"To… to pursue a successful and independent, ah… life?" Rossen said. His words sounded more like a question than a statement.

"Oh, well that's okay then. I've never really wanted to be successful, so you don't have to worry about all that."

"Mr Potter –"

"In fact, I couldn't give a fuck about your education system, Steve," Harry said, deliberately using the man's name simply because he could. The tosser clearly didn't care what Harry preferred for terms of address. "If it's all the same to you, I'm more than happy to bugger off to, I don't know, Greece or whatever to get out of your hair. Can I?"

As it happened, Harry could not. The Ministry 'respected' him, or so they said, but that respect clearly didn't deem him worthy of autonomy. It didn't matter that Harry had suppressed Voldemort. It didn't matter that he'd taken care of himself for years, and that he didn't need to go to school to learn what he'd never use. They had a procedure, a protocol, a standard that they chose to follow, and that entailed forcing school aged students into school.

What a load of utter bullshit. Harry regretted that he'd slowed enough in his flight after taking Voldemort down to be caught up by them. He cursed himself for his stupidity countless times since. For even if Harry had defeated the greatest Dark Lord of the generation, apparently his competency and independence wasn't considerable enough to allow him leave to pursue his liberty. He couldn't, either, for one Dark Lord whose magic disliked him so fiercely it was almost happy to leave him was one thing; an entire ministry of dubiously respectable individuals with more loyal magic was another.

Harry went back to school.

That first day had been a non-event. When Inquisitor Gyeong had all but dragged Harry to Hogwarts in an entirely unnecessary hold, as though he'd thought Harry was a convict to be led to the hangman's noose rather than a vaguely compliant returning student, it was to have his duties relinquished to the affably smiling headmaster. Harry didn't like Dumbledore. Or, more correctly, he'd grown to see something very wrong with his attitude. Dumbledore wasn't cruel or demanding, however, and their conversation had even been as amiable as Dumbledore appeared about everything.

The headmaster's office that Harry had been led to after his arrival in the Great Hall was as it always had been. Large and circular, it was dotted with more bookshelves and instrument-laden tables and supposedly disinterested portraits of past school Heads that should have rightly fit. To any passing observer, it would have been a trip into a paradise of curiosities and quirks. To Harry, it glared radiantly with magic from every surface; the instruments sparkled and glowed in gold and silver and bronze, the books themselves seemed to pulse with vibrating knowledge the colour and scent of parchment and dust, and the clicks and chimes and ringing tunes that permeated the air danced across Harry's senses so raucously that his magic withdrew from his hearing to almost Muffle him to normal standards.

Across the room, Fawkes the phoenix perched like a self-contained sun. The warmth of his magical presence so glaringly hot and bright that Harry could barely glance at him in passing. And
The man thrummed with pale red magic, almost pink, that seemed to ripple from him in overflowing waves. As Harry had beheld from Voldemort, there seemed almost too much magic stuffed into the man – except that *this* magic liked Dumbledore. It liked him a lot, because he apparently treated it well.

Harry had grown to take Magic's word on such things. He might not like Dumbledore, or at least no more than he liked just about any exalted witch or wizard, but he grudgingly acknowledged that the man was better than Voldemort. He respected his magic, at least a little bit.

Following him into the room, Harry paused at the doorway to simply let the sheer, overwhelming spread of magic assault him. It was only when Dumbledore spoke, skirting his vast, claw-footed desk to the high-backed chair behind it, that he recalled himself. "Would you like to take a seat, Harry?"

Harry drew his gaze back from where he was torn between shying from and staring at Fawkes. The phoenix really was unbelievably bright. Instead, he affixed his attention upon Dumbledore's rosy red. "If I said no, would you make me sit?"

Dumbledore chuckled. "I'd never make you do anything you didn't want to, Harry."

"Really?" Harry replied dubiously.

"Certainly. You are your own man, Harry. Free, as it were, from a life thrust upon you. You should enjoy your liberties."

Harry regarded him through his magic. The pulsing of Dumbledore's own magic was consistent, unwavering, and bespoke sincerity of his words. That, or he was a very good actor – so good that his magic barely flinched at falsehoods. Harry was inclined to consider both possibilities.

"So," he said slowly, "if I wanted to leave Hogwarts…?"

"I would, of course, abide by your decision," Dumbledore said, the magic settling upon his head fluttering with the motion of his nodding head. "But I would discourage it. I believe some members of the Ministry would be less obliging of your choice."

Harry sighed. It was true that he didn't much like Dumbledore, but at least he was being honest. Or appeared to be. Stepping into the room, he crossed to the chair placed before the desk. "This is actually kind of stupid," he said, flopping into it.

"What is?" Dumbledore asked with a questioning tip of his head.

Harry waved a hand in the air. "This. All of this. My being at school."

"You could learn something."

"The Ministry's involvement."

"They do like to get involved."

"The fact that they're completely denouncing themselves by claiming that I'm 'incredible' for defeating Voldemort, that I'm due all kinds of respect and congratulations, and yet I'm being told to go where they want me to like a kid."
"The Ministry is nothing if not hypocritical, traditionalist, and stalwart old bats in need of a change of revolutionising hands."

Harry drew his gaze towards Dumbledore from where it had drifted back towards Fawkes. He felt his eyebrows rise. "That's unexpected."

Dumbledore smiled. "What is, my dear boy?"

"You sound like you think they're a bunch of idiots, too."

Dumbledore chuckled. "I believe 'idiot' to be a harsh word."

"But not inaccurate," Harry said. He twisted in his seat to sling a leg over an arm. "Would you be the one to revolutionise the Ministry, Albus?"

For a moment, Harry knew he'd thrown Dumbledore. Authority figures were always momentarily unsettled by having their titles abandoned in place of their names, as people should be addressed. It wasn't a matter of respect, in Harry's opinion; it was common sense. That, and the fact that he'd been called more names in his time than he could recall, and pompous titles simply seemed like another means of raising one's own sense of superiority. 'Mr Potter' was no more favourable than 'street rat', 'boy', 'freak' or 'faggot' had become over the years. They were almost interchangeable, even.

Giving him his due, Dumbledore recovered quickly. He even chuckled once more. "No, Harry. My place is with my school and attempting to direct its students towards a future and an attitude that will fix future Ministries."

"You're manipulating them?" Harry asked.

"Not in the least."

"Encouraging them, then."

"A more correct description, yes."

Harry regarded him. The rosy pink-red coated of his figure as unwaveringly as it had been throughout the entire conversation. Dumbledore was being… surprisingly honest. Harry found he almost appreciated that fact. He wouldn't ever trust the man, as much because of his honest words at that moment as because of his past actions, but it was strangely satisfying to hear. "Huh."

"Yes, Harry?"

"You're not bullshitting me. That's unexpected, too."

Dumbledore chuckled again in his sparkle-eyed merriment. "I would prefer that our correspondence be founded upon mutual understanding."

"Meaning?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Meaning that, should you agree, I believe I can support you through what we both understand as being a tiresome position you've been forced into."

Harry kicked his leg slightly where it hung over the arm of the chair, slumping back into the seat. He didn't want help. He didn't need it. But, given that Dumbledore was offering in a way that made it more of an unwanted hand directing him, he accepted the inevitable. "What did you have in
Dumbledore smiled. Harry couldn't see it with his eyes, but he Saw it. Magic liked smiling. And laughter. And the sparkle of eyes as humour and satisfaction suffused its user. Dumbledore's magic clung to that good-humour and made it sing.

Harry left the office with a begrudgingly accepted understanding of how his following months would ensue. School. School, and studies – if of the most only a suggestion – and endurance. He would attend his classes to at least the minimum of required hours. He would attempt his assignments, which was an allowance that bordered on pointless. He wouldn't back-chat to his professors unless it was warranted, which Harry deemed a risky allowance on Dumbledore's part but didn't draw light to.

And that was it. No enforcing of school uniform as Harry had half expected and somewhat loathed for the simplicity of its imposition. No promises that he would be a good student, that he would assume the projected image he'd once assumed of the Boy-Who-Lived. No necessary compliance in following regulated routines outside of class timetables, and Dumbledore hadn't even enforced that he needed to return to Gryffindor Tower as his reinstated dormitory.

"To my understanding, you have been sorely missed," Dumbledore had said. "But it is entirely your decision, my boy. Your bed is made and waiting for you should you wish to fill it, but your specific circumstances, I've no doubt, would make resuming your previous position in Gryffindor to be… something of a challenge."

For all of Dumbledore's words, he hadn't offered alternative sleeping arrangements. That, in Harry's opinion, was rather telling.

He'd left the headmaster's office with a skewed and slightly juxtaposing image of him. Everyone with an ounce of intelligence would be able to see that Dumbledore was a master manipulator, despite his dismissal of the term, and that his smiles more often than not hid something far deeper and more contemplative. Hell, Harry almost felt the urge to take himself to Gryffindor Tower just because Dumbledore had mentioned it.

"You're friends surely missed you," Dumbledore had also said, as well as, "To my understanding, Professor McGonagall has already discussed your circumstances with your fellow students to a minimal degree. With hope, they will offer you the privacy you deserve."

The urge was there, planted as a suggestion in Harry's mind. He ignored it, however. Just as he ignored the weight of his wand in his back pocket – a wand he hadn't seen and had scarcely considered in over two years.

It was by unspoken agreement with the headmaster that Harry understood he wasn't going to start his classes that day. He wasn't inclined to ever start them again – studying? After not studying for years? It twisted his gut with distaste – but he would. Briefly. Because the Ministry were a bunch of bastards that demanded it and wouldn't leave him alone otherwise.

But not that day. That day, Harry wandered in search of his sea legs.

It was strange, being back in the school he'd left years before. Strange to walk down corridors emptied during class hours and to listen to the distant echo of professor's voices from open doorways. Strange to be around people, even if those people weren't alongside him and didn't even know he passed them by. A little daunting, maybe, to face those from his past, and disconcerting to take a step back into a past he'd all but abandoned.
Strangest, however, to behold what Harry hadn't even known existed.

The urge to gravitate towards magical regions was one that had always drawn him over the past few years as though magnetised. It was easier that way, because where magic was used, lathering every surface and moulding itself to its users, Harry could See. That wasn't to say that it wasn't present just about everywhere, but the density, and Harr'y's ability to See so sharply that it was almost as though he hadn't lost his eyesight years ago, was never more pronounced than when around Wizarding locations.

The Ministry of Magic, for instance. Or Diagon Alley. Or wizard-rich villages and abandoned houses that hadn't seen a resident for the curses placed upon its walls.

And Hogwarts.

Magic was happy at Hogwarts, and that made a difference. It was brighter, thrummed with more energy, flowed in active pursuit of being used. Magic always wanted to be used, Harry had found, so long as it was used correctly. So long as it steered from the Darkness that could so stain it and turn it into something Other. Hogwarts used magic for good and Light aplenty, if not exactly properly.

It was a favourable assault upon Harry's senses. His own magic hummed within his chest, tingling across his skin, and sang in his ears like a child joining in the songs of a jubilant choir. It flooded Harry's eyes as they darted around himself, clinging to each well of magic as he passed down the corridors: the portraits with the skewed colours of their images, the blossoming of greater colour upon staircases as they flowed with magical motion, the doorways into classrooms that spewed forth torrents of yet more rainbow fields of magic for the practical coursework being taught within. Even the corridors themselves were a riot of colour and sound and smells as the footsteps of magical children left their centuries-old impression upon the stone.

Harry doubted he would have been able to join the classes that day even had he wanted to. It was dizzying to even exist in the school to say the least.

So he wandered. Hands shoved into pockets, head bowed to blot out some of his surrounding vibrancy, and tucking his magic into himself a little, Harry strode through the corridors. The sounds of music that wasn't quite music still chased him, however. Heard not quite with his ears, it was nigglingly persistent nonetheless.

Escape. Away. Harry was sorely regretting that he'd allowed – allowed? Maybe accepted was more accurate – the enforced suggestion of the Ministry and Department of Education. Regardless of how agreeable Dumbledore seemed, surely nothing was quite worth withstanding such assault. Surely.

So Harry avoided Gryffindor Tower. He hastened past classrooms, instinctively wrapping his magic around himself as he passed open doorways in a manner as automatic as shrugging a cloak just a little tighter. He climbed stairs, seeking what he couldn't even discern, and eventually, finally, he found it.

The clock tower stood empty, silent but for the echoing residue of the latest magically-triggered bell. More than that, however, it was calm. Magic still supported the walls more strongly than the wooden framework, but it was old magic. Dimmed, if not darkened. This building – it wasn't infected by students or professors and their bright, present magic. The browns and warm, pale oranges that contrasted to the deeper browns of the rest of the school's structure was interrupted only by a smearing trail of comfortable grey nearly undetectable even to Harry's magical senses.
Peace, if only for a moment.

Harry had been alone since stepping through the hidden passage in the glass clock face. Alone to think, to breathe, to regret that he'd been so stupid as to nearly pass out at the graveyard barely a kilometer from Voldemort's prone form when he should have taken the opportunity to get the hell out of town. Regretting too that he hadn't made more of an objectionable stance to the Aurors, the Inquisitors, and bloody Rossen and Clarke with their hypocritical demands.

"We want what's best for you, Mr Potter," Rossen had told him when they'd finally concluded their discussion. "And given your circumstances and the threat that the Wizarding world could present to your uneducated self, we believe this is the best option for you."

It was utter bullshit, in Harry's opinion. The Ministry simply wanted to control things. To control everything. Harry was a freely drifting sailing boat that had momentarily escaped their iron-bound armada. Of course there was no escaping their confines.

But for a time, he was alone. Or at least, he'd been alone until Draco Malfoy strode into his solitude. What had that been about, anyway? Harry barely had a passing consideration for the man-child that had been his old rival, though the confrontation had certainly been… unexpected. Strange, even.

That thought barely crossed Harry's mind as he straightened from his slump upon the balustrade and brushed off the last vestiges of his sleep. He hadn't been forced to return to Hogwarts to pick a fight with his past rival, nor to make nice with his ex-friends, either, though he supposed a confrontation at least was an inevitability. Harry would stay for the duration of his pseudo-imprisonment and then not a moment longer. He'd be surprised if he could last that long.

"Then off to Greece or wherever," Harry murmured, turning from his staring across Hogwarts' grounds. "It's as good a place as any, I suppose."

The rumble from his magic was a murmur of agreement. Greece was old, rich with the magic of the past. Even idle musings triggered eagerness from the magic within Harry. It was almost ridiculous to consider that some people didn't believe magic to have even a hint of sentience, but…

The school bell sounded. Harry drew his attention over his shoulder, listening and watching as peals of visible sound rippled grey-blue from the upper-storey windows of the clock tower. Magic was always joyous in performance, so long as it was with Light magic; even something as trivial as hourly bell-ringing invoked its merriment.

Five… six… seven… Harry counted the resounding gongs in his head. Seven o'clock, then. Well, that would explain the sunrise. His time further south hadn't been all that much earlier when he woke with the sun.

Shaking a crick from his neck, Harry turned from the balcony. His magic settled comfortably around his shoulders, unasked for but obligingly wrapping him in a warm, cloaking embrace. Harry pulled it more tightly around himself with invisible fingers; today would be… interesting. Starting classes that he didn't want to attend, seeing people that he'd left long behind him with no intention of meeting again, pretending to learn things that meant confining the fluid use of magic as he hadn't in years. Harry wasn't looking forward to using his wand. Maybe he could just… not?

A passing thought nudged at him as Harry made his way into the Entrance Hall. He paused outside the doors of the Great Hall, contemplated briefly before the outrush of silence but for the magically placed food that spilled forth in sunny, aromatic waves. He didn't expressly want to see anyone yet. Or ever, but 'yet' was more realistic. Harry hadn't spoken to anyone at all but for Draco Malfoy, and
that was barely even a conversation. Draco had been effectively silenced after Harry's 'I'm blind' revelation, and though he'd remained on the balcony for a time afterwards, he'd eventually left.

"I'm not telling the professors where you are if you freeze yourself to death out here, Potter," he'd tossed casually over his shoulder as he'd departed.

Harry hadn't replied. It was irrelevant, for his magic wouldn't let him freeze. Besides, he'd slept outside on less comfortable terrain than a marble balcony in his time.

The Great Hall was clearly – and resoundingly – empty, and yet Harry had no inclination to step within. Instead, turning from the doors, he made his way in the direction of the kitchens instead.

House elves would most definitely assault him with their attention within seconds of him stepping through the door, but that thought was somehow preferable to the confrontation with students. House elves generally treated every witch or wizard as if they were heroes.

Echoes of voices had just begun to ring throughout the corridors around him when Harry drew to a stop before the painting of the fruit bowl. It glowed in a way he'd never been aware of in the past, just as he'd never known that the magic imbued in the painting actually smelled. Crispy sweetness rose into Harry's nostrils as he tickled the pear into a doorhandle – only to be blasted aside by yet more smells the moment he stepped through the opening doorway.

It was manic within. The kitchens themselves were extensive, every surface of stretching colour and vibrant magic reaching the entire length of the room that stood as large as the Great Hall a floor above it. Around the circumference, counters stacked high with what Harry could only assume were pots and pans – it was a little hard to discern their shape specifically for the magical marvels stuffed inside of them – cluttered stove tops that radiated magical heat, and vents that sucked smoke into grated mouths like slurped spaghetti. Plates were set, stacked high with bacon colour pink and quaveringly warm to Harry's eyes and eggs of rich gold were poached and scrambled and hard boiled and everything in between. And toast. So much toast.

Most noticeable of all, however, were the house elves. Harry hadn't come across any house elves before – or at least not with magic fuelling his senses – so the little creatures grabbed his attention almost more than the prospect of food. Green. They were, by and large, all swathed varying shades of green, if distinctly different to his own. Magic danced along pointed, flapping ears, swooped down long noses, and glowed brightly in wide eyes. Little footprints of yet more green trailed behind each of them, making a glorious mess of the floor.

And the noise. There was so much noise, and most of it not even magical.

"Bread! Bread is being finished!" cheeped an ear-splittingly high voice.

"House elves is needing more hands for the mixing!" called another.

"The milk, the milk! Pour the milk –"

"- have two kettles for Slytherins, yes –"

"Up, up, send it up!"

Harry stared. He'd rarely been to the kitchens at all, and certainly never preceding a main meal. He stood just inside the doorway and allowed it to wash over him. Maybe I should have just foregotten breakfast entirely, he thought.

It remained only a thought, however, and not given time to act upon, for his presence wasn't overlooked for long. First heads began to turn, then ears pricked, then shrill voices sounded in a
different manner.

"Harry Potter!"

"It is Harry Potter!"

"Oh, Master Potter is here, he's –"

"- come to our kitchens! Harry Potter has –"

"- defeated the Dark Lord and Master Potter comes to the house elves' kitchen –"

Yeah, I definitely shouldn't have come, Harry thought with rapidly mounting regret. The house elves – apparently they knew what most of the Wizarding world didn't just yet. How, Harry wasn't quite sure, but he wished he'd considered the uncanny awareness of magical creatures before his error. They always simply knew things.

Not that he had much time to build his regret. He couldn't, for one particular house elf appeared directly before him, vividly lime green and elbowing his fellows out of his path.

"Harry Potter, sir!" Dobby squeaked, his voice bordering upon hysterical. "Dobby is being so happy to be seeing you!"

Harry dredged up a smile. How long had it been since he'd been faced with so many people? It didn't matter that they were house elves; the effect of the crowd was the same. As someone who'd gone for days without speaking simply because he'd had no one to speak to… It was discomforting, to say the least.

"Hi, Dobby," Harry said, raising a hand in an awkward wave.

Dobby beamed. Harry felt the warmth of his expression almost more than he saw it with his magic. "Harry Potter is returned? Harry Potter is coming back to Hogwarts! Dobby is so happy, so very, very happy."

"Yeah, well… shit happens."

"Very good shit, Harry Potter!" Dobby agreed brightly. "Very, very good shit!"

Surprised mirth popped from Harry's lips in a burst of laughter before he could help himself. Who knew house elves so readily cussed? "I guess."

"How can Dobby be helping Harry Potter?" Dobby asked through the continuing clamour of momentarily distracted elves. His ears twitched with eagerness. "Anything that is needed Dobby will fetch."

"Iggy can be readying Master Potter a bath," one house elf said from Dobby's left.

"Tato can be readying Harry Potter's school robes!" announced another to his right.

"Shoes polished –"

"Timetable fetched –"

"Nancy will be getting Harry Potter his school supplies!"

A bad idea. It had been a very, very bad idea to come to the kitchens. Harry held up his hands in
placation that only served to dim the clamour slightly. "It's fine. Um, everyone, it's fine, I don't –"

"Ponty has been seeing that Master Potter hadn't been sleeping in his bed last night, but Ponty redressed the sheets nonetheless," a glowingly blue-green elf proudly declared.

"Harry Potter may be needing a guide?" asked another. "If he is forgetting his way around the castle –"

"Bobo is knowing the Gryffindor password!" announced what must have been Bobo.

_Bloody hell._ "It's fine," Harry said, raising his voice. "That's really swell of you all to offer, but –"

"Mopsy can help to find –"

"- if Master Potter is needing –"

"- Jiggy would be the _best_ for –"

Clamouring voices of a painfully high pitch attacked Harry's ears until he winced. Backed into the door to the kitchens as he was, the urge to turn on his heel and simply leave only increased with every passing second. Raising a hand to his head – his magic throbbed with delight for the reflected delight of the magical creatures around him – Harry briefly closed his eyes.

_God give me fucking strength, I hope the rest of the school isn't this bad._ Then his ears pricked and he snapped his finger and his attention in the direction of a single suggestion barely heard. "Yes," he said, maybe a touch desperately. "Whoever said that, I would _love_ some breakfast. Please."

The room erupted at his words. Like the tides suddenly turned, ever house elf swarmed from before him and made like scurrying ants to the surrounding benches. Within seconds, quite without knowing how, Harry found himself plopped down at one of the long tables and surrounded by such a range of dishes that the magical and physical smells were all but overpowering.

It was intense. It was overwhelming. The attention of the house elves and the spread before him were both unprecedented, and Harry decided that, regardless of how good the intention were, he didn't like it. He didn't like it at all.

Why had he possibly bowed to the demand that he return to Hogwarts?

With another brief touch of his hand to his head, Harry pointedly ignored the house elves that continued to swarm around him. Maybe Draco had been right the night before; maybe he was rude. Except that, rudeness aside, Harry didn't think he could manage anything more. So, to the discordant melody of squeaks and offerings, chirps and shouts of, "Minny is better at doing this!" and "Lotti should not be helping," Harry set about his breakfast.

Their attention faded. Sort of. Or maybe Harry just managed to tune them out more effectively. All but Dobby's constant company on the bench at his side flowed with constant motion, and after he'd taken a bite of buttered toast, it was as though the flag to direct the continuation of work had been waved. The elves dispersed, though seemingly random squeaks of 'Harry Potter!' still erupted every few seconds.

Harry was sorely growing to dislike his own name.

"Is Harry Potter liking his toast?" Dobby asked before Harry's third mouthful.

Harry paused mid bite. He spared a sidelong glance for the glowingly green figure beside him.

"Um… I guess?"
Dobby beamed. "Dobby has been making bread all morning, sir. Dobby is very happy that Harry Potter enjoys his bread."

"Right. Thanks?"

More beaming. "Can Dobby be of further assistance to Harry Potter, sir? Dobby is certainly better help than the other house elves is being, most certainly."

Harry paused in the midst of another bite. "I don't really need help with anything," he said through his mouthful.

"Not with fetching Harry Potter's robes?"

"I don't think I'll be wearing robes if I have any choice in the matter."

"Not with collecting his school books?"

"What school books?"

"Not with fetching Harry Potter's timetable from the professors, sir?"

Harry lowered his toast to his plate. He really wasn't all that hungry. For one who'd eaten as much as he could if only occasionally, an opportunistic fugitive of sorts on the run, he felt remarkably lacking in appetite. Brushing his hands free of crumbs, he nodded almost warily. "Dobby, that'd be great. I honestly have no bloody idea what classes I've even been signed up for."

Dobby beamed once more. Or, more correctly, his merry smile widened. Harry didn't think he'd stopped smiling for a second since Harry had entered the room. "Of course, Harry Potter! Dobby will be fetching Harry Potter's timetable right away, sir!" And then, with a snap of his fingers, Dobby popped into disappearance.

Harry stared at the empty seat left behind him. The impression of green still remained, like a shadow glowing gently and as merrily as Dobby had been himself. Shaking his head slowly, Harry returned to his toast. He did his best to ignore the persisting sidelong glances of the elves and bowed his head, already wearied despite waking less than an hour before.

It was going to be a long day.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Okay, so, I know there's no Draco in this chapter, which is part of the reason I wanted to post it a little early. Who wants to wait a whole week for a chapter with no Draco?

But anyway, yeah. I'll be posting again soon, so thanks for reading! If you did - or have any questions or comments or absolutely anything - please leave me a comment to let me know your thoughts. Bless you to all of the absolutely lovely people out there who have done so already. You add the kindling to the motivational fire!
A/N: I am... seriously almost embarrassed for this chapter. Firstly, sorry that it jumps all over the place. That was just how it happened, and I couldn't seem to fix it to my satisfaction. Secondly, sorry for the late update. I'll try to do better next week. And thirdly... oh my god, I didn't realise until I was editing what a butthead Harry is. I mean, I kind of like it, but yeah – he's a real little smartass. So much teenage angst. Sorry, not sorry?

But I hope you like it! Please leave a comment at the end to let me know your thoughts!

The bell sounded. It echoed through the corridors, chimes ricocheting across wide halls and stretching in magically enhanced notes to every corner of Hogwarts' castle.

For a heartbeat, the seventh year Defence Against the Dark Arts class sat in frozen suspension. Then it erupted into motion. Harry, unfortunately, hadn't the chance to even rise from his seat before that eruption collapsed down atop of him.

Hermione appeared at his side first. Of course she did, because she'd been barely a table away. She all but crashed into Harry's desk in a collision course that focused more upon speed than any result of that speed. "Sorry," she managed, hitching her slipping books more firmly into her arms. And that was all she had time for before what appeared to be every other Gryffindor in the class similarly crashed into Harry's table.

Harry bit back a groan.

It had started in Charms. A morning of Charms, a whole double period of classes that Harry wasn't entirely sure he could survive after having avoided attendance so conveniently for years. But the ministry forced him to attend for 'reasons', and he'd made a pact of sorts with Dumbledore. Maybe he could knuckle it out. Maybe.

Even with his blindness, and even had his magic not sketched a magical footpath to lead him when he referred to the timetable Dobby had read aloud to him that morning, Harry would likely have found his way. Despite two of absence years – years he didn't particularly want to think about and yet was considering increasingly favourable despite its flaws – his feet took him towards Flitwick's classroom without hesitation. He was late, he knew. Not because of the house elves and their assaulting offers of assistance, though it had been something of a struggle to leave the kitchens. Harry could likely have left whenever he'd wished.

Rather, Harry was late because he was delaying. He knew what to expect, even if that expectation was only a sketchy image in his mind. He knew... and he wasn't looking forward to it.

The door was partway open. The sounds of quills scratching and the distinctive squeak of chalk on blackboard were all that trickled from within. Tentatively, reluctantly, Harry peered around the doorframe.
Colours. So many colours, and each glowingly representative of their magic-user. Heads were bowed over parchment, and those heads were red, and blue, and green, and gold. Violets, yellows, teals, and indigos. The colours that Harry knew from memory weren't visible to the naked eye, and those that were felt more, far greater, than were simply observed seen. Harry knew them even without the defining outline that magic lathered to each figure's frame.

There was Hermione, a rich, warm caramel, rapidly sketching more of her caramel words across her parchment.

There was Ron, at her side but somehow distinctly apart from her, the crop of yellow magic defining his short hair drifting like dandelion seeds when he raised his gaze to the board.

Seamus chewing on the end of his quill, scarlet dribbling across his shoulders. Lavender in blue so pale it was nearly translucent white, head tucked towards a Ravenclaw girl's at her side that Harry knew by feeling rather than name. What even was her name again? He didn't know. Truthfully, he didn't really care.

Gryffindors, Slytherins, Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs – all of the seventh years that had elected to undertake Charms for their NEWTs, and a surprisingly large number of them, too. Each wrote with the fluffy quills that magic clung to like invisible, adoring fingers, and each had their heads bowed unless they were glancing once more towards Flitwick and the board. The professor himself had his back to the room, was perched atop a tall stool as he stretched to reach the edges of the board with deep, navy-blue magic concentrated around the tips of his fingers.

Harry edged into the room. He knew he didn't make a sound, because he didn't want to, and his magic often responded to him without request these days. For the important things, of course. None of that trivial bollocks. When Harry wanted – needed – to be quiet, he was quiet. When he didn't want to be seen, chances were he wasn't seen.

It took a profound effort for him not to subconsciously request remaining unseen.

Despite the size of the class, there were seats enough at the back of the room for Harry to slip into without being noticed. He didn't have books, so he didn't write. He didn't even know what they were studying – or at least he didn't until he turned his attention towards the board and the trails of Flitwick's glowing, navy writing slanting across its breadth.

*The Law of Intent:*

*Considering the application of wandless magic from its second law rather than that largely considered to be unrealistic, untrained and impractical – refer to Law of Happenstance – intentional wandless magic considers the advanced interaction with magic as a tool to be of a more theoretically based application…*

Harry stared. He stared for a long time at Flitwick's writing, and he didn't progress past that first paragraph for any difficulty in reading the words. Instead, he was caught for an entirely different reason.

Therein lay the first problem that Harry encountered in his return to school – or his first after the house elves. Quite simply, academic studies of what magic was clearly had it fucking wrong.

Harry barely had the chance to consider it further, however. As he settled back in his seat, feeling his frown settling more and more firmly, Harry shook his head. So wrong. If anyone considered magic properly, they would clearly understand that –
Something squeaked. A squeak, and then a louder squawk that sounded distinctly delighted. Harry wasn't the only one to find his attention drawn towards Flitwick; heads raised in a ripple of distraction, and Harry turned his gaze towards the professor in turn.

Navy shouldn't look so bright, but Flitwick positively glowed. His smile was radiant. "Mr Potter! I didn't hear you come in." He jumped – actually jumped, as Harry had all but forgotten he was inclined to doing – from his stool and across to his desk. "Welcome, welcome. We're delighted to have you, as ever."

Harry didn't quite flinch, but it was a near thing. First the house elves and now… So much for slipping into class undetected. Even worse than Flitwick's frustrating announcement of his presence was that every single coloured head in the room turned towards him.

Harry sighed. He slumped just a little further back into his seat and deliberately avoided meeting any of those suddenly attentive gazes. It was because he stared so unwaveringly at Flitwick that he saw the professor's benevolent smile sweep across the room, collecting every student within beneath the blanket of his following words. "Now, given that we're all mature adults here, I'm sure I don't need to emphasise how sincerely I believe it the responsibility of everyone in the room to assist Mr Potter in the resumption of his studies. Should he have any question…"

Flitwick continued, and it was only by blocking out his words that Harry refrained from rising to his feet and exiting the room. This. This was exactly the reason that Harry hadn't wanted to return to Hogwarts. Or at least it was one of them.

He didn't want the attention.

He didn't want to be given special consideration.

He didn't want to study, but more than that, he didn't want to study what he knew – absolutely knew – to be utterly redundant. What he knew to be wrong.

Unfortunately, those three very definitive aspects he was so repulsed by showed themselves in blatant disregard of his preferences from the moment he stepped into the classroom.

The special consideration was perhaps one of the easiest to deal with. The easiest, but nonetheless irksome. Harry's first Charms lesson, in which he dutifully ignored absolutely everyone in the room up to and including Flitwick when he wasn't being directly addressed, royally sucked. It didn't help that it was a theoretical class and Fliwick seemed to make it his goal to ensure that Harry was kept up to date with where they were at – a ridiculous and impossible task given that Harry was, quite literally, nearly three years behind his fellow classmates.

"Perhaps you'd like to read up on the First Law of Wandless Magic, Mr Potter? That might be more – yes, it might be more beneficial than…" The professor fumbled around behind his desk, "here, I have a spare textbook for you!"

"The emphasis upon intent in the second law – Mr Potter, this pertains specifically to intent versus accidental – is the basis for most defined wandless magic…"

"Now, I don't expect you to understand this aspect, Mr Potter, but to everyone else – wandless magic is absolutely and completely grounded in direction. Even of the accidental kind, it takes a subconscious and deliberate intent to enact. Thus, oftentimes, there is some fluidity between the first and second laws…"

Harry hated it. Flitwick wasn't a stupid person, nor was he unkind, but the fact that he kept drawing
attention to Harry time and again? It certainly felt both stupid and unkind. More so because it seemed to highlight every aspect that Harry didn't know.

Harry had grown to hate being considered ignorant. So he wasn't textbook savvy? He would wager that none of the professors, nor the interviewers of the ministry's education department, knew how to sweet talk someone into a spare penny or two. Or how to hijack a car. Or which symbols graffitied onto alley walls indicated a safe house for the right kind of traveller. Harry was not bloody ignorant.

But Flitwick clearly to consider him so, if in the kindest way possible. And so did Professor Sprout, for that matter, when Harry made his way down to Herbology for the following periods.

"Potter, just keep up with what you know."

"This class is about feeling and using the senses as much as theoretical knowledge of Scuttleburst beans to determine the nature of their usefulness, so – Potter, I wouldn't expect you to have a working knowledge, but…"

"You recall third year revision on Puffapods, Potter? No? Can anyone else offer a reminder of the similarities between the bursts and the pods?"

And finally, "Listen and take notes where you will, Potter, so that you can -"

Sprout abruptly cut herself off at that. Harry had been barely listening to her at all until then, had been instead persisting in ignoring everyone else in the greenhouse as he received more sidelong glances than he'd ever been afflicted with before. He'd taken to prodding at the little Scuttleburst beans, nudging them as much with his magic as his finger to send them scurrying in looping circles upon invisible legs.

At Sprout's sudden silence, however, he raised his gaze. "Sorry?"

Sprout's earthy green coloured magic dimmed slightly as she didn't quite visibly cringe. Or at least not visibly to anyone else. Harry saw it immediately. "My apologies, Potter. Should you get the chance, perhaps you'd do well to acquire notes off someone or – ah." She paused. Harry could almost hear her swallow. "I have no expectations that you'll be writing anything, Potter, so…"

Until that moment, Harry hadn't a clue what she'd been all but rambling about. Then it clicked in place, just as the morning's incident with Flitwick – the offering of a textbook before immediately retracting it with an apology and no further explanation – made that much more sense. Harry fought not to roll his eyes.

It's not like they know any better, he reminded himself with a struggle. Physically, I suppose I am blind. Maybe only Dumbledore knows better?

Giving a mental shake of his head, Harry dropped his gaze back to the Scuttlebursts. He was very aware that the entire class was watching him attentively, but he chose to ignore them as he had all morning. "Don't worry about it, Professor. I've got a good memory for the important stuff."

The greenhouse hung in suspended silence at his words. A glance towards Sprout found her attending to nothing but Harry himself. Harry blinked up at her as he continued to prod at the burst-beans; she seemed torn between chiding and further apologies. "With all due respect, Mr Potter, I shouldn't think that simply remembering without study will be beneficial. The intricacies of Scuttleburst anatomy and magical use are –"

"Probably mostly useless," Harry said, only half intending to interrupt Sprout at all. "No offence,
Professor, but let's be real; most of what we're being taught is a load of bullshit that we'll forget as soon as we step out of the exam halls. Right?"

A smattering of gasps erupted with his words, but Harry didn't spare the owners of those voices a glance. Whispers and awkward shifting rippled through the room, but Harry didn't care about that, either. He stared at Sprout, and the chiding grew to override her expression of apology.

She held her tongue, however. Maybe it was because Harry was 'newly returned' that she didn't call him on his words. Maybe she was just stunned by the words themselves and couldn't think of an appropriate reply. Or maybe she decided that he wasn't worth her time, a decidedly un-Hufflepuff attitude, but possible nonetheless.

Harry mostly hoped it was the latter. He'd never much liked Herbology, even if its applications were occasionally relevant. Knowing which magically-fuelled garden roots he stole from some hedge-witch's front garden were actually edible, for instance, or might help with a burn. Applicable knowledge: that was what Harry was all about.

Which was another reason why he hadn't wanted to return to Hogwarts. It was another reason Harry objected to the ministry's enforced suggestion, and one that was all but spat in the face of in his first day.

Wandless magic should be cast with intent, for even the paradoxically-named 'accidental' magic was grounded in a solid intention. Or so Harry was instructed upon his first day, despite knowing for a fact that such solidity was irrelevant.

Wands should always be used, except in extenuating circumstances, for without such a channel, the chance of making a mistake was all the more likely. Not even, apparently, when the use of a wand was deemed unnecessary, as Harry had discovered years ago. So he was told that first day.

It was of extreme necessity to be able to discern the difference between a three-week-old and a four-week-old Scuttleburst bean, and this could only be ascertained through rigorous experimentation of the response of the beans to sun exposure for more a solid hour. Of course, such a process couldn't simply be shrugged aside, even when to Harry's Sight they looked entirely different colours for their magical density.

And then, after Herbology – protection Shields must always be erected at least a meter from the user, to avoid any penetration of spells and the dislocating feeling of those spells striking at all. It was an absolute must, Professor Snape had insisted in their afternoon Defence class, despite the fact that Harry knew otherwise.

"Mr Potter, I would have thought you were capable of following at least basic instruction," Snape drawled from the front of their class.

Harry didn't glance up from where he sat at the back of the room, working independently upon his self-encapsulating shield charm just as everyone else in the room had been instructed to. Or at least he had been until he'd erected his shield to sit barely a finger's from his skin and coat him like a protective jacket at the very beginning of class. Since then, he'd been staring down at the wand that he hadn't used – not to produce his shield and not for years before that – with growing resentment.

"How stupid, he couldn't help but think, despite the familiar weight of the wand in his hand. Why should I have to use it even if I don't have to?"

"Mr Potter," Snape repeated, slightly louder but still drawling.
Harry shook his attention from his wand and glanced upwards. Not only Snape but – now expectedly – most of the room had paused in their occupations and turned towards him. "What?"

Several students cringed sympathetically. Heads dropped, bowing their chins as though regretting Harry's stupidity. Snape's muddy magenta magic, a colour that Harry hadn't even suspected would suit the man until he saw it clinging to him, pulsed slightly in a clear show of irritation. His robes fluttered slightly as he moved in a fluid folding of his arms. "Your Protection Charm, Potter," he said slowly, as though speaking to a simpleton. "A meter from your core."

"Why?"

Snape's lip twitched, curling briefly into a sneer. "Have you not been listening to my instruction at all? You resume your studies with a glowing start, I can see."

"Well, I always aim to impress," Harry said.

Utter silence met his words. It was so quiet that the gentle crackle of protective shields fizzling into non-existence could be heard. Eyes widened in something akin to horror, and more cringing heads tucked.

Harry didn't spare any of them a glance. He stared up at Snape and he couldn't care less that Snape openly glared back at him. The newly appointed Defence professor – or at least newly appointed to Harry's understanding – had never liked him anyway. Why should Harry make an effort to attempt to impose otherwise?

"See me after class, Mr Potter," he said shortly. Then he turned in a magenta-speckled flap of robes, decidedly less impressive for its glowing colour, in Harry's opinion, and continued in his striding around the room.

Harry watched him for the barest moment before turning back to his wand and frowning at it. What stupid rules. Why did magic have to have rules, anyway? Why couldn't it just *be*? And more importantly, who the hell came up with the idea that all magic should and could be used by everyone in the same way? For Harry, at least, he didn't intentionally cast magic anymore. He didn't like using a wand either. He didn't need to experiment on beans to determine what he could *See*, and he certainly didn't need to erect his protective shield around himself a whole meter away for added protection. If anything, that distance made it harder; it was further from his core, so of course it would be more difficult to maintain.

School, Harry was rapidly growing to realise – or to at least more firmly believe – was stupid. The entire education system was stupid. Certainly, there were some like the studious witches and wizards of the world that could benefit, and maybe it helped in early years to develop a rudimentary understanding of the basics, but otherwise?

Stupid. Utterly stupid. Fitting the mould of what was supposed to be, of what should be learned, should be understood, should be enacted, was so unnecessarily restricting. As he sat and brooded objectionably in the back of Defence class, Harry found that it was only his pact with Dumbledore and the ministry both that had him remaining in his seat.

He didn't work upon his shield further in class that afternoon. He didn't need to, for his first and instinctive conjugation remained hugging his skin, perfectly at ease. He didn't even pretend to for the watchful eyes of a class that constantly turned towards him. They looked a little stupid themselves, Harry noted with peripheral awareness. Surely a cohort-wide crick in the neck was likely to arise that evening.
And therein lay the third reason Harry objected to his institutionalisation. The attention. The students. The people who had once been his friends.

Harry had almost forgotten that. He'd forgotten he'd even had friends, really. He'd been alone and drifting and interacting on a briefly personal basis with the occasional roomie before moving onwards for what felt like so long. When he returned to school, however, it was to be afflicted with something distinctly other.

That otherness became apparent the first time Hermione crashed into his desk.

The end of Charms class that morning saw an eruption of movement shake the room. Harry almost flinched for the speed of that disruption, and only became aware of the nature of it when Hermione led the wave that all but crashed into him.

"You're here!" she burst out, planting her hands upon his desk and leaning towards him. "I'm so happy to see you, Harry!"

Ron appeared at her side an instant later, and similarly leant far too closely. "Harry! We didn't even know where you were, mate, or if you'd come to class today. McGonagall said we weren't supposed to pester you with questions, or to look for you or anything, but –"

"Harry, you're here!" another voice all but shouted behind them.

" Didn't even see you come in, mate," said another.

And a third. "Where were you last night? No one saw you, but you had a bed made in the dorms, and –"

Seamus appeared alongside his desk. Then Lavender. Then a scatter of Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, faces that Harry had barely known in the past and definitely couldn't put a name to now. Their magic crashed against one another in a splatter of colour, glowing brightly with enthusiasm.

They'd changed, Harry immediately noticed. With his magical Sight, Harry could see their changes: that Hermione's hair was chopped to her shoulders and she wore glasses, that Ron had grown at least a foot in height and had definitely embraced his lankiness, that Seamus had broken his nose at some point, and Lavender had started wearing magical make-up that muddled her own magical colour, and… and…

And more. So much more, and not just physically. The density, the spread, the refinement of magic, had clearly grown within each of them. Harry could See the changes even without having seen their magic beforehand. He could taste it, and smell the difference on each of them, too. He heard the comfortable, almost careless hum of Ron's magic. Had he always been so laid back? So disregarding of his schoolwork? He scented the sharpness of Hermione's attention, expected for her incessant bookishness, but had she always been so completely narrow-minded? Seamus was bubbling at the seams, even more profusely excitable than he had been, and that Ravenclaw girl Lavender had been talking he felt absolutely sucked at Potions from the tinge of her colour, and the Hufflepuff boy – Ernie? – was still a prat and his magic disliked him for it, and… and…

Harry didn't like attention. He'd never liked being at the centre of it, not even when it was warranted for an act of bravery, or intelligence, or a job well done. Harry was brutally reminded of that dislike as the entirety of his Charms class, up to and including a few Slytherins, crowded around him.
If the blast of their communal magic wasn't overpowering enough, the questions that sprung from
every tongue certainly were.

"I can't believe you're back! I mean, you're really back, right?"

"Where've you been?"

"What happened after fourth year?"

"You disappeared, and now you're not disappeared, and – what the hell?"

"We missed you, mate! Gryffindor hasn't been the same without you."

Harry leaned progressively further back into his seat with each buffeting query. He reckoned that,
even had he not been mostly solitary for the past few years, the effect would have been too much to
endure.

So much for McGonagall's supposed words, Harry thought, reminded of Flitwick's similar words to
the effect. The seventh years that had once been his classmates seemed nothing if not aggressively
enthusiastic in their questioning.

And they continued to be. Into Herbology, where Sprout's keen eye forced them to actually work,
and throughout a lunch that Harry found himself all but dragged to. It likely would have continued
at such a roaring pace into Defence as well, except that Snape's generally aversive aura demanded
silence, personal space, and attention to coursework.

Harry almost appreciated Snape for that. He still didn't like the man, and doubted he ever would,
but he was grateful nonetheless.

Just as he was grateful at the end of the class when Hermione was the first to crash into his desk
for the third time that day. "Sorry, " she said, and she didn't seem all that sorry at all.

Harry really didn't want to groan aloud, but it was a near thing.

The fact of the matter was that he didn't want to be around his old friends. He didn't want to answer
questions – which the rapid firing rate meant he'd blessedly had to address precious few of – and he
didn't want to be around everyone. Hermione seemed to have clung to his side like a leech
whenever she could, and Ron was little better upon his other side.

"You're coming with us to Herbology, right, Harry?" Hermione asked after charms, to which Ron
immediately replied, "Of course he is. Right, Harry?"

Harry didn't like being told what to do. He hated it, even. First the Ministry, and then the
professors, and now this? Now them?

For the first time in years, memory of the holiday after Harry's fourth year rose to the forefront of
his mind. He hadn't wanted to consider it. He'd done his best to not consider it for two and a half
years. It was in the past, and though the dismissal of friends, professors, and those he'd considered
all but family had stung fiercely enough to drive his initial flight, Harry didn't care. Not anymore.
He simply did not care.

Unfortunately, resentment had a way of resurfacing of its own accord. It felt almost like Harry's
magic in that regard; it rose, and spilled forth in active response to his unconscious desires.

"McGonagall said we weren't supposed to annoy you with questions," Ron said as he crab-walked
alongside Harry out of Charms class, "but I've gotta ask, Harry: where the hell have you been?"

A flicker of resentment almost caused Harry to frown. "Better to ask where I haven't been," he replied.

"I can't believe you're starting up in the middle of NEWTs," Hermione asked over lunch. "Do you think you'll manage to keep up with the workload?"

Harry shrugged, affording undue attention to separating each of his baked beans from one another in their mess of tomato sauce. "Don't know. Don't really care."

Rising from the table was accompanied by a further drilling of questions: "So what classes are you taking?"

"I'm not sure. I haven't exactly read my timetable."

"You mean because... because of your eyes? We asked the professors but only got cryptic replies about you being blind or something. Are you really blind, Harry?"

"Mm."

"Really? How?"

"Because my eyes stopped working."

In the corridors again: "You look really different; I almost didn't recognise you yesterday."

"Go figure."

And: "Where did you even go for the rest of the day?"

"Dumbledore's. For a bit."

"And then?"

"Around."

And finally, in the moments before Snape descended upon their Defence class, moments in which Harry's unwanted entourage immediately continued to pepper him with intrusive questions, Ron's words filtered through the loudest, "Why did you disappear all that time ago, Harry?"

A momentary lull met his words, which – fortunately or unfortunately, depending upon one's perspective – made Harry's reply only louder. "Maybe because I fucking wanted to?"

No one seemed quite willing to reply to that. Hermione's eyebrows snapped upwards as Ron's lowered so far they almost disappeared into the glowing yellow of his eyes. Seamus made an aborted chuckle, and at his side, Dean nudged him into more complete silence with a subtle prod of his orange-coloured elbow. Eyes blinked in surprise and lips parted in silent question. Confusion, perhaps. Or maybe sudden realisation that Harry's none-too-subtle expressions of increasing exasperation and resentment weren't misunderstood.

It persisted until Snape swept into the room to begin class and demanded silence of the already muted students. Unfortunately, in Harry's opinion, when that bell sounded for the end of class, he didn't hold quite the same degree of power over those same students as he had.

Harry watched as the few students that apparently had little interest in him – Slytherins, he noticed
– bypassed the crowded confines of his table and departed from the room. Harry wished he could
go with them, if only into the corridor to actually escape. There was no opening for such an escape,
however. Not around Ron's, "Did you want to head up to the common room for a bit before
dinner?" and Hermione's, "If you'd like, Harry, I could offer you a hand with some of your catch-up
work?"

Harry was frowning at them – and every other speaker and questioner and person he couldn't
remember the name of – and opening his mouth to tell them to "Back off a little, would you?"
before he realised he intended to. Maybe it was a good thing that Snape interrupted him.

"You will take your nattering out of my classroom," his resounding monotone snapped throughout
the questioning. "Now. Potter, you stay behind."

Heads turned with varying degrees of resentment towards Snape. Harry slumped slightly across his
desk as they did so. It was a relief, that likely unintended offering. Even more so when mutters
preceded the gradual dribble of students from the room.

"See you in a bit, Harry," Seamus stage-whispered over his shoulder, one of several similar
murmurs from passing students. Harry barely spared him a glance.

"We'll wait outside for you," Ron said.

"Don't," Harry immediately replied.

"It's okay," Hermione said, hitching the books she held higher into her arms. "We don't mind
waiting."

"Please, don't."

"It's really –"

"I'll try and get up to the common room to see you," Harry overrode her as she made to speak
again. "I'll see. If I get the chance."

He had no intention of trying. Quite simply, Harry was wholly done for the day. No more people
would be ideal. No more probing questions, or animated discussions flowing around him. No more
special considerations from professors or stupid reasoning of curriculums. Even better would be to
escape from the old friends he'd once had that seemed inclined to return to how things had been
before Harry had run away.

It wouldn't happen. It couldn't. They'd changed, Harry knew; all of them, including himself.
Hermione was a recluse – he'd determined that much – and Ron was even more of a slacker than
he'd been prior to fourth year. Apparently his after-school plans amounted to joining his brothers'
joke shop as he'd claimed Fred and George had readily agreed to only the summer before. Ron was
the self-proclaimed third wheel to the Weasley's Wizard Wheezes, as the twins had called
themselves. Go figure that they actually did something with the galleons Harry had given them.

Even without those particular changes, however, Harry knew it was his own disinclination that
would stopper returning to how it had been. Mostly, he knew, because he didn't want to. Nothing
but mild annoyance rather than guilt welled within him as Hermione nodded and Ron muttered a
final, "'Kay, then. See you in a bit," before they left.

Harry turned towards the front of the room as the doorway hollowed with their departure. He
leaned more comfortably across his desk, folding his hands and resting his chin on top of them.
Snape sat at his own desk, a muddy magenta bat with the same lank hair Harry remembered him for. He still sneered, though less profusely than he had earlier in class. Maybe his sneering muscles had grown weary.

"Sit up straight in your chair, Potter," Snape said shortly.

Harry blinked. "Why?"

"Because you look like a slob."

"Wonderful, 'cause that was exactly the look I was going for," Harry replied.

Snape's sneer deepened once more. Perhaps those muscles weren't quite so fatigued after all. "You, Potter," he said slowly, deliberately, "will be a problem this year."

"Unintentionally," Harry said. "I'm actually not looking to make trouble, if you could believe it, Professor."

Snape regarded him flatly, and if his sneer died slightly, it was likely without intention. "Excuse me?"

"What?"

"You expect me to believe that the son of James Potter isn't looking to make trouble?"

Harry closed his eyes. Right. The 'war with his parents' thing. He'd almost forgotten that was even a thing at all. Was that why Snape had hated him all those years? It wasn't like Harry really cared, but it was mildly interesting to consider. Except that… "I'm not my father, Professor. Truth be told, I don't think I'm all that much like him at all."

"For your information, Potter, you are quite expressly exactly –"

"For instance, I don't want to be an Auror," Harry interrupted, speaking more to himself than to Snape. His fingers scratched at a pockmark in his desk, burying little smears of his magic in the wood. "I don't have any interest in being the centre of attention like a performing fool, and if I by some chance I make a scene of something, it is pretty likely to be entirely my own fault rather than the conspiring work of a quartet of troublemakers."

Snape stared at him, mouth opening slightly. "Potter –"

"I haven't played quidditch for years, and I can't say that I really miss it all that much," Harry continued thoughtfully. It really was interesting to list the differences. "Flying's cool, but quidditch? Not so much anymore. I have no interest in picking it back up again either, for that matter. I'm not a pureblood, I don't think I was really raised in a pampered house like a spoiled poodle, and from what I've heard – and what you've told me – I don't really like bullying or being a prat." He paused, frowning for a moment. "Or at least I don't intend to be a prat. I probably am a bit. Yeah."

"Potter, you… the irrelevance of this is entirely –"

"Oh," Harry said, raising a pointed finger to snap in Snape's direction. "And I'm gay, so I don't think the whole 'marrying a nice girl and settling down to pop out kids' is really going to be my thing."

To say that Severus Snape was rendered speechless was likely a bit of an exaggeration. Or maybe
he was, but Harry didn't care. Instead, he dropped his hand back to his desk, fiddling idly with the holly and phoenix-feather wand that still rested before him. The hollow sound of wood upon wood rung through the room as he rolled it back and forth.

Finally, Snape seemed to regain his composure. Or he'd decided upon how he was going to respond, which was just as likely. "You make a convincing argument, Potter," he said, enough of his own sarcasm audible in his voice that Harry couldn't help but smile slightly, "but such is beside the point."

"Oh. I thought it might make you hate me less, but," Harry shrugged, flicking his wand once more, "fair enough."

Snape frowned. His sneer had faded, and he seemed more confused than anything. It took a long pause – and more wand rolling – before he replied. "Regardless of your claims, Potter, and your heritage –"

"Really?" Harry pondered aloud. Was Snape really disregarding said heritage?

"- I call your attention to your classwork which is nothing short of lacking." Snape overrode him without pause, lips thinning as he spoke, if not expressly curling once more. "For instance, following instructions."

Harry bit back a sigh. "The shield thing?"

And there was the beginning of a sneer once more. It was sadly predictable. "The 'shield thing' is of serious concern, Potter. If you cannot perform such a defensive shield at a specified distance that will provide maximum protection, then –"

"It's a stupid distance, actually," Harry said. "It works better if it's closer to the skin."

Snape paused. When he continued, his voice was chilling. "I beg your pardon?"

"Yeah, no, pushing it away is stupid." Harry flicked his wand. His lips tugged downwards as it finally rolled the whole way off the edge of his desk to clatter onto the floor before him. "I mean, okay, so, I suck at a lot of things, right? I'll probably never change a pillow into a – a cushion, or whatever's taught in Transfiguration for seventh year."

"A pillow into a cushion?" Snape repeated with such deliberate slowness it couldn't be anything but mocking.

Harry shrugged again. "Whatever. Like I said, I'll probably never manage that, but this stuff?" He gestured towards himself where his magic still clung to him in a protective skin, a sparkling green that was entirely his. "This I can do. And I can tell you right now, it works better this way. For me, anyway."

"For you?" Snape echoed.

"For me."

"For… you."

"For. Me." Harry smiled slightly. He hadn't meant to provoke Snape, but it was kind of fun.

Snape, however, didn't appear to appreciate provocation. His lip curled once more – honestly, it must have been an unconscious twitch of his – before he straightened further in his seat. "You'll
never achieve your NEWTs with such an attitude to your studies, Potter," he said just short of spitting.

"That doesn't really matter," Harry replied. "I just have to put in my time, right? If I don't get any NEWTs out of it at the end, then…" He trailed off with another shrug.

Snape apparently didn't have anything to say to that. No further reprimands, not anything but wordless sneers and a gesture with his hand. A moment to declare, "On your head be it, then, Potter," and with a flung finger, he was shooing Harry from his classroom.

It was probably the least punishing interface Harry had ever shared with the man.

Blessedly, the corridor outside of the Defence classroom was empty. No Hermione, no Ron, no gaggle of Gryffindors, or Hufflepuffs, or Ravenclaws that seemed to think they were entitled to all but cling to him like rather cumbersome growths. Harry sighed as the door clicked shut behind him, closing his eyes. Then he turned and started down the corridor in the glowing path of student footprints.

Was he going to Gryffindor Tower? Certainly not. Was he going to the library to study? Slightly more likely, but still no. Would he show himself in the Great Hall for dinner, or the kitchens with its sea of over-eager house elves?

Just the thought made Harry shudder. Stuffing his hands into his pockets, he instead trudged along the route towards a certain sanctuary that was, even in barely a day of returning to Hogwarts, quickly becoming his favourite place in the entire school.

"You're in my spot."

Harry didn't move. He didn't raise his head from where it rested upon the marble floor of the magical balcony, stretched as he was. He didn't blink his eyes open either, for to do so would give his magic the suggestion to flood his senses with Sight.

Oh, you have your eyes open? it would all but exclaim with delight. Let me help you to see! I can do that! And like an eager puppy, it would.

Harry didn't begrudge its enthusiasm. Far from it, in fact; he appreciated it like nothing else in the world. And yet sometimes… it was nice to be granted just a brief reprieve from the overwhelming clamour of his surroundings.

Harry didn't move, didn't open his eyes, but he couldn't quite ignore Draco Malfoy's arrival. The isolation of however long he'd lain in stillness had eased some of the tension that had mounted within him, but the interruption was still unwanted.

"Your spot," he murmured detachedly.

"My spot. Precisely."

"Entitled much, are you?"

"Rightly so."

"Any why's that?"

"Because I found this place. First come, first served, Potter."
Harry heaved a mental sigh. He didn't hate Draco Malfoy. He didn't even hold all that much resentment towards him – not like he did for his old friends. There was just... nothing. And with the weight of the day and his disgruntlement throbbing in his head like a headache, Harry couldn't find the energy to even bother disliking him.

Besides, what was their rivalry compared to that which was so much more in the presence of Death Eaters and a murderous madman out for his blood? What were snide words beside curses flung at him – magical and otherwise – to chase him in violent pursuit as often as to scoot him off of a park bench or to banish him and his 'loitering'? Competition versus ensuring there was a bed to sleep in that night, quidditch matches against avoiding notice from both Wizarding and Muggle law enforcers. What kind of a foe was Draco Malfoy beside the overwhelming demands of the ministry, the nagging persistence of reporters, and the exasperating ignorance of school professors?

Did Harry hate Draco? No, he didn't think so. Not when he considered all of that.

Not that he really did. Before that moment when Draco had nudged his way into his field of consideration by stepping onto the balcony, Harry had barely spared him a second thought. He'd glanced towards him as little as he had any other student in their shared classes, and even less so because Draco hadn't peppered him with annoying questions. He simply wasn't important; not alongside everything else.

Except for the fact that he'd intruded upon Harry's solitude.

"That's a stupidly juvenile way of considering of the situation," Harry said, eyes still closed, attention still barely spared.

The nearly silent tap of Draco's step sounded briefly. "No. It's an entitled way of thinking it."

"Just as I said," Harry murmured. It was getting quite cool, he noted, even through the warming blanket his magic snugged around him. Was it nearly nightfall? Later, even?

"Are you accusing me of immaturity?"

_Have I missed dinner?_ Harry wondered. "No. Just stating an observation that you seem to agree with."

"Oh, so now we're in agreement?"

_I wonder if I should find an actual bed to sleep in tonight..._ The thought of making his way to Gryffindor Tower, with its students and his old friends that were so irritating, and the _questions_, was nothing short of distasteful. "If you'd like."

"... Really?"

"What?"

"You're agreeing with me?"

A touch of magic quivered on the edges of Harry's awareness, and his vague attention was immediately distracted. That quiver – it had happened several times since he'd been lying upon the balcony, and had probably done so the previous day, too, though he hadn't quite been aware of it. The stillness, the silence, the almost meditative lull he'd fallen into, though... Harry felt it, then.

Reaching absently towards it – with an extending nudge of his magic, for he didn't physically move an inch – Harry soothed what appeared to be a mild disruption somewhere in the heart of the castle.
Some student had kicked up a fuss? An accidental spell had struck a wall? Those were what had happened before when Harry had felt it.

"Potter?"

The castle murmured something, the rich browns and deeper shadows that weren't quite black but something far more glorious, vibrated along Harry's senses. He liked that kind of old magic. The ancient kind, built into the castle's structure and devoid of the newer constraints that Harry had beheld that day in the classes he'd attended. None of the rigidity, the rules and restrictions. Really, how could he have forgotten that modern spell-casting was so confined?

"Potter, are you ignoring me?"

Had he simply not noticed it because he'd had nothing to compare it to? Was that why he hadn't noticed how wrong it felt before he'd embraced his magic in a new manner and learned to perceive it in an entirely different way? How working alongside and giving as much as taking made magic so much happier, so much warmer, more eager to help? Harry could hardly even consider using his wand when wand-waving compared so feebly to -

"You are. Potter, I'm not partial to being ignored."

Harry started, and it wasn't because of Draco's words. The kick to his foot was far more attention grabbing, and not because it was a particularly hard kick. It had been a long, long time since anyone had been inclined to pull him from the distraction his thoughts when he lost himself.

Blinking his eyes open, Harry was immediately greeted by his magic resurfacing and flooding his eyes. Colour and warmth spread across his vision, painting the sky – it looked like night, with a different magical tinge to daylight hours – and tingling that place behind his eyes that was triggered by that very magic.

The balcony.

The empty grounds beyond that balcony.

The Clock Tower that hadn't sounded for nearly an hour.

And Draco Malfoy.

Blinking up at him, Harry took a moment to stare at Draco as he hadn't the time or the bother before in the assault of various demanding fellow students and professors. Too many colours with too much new magic to behold. Even if the curiosity of their previous night's meeting niggled at him on the edges of his awareness, Harry hadn't pursued it. There were other things to think of; more important things. More interesting things, too, than a Slytherin that apparently still held a childish vendetta against him.

But Harry looked, and he saw him for the first time, and it was… curious.

Draco was grey. Or not quite grey. His magic glowed just slightly, as magic always did, defining his figure and features, and darkening to something metallic at his eyes, his mouth, his fingertips where his arms rested folded across his chest. Not grey; just something very like it.

But that wasn't the interesting part. Harry had seen more colours than his old eyes had ever deemed possible, so it was hardly remarkable. What was interesting was what he saw with his Sight, what his magic defined and highlighted in a way that other people could see.
Last time he'd seen him, Draco hadn't been quite so tall. His features were still sharp, but they were somehow different. A little rounder, perhaps, and not quite as petulantly pointy. Except that the main difference lay not in how he held himself – though the entitled swagger he managed even in stillness was certainly still present– but in his dress. In how he'd groomed himself. In the pose in which he stood and the objectionable, almost aggressive light to his eyes that wasn't quite as composed but more erratically careless than it had once been.

In short, Draco wasn't well-groomed. If anything, his hair was almost scruffy, his clothing – without school robes thrown over the top – carelessly askew and with a somehow 'unfinished' air to it. Harry only deemed it something less because he himself knew 'scruffy' on a very personal level. Scruffy, and without robes but in… was that Muggle clothes? That fact, for a pureblood, was startling enough, but that it was a Malfoy even more so.

He wasn't refined, because there was nothing 'refined' about this particular Malfoy except perhaps the practiced way he wore carelessness. And the aggression, the objectionable weight to his eyes, and his words…

Harry slowly propped himself up on his elbows. "Huh."

Draco leaned backwards until he was resting against the balustrade behind him. "What?"

"You're different."

Draco blinked. He raised one grey, magically sparkling eyebrow that was so pale it could have been whitewashed blond. "What the bloody hell are you going on about?"

"Are you wearing jeans?"

Draco glanced down at himself. "What -?"

"Never thought I'd see the day," Harry said, a touch incredulously. He shook his head. "Huh. They actually kind of suit you."

Draco slowly lifted his gaze from himself. Eyebrow still raised, he turned his regard upon Harry. "Speak for yourself."

Sitting up more fully, Harry tucked a leg to his chest, dropping his chin atop his knee. '"Bout what?"

"You've changed."

"So I've been told," Harry said, for he had been. By ministry representatives, and by Dumbledore, and by classmates throughout the day. He heard the slight condescension in his own tone despite himself.

Or not really despite himself. Harry didn't care what Draco thought of him. He couldn't say he really cared for what anyone thought of him.

Draco regarded him with a slight frown. It wasn't objectionable or aggressive as those he'd always worn had been. It wasn't a sneer like Snape's either, and though he seemed to be wearing a mask of expectation – for attention? For a proper reply? – it wasn't quite demanding. Not even with his continuing words.

"You've really have changed," he finally said.
Harry nodded against his knee. "Shit happens."

"I didn't say it was a bad change."

"Is it good, then?"

"I didn't say that either."

Harry couldn't help but roll his eyes. He drew his gaze to the side. "You know, Draco, if you want to talk, you'd be better off going somewhere else to find someone who had the time and the energy for it. Nattering on kind of defeats the purpose of this place, so…"

Silence met his words. Blessed silence, Harry thought, for the tension that had provoked a headache in his temple throughout the day hadn't quite abated. The thin whistle of wind, the chill of snow that never truly touched Harry for the constant embrace of his magic, curled around them. Snow was falling, just barely, but it never seemed to land upon the balcony.

*Expectedly,* he thought. *That wouldn't suit its purpose, after all.*

"There is so much about that statement that I have to question."

Glancing at Draco sidelong, Harry saw him settle into a comfortable slouch against the balustrade. It was different to the carefully choreographed slouch he'd observed for years; this one didn't seem choreographed at all. Harry had to acknowledge a moment of surprise for that; he never would have expected Draco to disregard posture entirely from simple laziness.

"You really don't have to ask anything, actually," Harry said.

"I have three questions," Draco said, holding up three fingers.

"Do you have to?"

"Are you questioned out for the day, Potter?" Draco said, an amused smirk tugging at the silver-grey corners of his lips and making them glow slightly brighter.

Harry nodded with absolute sincerity. "You have no idea."

"That's unexpectedly honest of you."

"Why would I lie?"

"Because I'm me," Draco said, pointing to himself redundantly, "and you're you."

"Ground-breaking." Harry tipped his head so his cheek rested upon his knee instead of his chin. "Honestly, Draco, I couldn't give a fuck about some stupid rivalry we had when we were younger."

Draco stilled slightly further in what was already marked stillness. "Is that why you called me Draco, then?"

Harry glanced at him sidelong. "What?"

"You're calling me Draco. Hadn't you noticed?"

"Not really."

"Am I expected to call you Harry now, then?"
Fucking hell, why does it even matter? Harry didn't bother withholding his sigh. "Do whatever the hell you'd like, Draco. I prefer my name but really – do whatever you want."

"All… right," Draco said slowly. Not hesitantly as much as with consideration, Harry thought. Even with barely a sidelong glance Harry could see the curious brightening of his grey magic. His outline defined further, the glow becoming almost silver. "Okay, that's one of my questions. Second question."

"Must you?" Harry frowned as a throb in his temple reminded him of his persisting headache.

"The purpose of this place," Draco said. "What does that mean?"

"What?" Harry sighed.

"You overuse that word."

"Do I look like I care?"

Draco snorted. Not loudly, but enough that Harry's attention was momentarily drawn to him once more. He was smirking again. "Not really."

"Good. Because I don't."

"What is it, then?" Draco paused, then, into Harry's dismissive silence. "The purpose?"

*He's bloody persistent*, Harry thought to himself, and almost said it aloud. He withheld from doing so only for reluctance in the extending the conversation. He'd really appreciate the silence.

So instead, he reached a hand out beside himself and patted the cool, marble balcony floor. "It's entirely magically built."

"I gathered that," Draco said. "And?"

"And not accessible to most people."

"Only adults," Draco said with a nod. "And?"

*Only adults… should've guessed that.* Harry brushed the discovery aside. "And it only shows itself to people trying to escape."

Draco made a strange sound in his throat. It wasn't a squeak of surprise, nor a disgruntled grunt, but something in between. "Escape?"

"Do I have to repeat myself?"

Draco snorted again. He seemed to do that a lot, from what Harry had witnessed. "I suppose not. Third question."

"Fuck, you are persistent, aren't you?" Harry didn't withhold from saying this time. Instead, he closed his eyes and the magical colours flooding his senses dimmed slightly. Not quite enough that he couldn't feel Draco's smirk widening into something like a grin.

"It's in my nature. Haven't you noticed?"

"I had, surprisingly enough."
"Third question," Draco repeated. Harry could feel more than see him raise a hand and those three fingers once more. "Why're you avoiding people?"

Harry blinked his eyes open. Slowly, he turned his head towards Draco. "Isn't that obvious?"

"Because the people who used to be your friends are annoying twits?"

"Partially, yeah."

"You're being asked too many questions?"

Harry stared at him flatly for his hypocrisy, and Draco's snort came out in a chuckle this time. It somehow suited his countenance, with the scruffy, lazy image. His eyes glowed nearly silver as he blinked at Harry. "What've you got to hide? Some deep, dark secrets, maybe?"

Oh, fuck you, Harry thought, glaring at him across the distance between them. That distance was minimal enough, but Harry figured he could probably manage to leap across it and tip Draco over the edge before Draco could jump out of the way. A pity that the balcony didn't allow for fatal accidents of the falling sort; Harry had seen the magical protective netting around the balustrade from the moment he'd stepped from the Clock Tower.

Instead of striking out at Draco's smug face – Harry might not hate him, but he was fairly sure most people would annoy him these days – he bit out a reply. "Why yes, Draco. When the world finds out I, a mere seventeen-year-old with no discernible talent or skill in spell-casting, effectively took out the greatest Dark Lord of our time, I'm sure there will be reason enough to hide."

Harry had the satisfaction of seeing Draco's silvery eyebrows leap up his forehead. He saw his eyes widen and almost sparkle. Even his mouth flopped open and he drew back into a posture that was nearly straight. Surprise, you bastard, Harry thought with quiet satisfaction as he closed his eyes once more. The image of Draco's incredulity faded with it.

Was it stupid to announce the truth? Maybe. Would the world find out? Most certainly, at least eventually. But Harry didn't care. A few more months putting in the enforced hours at school and he would be away – to Greece, or New Zealand, or – or Madagascar or something. Anywhere that was simply away.

Voldemort wasn't dead. Harry knew he wasn't, and that he likely wouldn't be for some time. Though he didn't know what it was exactly, there was a certain disjointedness to his magic that went beyond Dark Arts. Something that whispered words of longevity and immortality.

Not that Harry cared. It wasn't his problem anymore. He'd firmly decided that it wouldn't be when his own magic had forcibly expelled that same twisted darkness from himself years ago. He still shuddered to think that, whatever it was, that shadow that had been so reminiscent of Voldemort had been inside of him. Harry had ensured Voldemort could be incarcerated, as much for the shadow he'd infected Harry with as to get him to bloody leave him alone. Thus, that he was now in the hands of the ministry, Harry's job was done.

Let someone else deal with him for a change, he grumbled to himself.

The sound of a body dropping to the floor beside him drew Harry's attention from where he'd drifted into his thoughts. He glanced sidelong to where Draco had lowered himself beside him, back still against the balustrade and legs stretched out. He breathed out a puff of air and it swirled silver and white and just a little black before him.

"So you were the one who took down what's-his-name, then?"
"What's-his-name?" Harry couldn't help but echo, smirking.

Draco's lips twitched. His magic had dimmed from incredulous brightness into subdued disbelief that contrasted the comprehension in his words. "Yeah. Him."

"Hm," Harry hummed. "Guess so."

"And now you're at school?"

"Ten points to Slytherin. Did you work that out for yourself?"

"Did the ministry force you to come?" Draco asked, tipping his head backwards until he was looking almost to the sky. "Did they force you to?"

Harry shrugged a shoulder. "Sort of."

"Bastards."

"Tell me about it."

"But why are you here?" Draco tipped his head slowly towards Harry. "You're powerful, and you could tell them all to fuck off if you wanted to. Why are you here, Harry?"

"It's only for a while, because there's not really any avoiding it," Harry said quietly, silently acknowledging the use of his name. It meant something, that Draco used it. Something Harry didn't bother considering. "Then I'm gone."

"Gone?" Draco said. When Harry nodded, he sighed. "Sounds nice."

"What about you?" Harry asked with a touch of lazy curiosity. "Why're you here? I can't imagine it's pleasant for an Death Eater's son."

Draco shrugged with more sincere disregard than Harry would have expected him capable of. "Not really."

"Then why?"

"It's… just for a time. Then I guess I'll be gone, too."

Harry stared at Draco. He stared at him for a long time, long after they'd both fallen into unshakeable silence and the disgruntled pounding of Harry's headache had died into soothing calmness. Harry stared as Draco's grey cyclically brightened then dimmed into silver and then nearly black, up and down and constantly changing as magic had a habit of doing. And he thought.

They weren't really rivals anymore. They certainly weren't friends, either, and were barely acquaintances, but they weren't rivals. And maybe, surprisingly enough, they weren't all that different.

Strange, that Harry would find more in common at Hogwarts with Draco Malfoy, Death Eater's son and ex-Slytherin idol, than he would anyone else. But then, life was, by and large, pretty strange itself.
"Let's Be Realistic"

**THE BOY WHO SAVED US ALL**

Two and a half years ago, he disappeared. Believed dead by many, Harry Potter became a legend of speculation and regret. Dead? Fallen to He Who Must Not Be Named? The tragedy of the Boy Who Lived left an ache in every heart.

And yet Harry Potter returned, and he bequeaths upon the Wizarding world an insurmountable gift.

Our most recent interview with Minister Rufus Scrimgeour has revealed the mystery tantalising every existing witch and wizard. When asked in an interview just who was responsible for the end of our struggles, the close to trials, chaos, and war, the Minister spoke simply: "Harry Potter defeated him once. He seems to be making a habit of it."

Harry Potter. The Boy Who Lived. The Saviour of the Wizarding World not once but twice. Where is he now? The search ensues as Minister Scrimgeour denies providing Potter's location...

Draco snorted. He couldn't help himself. The reporter's excitement practically buzzed off the page with her words, and he hardly needed to draw his gaze to the bottom of the piece to know who wrote it. Rita Skeeter, resident busybody of the *Daily Prophet*, and the loudest voice in the campaign to unravel the riddle of Voldemort's demise.

It was pathetic, really. Stupid, that Harry Potter, Golden Boy and legend, who had been all but archived as the deceased hero he'd been when little more than a baby, was being hailed a hero. Stupid – and a little amusing, too.

"Are you coming down with a cold, Draco?" Pansy asked from his side.

"A cold?" Blaise asked from her other side. "That's a new one. Or was it a particularly congested snort this time?"

"Particularly profuse," Pansy said, sniffing in faint disdain as she deftly scooped egg yolk onto her toast.

Draco ignored them both. He didn't spare them a moment's glance from the *Prophet* in his hands. Today, at least, he was taking the time to read the entire foolish article.

Or articles, as it would happen. The fool of a minister's words had taken the papers by storm; one word, one admission as to the identity of their 'Saviour' and Voldemort's 'defeater', and the entire first half of the *Prophet* was thick with stories pertaining to the revelation. There was a segment upon the minister's non-event interview. There was an article on Voldemort, with the same old speculations as to just how he'd been defeated, if with the added filter of being 'defeated by Harry Potter'. Pages of words from people who didn't matter, memoirs of the war, odes to the triumph and to those lost.

And a whole double spread about Harry himself.

Draco read that spread. He deliberately ignored the swelling noise that flooded the Great Hall as breakfast blossomed with life. The crackling of newspapers, the gasps and whispers and wonder, all but exploded as awareness struck every student.
“Harry Potter defeated him?” they said.

“It was really him?”

“How did he do it?”

“It’s incredible!”

“It was really him? And now he’s come back to school?”

It might have been surprising. To most people – likely all of them, Draco would wager – it truly was a revelation. Maybe if Draco too had been surprised by the reality, he would have been as buzzing with excitement as the rest of them. Unlikely, for Draco didn’t ‘buzz’, but it could have been so. More likely that he would have been as subdued in his interest as Pansy and Blaise pretended they were.

But Draco wasn’t surprised. He’d had nearly a whole week to grow accustomed to the fact.

Draco still didn’t quite know why Harry had told him. ‘Harry’ now, not ‘Potter’ – it had been a surprisingly easy transition and one that felt somehow… natural. Automatic, without emotional investment, just as Harry’s confession of the truth had been.

If he’d been smug or proud in his claim, Draco wouldn’t have believed him. If Harry had beaten around the bush or vaguely insinuated his involvement, Draco would have suspected that he’d had help. But Harry hadn’t done any of that. He’d come straight out and spoken with just a hint of annoyance to his words to suggest that it was exasperating to explain at all. If that didn’t bespeak grudging truth then Draco didn’t know what would.

Draco could almost hear the words now, even days after being so unexpectedly told: I, a mere seventeen-year-old… effectively took out the greatest Dark Lord of our time… Such self-deprecation pertaining to his ‘talent’ and lack of spell-casting skills could only serve to emphasise that truth.

Draco believed him. He’d believed Harry from the moment he’d been told.

Skimming his gaze over the Harry Potter double spread, Draco listened with a distracted ear to the whispers throughout the hall. It was a little hard to attend those around him at all with the picture of Harry – fourteen-year-old Triwizard champion, as he’d been in the chosen picture – blinked up at him with something that was almost a shadowy, shyer version of the disregard he now wore. That Harry hadn’t liked being the centre of attention either. He’d clearly just not had the balls to do anything about it.

Unlike now, Draco thought, raised his gaze to skim briefly – and redundantly – around the room. He’s hardly ever about if he can help it, and when he is…

Harry Potter was changed. It was more than just the look of him, though that in itself was enough to raise the eyebrows and invoke suspicions that he might not really be Harry Potter at all. It was more than that he was blind, something that Draco was still attempting to wrap his head around because Harry certainly didn't act blind, or that his face was patterned in strangely intricate scars that somehow seemed to complement the lightning bolt on his forehead the precious few times Draco had seen the behind his fringe.

Most importantly, though, Harry wasn't the Golden Boy anymore. That much was apparent.

He didn't scurry back to his Gryffindor friends as Draco might have expected him to. He didn't sit
silently in class, moping in the fact that he was so far behind everyone else, or even take to studying in a flurry as Draco might have done himself once upon a time. He spoke his thoughts – or what Draco assumed were his thoughts – and that speech was as often remarkably stark to the point of disrespectful.

He didn't dress in the school uniform – not even the modified manner of dress that Draco had taken to wearing. He didn't pick up a quill or roll of parchment – which Draco couldn't really blame him for because he couldn't actually see to write, could he? – and he didn't use his wand. Ever. In fact, he barely used magic at all.

Like everyone else in Transfiguration class, Draco had stood witness to the moment Harry announced that very disinclination to the world. "Why?" he'd asked in reply to McGonagall's request.

McGonagall appeared momentarily stunned. She took a handful of seconds to compose herself enough to reply in, speaking in something of a stupor. "Why? Why am I asking that you attempt the transfiguration, Potter?"

Harry sat at the back of the room. He always did, and mostly because he arrived just bordering upon late. Sometimes he actually was late, Draco had noticed, and always somehow managed to through the door without being noticed at all. A good Muffling Charm was to thank for that, Draco suspected, and possibly a Disillusionment Charm, too. He'd certainly never actually seen him enter when he was late.

As always, Harry leant upon his desk with arms stretched before him, chin dropped to rest on the scarred and seeming nothing if not bored in his attempted attentiveness. He likely wouldn't have been able to see even had his fringe not covered most of his eyes, Draco thought, so sprawled was he. Even if he'd been able to see at all.

The whole class turned towards him at his objection, a phenomenon that had occurred many a time over the past few days, and just like every other time, Harry ignored them all. He was remarkably good at that, Draco had grown to realise, for he would always acknowledge adept disregard when he saw it. Even in an ex-rival.

"Mm," Harry hummed in affirmative reply to McGonagall's words. "Why?"

"Because I told you to, Mr Potter," McGonagall replied as though she couldn't comprehend being challenged. And by a Gryffindor of all things – it was positively delightful to witness, in Draco's opinion.

"But it's useless," Harry replied, and all eyes that had swung to McGonagall snapped back to him. "Why would I ask my magic to turn a ceramic mug into a glass cup when they do essentially the same thing?"

Draco stared at Harry intently. The way he spoke – not the touch of ridicule or condescension, but the way he spoke of his magic itself – made it almost seem like it was a person to be requested from rather than directed. "Why would I ask?" he always said and, "That doesn't seem like a useful thing for my magic to want to do."

Curious. Very curious.

"That is not the purpose of this exercise, Potter," McGonagall said, her surprise fading into lecturing reprimand. "The function is to translate dissimilar substances of similar objects so as best to –"
"But why would I ever want to do that?" Harry interrupted her.

McGonagall twitched slightly. Draco couldn't help but smirk; he'd seem a very similar response from a number of professors of late. None seemed to know quite how to handle an openly objectionable Potter. McGonagall took a visibly steadying breath. "Well, for functions such as brewing a cup of tea, one would need a mug rather than –"

"Or you could just go and get a mug from wherever," Harry interrupted again, raising an arm and gesturing vaguely. "That's a wasteful use of magic."

"There is no 'wasting' of magic," McGonagall said. "It is a bottomless well."

"Maybe, but it still tires from being asked to enact triviailities. Gets pissed off, you know?"

McGonagall blinked and someone – probably Granger, Draco thought – gasped. "I beg your pardon?"

But Harry seemed to have decided he'd had enough of the conversation, for he clocked out with his argument. "Whatever. It seems kind of stupid to me, and my magic doesn't like it, but if you all want to…” He shrugged and returned to simply draping himself across his desk.

Stunned silence met his words once more. Only slowly did it ripple back into motion. For Draco, at least, he didn't attempt to recast his transfiguration again; not because he worried about 'tiring' his magic, but because he was staring at Harry.

Harry, who was very curious indeed.

It didn't stop there, either. Harry was an objectionable pain in the arse, Draco had discovered, and seemed to question the purpose of just about everything. "When will anyone ever need to cast a Heat Dissipation Charm rather than a Cooling Charm?" he asked of Snape in their Defence class.

"Exactly when a heat-based curse is flung towards you, Potter," Snape replied, his words clipped and aggravated in a way that Draco couldn't help but snicker at. It was worth the silencing glare he received.

"But they're basically the same thing," Harry replied. "You'll just end up confusing yourself. Why bother to learn two spells?"

"Only the simple-minded would restrict themselves for such reasons," Snape said, a hint of victory to his words.

Harry, in his seat at the back of the room as always, only shrugged. "Then I guess I'm simple?" And Snape's victory died.

"Is it edible?" Harry asked of Sprout in Herbology, and was continuing with, "Then do we really need to know?" almost before she'd started shaking her head. Sprout almost popped a vein.

"What if you're lactose intolerant?" he asked of Slughorn when their professor noticed him decidedly not listening to his lecture on milk pearls in Potions.

Slughorn blustered for a moment before replying, "Then oyster pearls can be used as an apt alternative. However, Mr Potter, you should really –"

"Do they do the same thing?" Harry interrupted him mildly, as he was partial to doing.
Slughorn floundered for a moment before nodding slowly. "They do, but it is important to note that..."

"Then why not just use oyster pearls for everything?" Harry asked. Slughorn didn't have a reply to that, and Draco saw Blaise add another stroke in the 'Potter vs. Professors' tally he'd taken to keeping on a note in his robe pocket.

In each class they shared, even merry little Flitwick's class, Harry was a right bastard. Not a 'naughty' student that occasionally pulled pranks, nor one who talked in class like Finnegan did, and not a teacher's pet like Granger. He wasn't even lazy to the degree that Weasley had grown increasingly over the past years. He was just...

A pain in the arse. There was no other way to properly describe it. And Draco decided that he quite liked it. Arithmancy, the only class he took that Harry didn't, seemed comparatively dull.

And that was to say nothing of their undisclosed shared evenings on Draco's balcony. That in itself was a whole new kettle of fish worthy of consideration.

Staring at Harry's fourth year picture in the papers, Draco was only reminded more forcibly of the differences between the Potter of then and the Harry of now. Had he always been like that but never showed it? Or was this something to do with his time disappeared, the time that Draco knew nothing about, and the defeat of Voldemort however he'd managed? Strangely enough, Draco found himself regretting that he'd disliked Harry so much in the past that he wouldn't ever know for himself. It was hard to compare his present self against next to nothing.

"Is there something particularly interesting about that picture, Drake?" Blaise asked, leaning around Pansy to flick the side of Draco's head. Draco waved his hand away distractedly.

"Other than the fact that Potter seems like he wants to bodily climb for the side of the frame?" Pansy asked, pausing with a chunk of egg-laden toast speared upon her fork.

Blaise nodded his fervent agreement. "He does, doesn't he? But I thought there might have at least been something on his face that was so worthy of interest. You know, a buzzing fly caught in the image."

"Or red-eye," Pansy suggested.

"It's black and white," Draco said absently. "There's no red-eye."

"And Draco is very aware of that fact," Blaise said, flicking him again. He hissed slightly when Draco swiped him aside particularly hard, but was chuckling again a moment later. "Gazing longingly again, are we?"

With a roll of his eyes, Draco sighed and finally turned his attention towards Blaise. Pansy was regarding him sidelong as she ate, but Draco chose to ignore her. "Please tell me you're not starting with that foolishness again."

Blaise grinned. He clearly didn't need to be told what Draco was referring to. "Well, it has been three years."

"Two and a half," Draco corrected.

"Look, Pans, he knows the dates specifically."

"Yes, because I can count, unlike some people."
Blaise pouted, but the expression smoothed back into a grin a moment later. "Exactly. You take the time to count."

"Shut up, Zabini," Draco sighed, shaking his head and turning back to the newspaper. He deliberately turned the page and ensured he didn't seem even mildly disappointed that he hadn't finished the article. He'd likely overhear all of the verbally illustrated *Life of Harry Potter Facts* throughout the day, anyway.

"Draco, dear," Pansy said, slowly lowering her fork to her plate. Her voice similarly lowered in a way the indicated these words, at least, weren't meant to be overheard by their surrounding eavesdroppers. "We have an objective for this year."

"What are you insinuating, Pansy?" Draco said, skimming without really attending to the article on Scrimgeour himself.

"This fixation –"

"It's not a fixation."

"It kind of looks like it," Blaise said.

"Or at least very similar," Pansy added. "I thought we agreed not to concern ourselves with Potter after he left. I had assumed it was just a momentary fixation, wasn't it? All in the past?"

"Until the past returns to bite you in the arse," Blaise said. His lips quirked teasingly, a single eyebrow rising alongside it. "Is this a good thing or a bad thing, Drake? Do you have an arse-biting fetish?"

Draco flipped the *Prophet* closed and slapped it pointedly onto the table before him. He wasn't blushing, because it would be stupid to blush, but the subject of conversation was slightly discomforting nonetheless. How many times in his younger years had he denied such accusations? "For the last time, both of you, I've never had a crush on Harry Potter."

Blaise and Pansy stared at him with starkly juxtaposing expressions – Blaise still smiled and Pansy seemed to be nothing if not staring down her nose at him. The they glanced at one another before turning back to him. This time, those expressions had shifted into identical scolding.

"We never even brought up the crush thing," Blaise said. "Your defensiveness is very telling."

"It's almost as it was in first year," Pansy said, pursing her lips. "'I never wanted to be his friend anyway. It was common courtesy, to offer companionship'."

"Or second year's 'Mudblood is a perfectly acceptable name for someone Muggleborn. *Everyone* uses it. Why did he have to get so upset at *me*?'"

"Will you both stop it," Draco said shortly.

"Or the hippogriff incident." Blaise turned commiserating eyes towards Pansy once more. "The icing on the cake of third year."

"Humiliating." Pansy nodded gravely. "To say nothing of fourth year."

"Parkinson, Zabini, my tolerance is wearing thin –"

"'Why'd he have to be picked?'" Blaise said in a poor mimicry of Draco. The pout he wore looked
ridiculous on him. "A fourteen year old? Not only is it stupidly dangerous but it's unfair."

"No one in their right mind would consider your 'unfairness' to be the root cause of your objection, Draco," Pansy said so gently she had to be condescending.

Draco scowled at her. Then he scowled at Blaise. They were idiots. Both of them. "We were juvenile schoolyard rivals," he said, detachedly realising he all but echoed Harry's words of days before. "Rivals, you arseholes."

"There's a thin line," Pansy murmured, eyebrows rising suggestively.

"A very thin line," Blaise said with his own grave nod.

"I'd hoped that Potter's return wouldn't spark a renewed war, but…"

"We had a deal, Draco. We're a support system, to support one another."

"And yet some things apparently can't be supported or fixed."

Draco rose to his feet. He glared down at his friends, ignored the glances of the Slytherins for the abruptness of his movement, and adopted his most dismissive sneer. "You're both bastards."

"At least call me a bitch, Draco," Pansy said benignly.

She squawked a second later as he reached for and plucked her toast from her plate. "You are," he said, then pointed the toast to Blaise. "You too."

"I'm a bitch and a bastard?"

"Most definitely."

"Splendid."

"I, at least, know that I came from a marriage bed," Pansy sniffed. "Blaise is questionable, but at least be accurate in your criticisms, Draco."

"Mine was a marriage bed too," Blaise objected. "Or at least it was at the time."

"Before your mother killed him?"

"Pretty sure he was the one that ended up escaping to Vanuatu."

"Ah, yes. The fool. Madame Zabini will track him down eventually. Draco, where are you going?"

Draco had already turned on his heel and started down the aisle away from his friends. "I can't stand either of you," he threw over his shoulder. "Until you regain your senses, you're both on probation."

"You mean until you acknowledge the truth?" Blaise called after him.

The sound of surprised gasps and Blaise's ensuing grunt as Pansy's toast struck the side of his face was astoundingly satisfying. Even more so, Draco thought with satisfaction, because he'd barely had to glance over his shoulder to aim so perfectly.

He left the Great Hall to ridicule of his friends and the whispers of students still fixated on Harry growing only more profound in intensity. Saint Potter, Draco thought rolling his eyes as he strode
through the Entrance Hall. He practically is at this point. Class is going to suck for him.

Draco paused in step as he turned towards the nearest stairwell. He was a little annoyed by Blaise and Pansy for their assumptions – their relentless teasing should have died a painful death long ago – but not quite enough to addle his thoughts. Draco paused, and he considered, and he reflected just briefly on Harry.

The Harry who seemed to shun the limelight like shadow-loving mould.

The Harry who spent every other second on the 'escape' balcony of the Clock Tower that none who didn't truly need it could access.

The Harry who, even then, was avoiding the Great Hall as though it hosted the plague because of the people and the supposed friends and the whispers.

That Harry was different to the one Draco had known. He didn't just take the attention lying down, but instead went so far as to grumble in the face of it in such a relatable manner that Draco almost felt… not quite affection, but certainly commiseration. Unexpected commiseration, too, for he'd never thought himself capable of such. Especially not for Harry Potter.

But Harry was different, and from the evenings that they usually sat in solitary company on the balcony, rarely even talking, Draco appreciated that difference. Harry was a bit of a prat – and a lot of a pain in the arse – but he was so relatable that his silent company was… kind of nice.

Harry Potter. Good company. Draco shook his head as he extracted his wand from his pocket. Thank Salazar neither Pansy nor Blaise have any competency in Legilimency.

Placing his wand upon his flattened palm, Draco kicked himself one last time for his thoughts before casting. "Point Me: Harry Potter." If nothing else, Harry deserved a warning of the assault that would surely hit him later that morning.

The Point Me Charm led Draco on a winding route to the kitchens. Expectedly, Draco had to admit, for Potter had to eat sometime if he wasn't in the Great Hall. Glancing instinctively over each shoulder – because Draco wasn't a fool, and giving juniors the privilege of kitchen access was sheer stupidity – he tickled the pear until it giggled into a doorknob and eased the door open.

Draco had never liked the kitchens. They were vast, and admittedly immaculate, which was something that he'd grown less concerned about over the years until it was practically disregarding that cleanliness, but even so…

He didn't like house elves. Draco never had. He didn't hate them, and didn't take pleasure in beating the crap out of them like his oh-so-blessed father once had, but they kind of creeped him out. Nothing should be so eager to please another creature, even if witches and wizards were rightly worthy of esteem.

House elves scurried everywhere in the kitchen cavern. It was a veritable sea of dishrag-clad bodies and flopping ears, noses too long and plates balanced precariously above heads. At breakfast time, predictably one of the craziest hours of day, even midway through the meal it was mayhem. Pots were levitated, toast popped every other second with magical speed, porridge dolloped itself into waiting bowls, and honey drizzled into emptying jars.

They moved so fast, those house elves. It was almost like a hive-mind. It really was kind of creepy, - but not unexpected. Not like the fact that Harry was standing across the room in a ring of just such elves wringing their hands and babbling concerns while he engaged in a struggling tug-of-war
with one elf in particular.

"Bissy will do it," the house elf was squeaking, tugging at the plate Harry help that lifted her off her feet. "Bissy will be cleaning the plate for Master Potter, sir!" Despite the offering of her words, she sounded more demanding than kind-hearted.

"Bissy should heed her bloody name and 'busy' herself somewhere else," Harry said, shaking the plate slightly and the elf with it. "I'm not incompetent. Just let me do it myself."

"No!" Bissy all but shrieked, her voice so shrill Draco couldn't help but wince. "Bissy will be cleaning Master Potter's plate!"

"I can do it myself."

"No! Master Potter should not be –!"

"I made the mess, so let me clean –"

"Bissy will –!"

"Can I just -?"

"Master Potter shouldn't be -!"

"But I can –"

Draco couldn't help himself. He was laughing before he even realised his amusement. Heads turned towards him, house elves scattered with mutters of "Draco Malfoy," and "It's Master Malfoy", vacating the area around him. There were nothing if not dutiful, those elves; they'd remembered Draco's discomfort in their presence from years ago and persisted in their evasions. Not that Draco really noticed. He was more distracted by Harry as he paused, the Bissy elf still hanging off the floor from the end of the plate, and turned towards him. With an upward blow, he fluffed his rather bedraggled fringe from his eyes. Unnecessarily, in Draco's opinion, given he was supposedly blind, though he did appreciate the gesture nonetheless. He didn't much like being disregarded, after all, and not bothering to meet someone's eyes was the height of such disregard.

"Are you terrorising the staff, Potter?" he asked.

"What?" Harry replied, straightening slightly and absently lifting Bissy further off the ground.

"What?" Draco echoed with a smirk. "Don't you know any other words? Honestly."

Harry rolled his eyes before he then really did dismiss Draco. The annoying arse. "My morals are my business, Draco. If you have a problem with them, eat your breakfast upstairs."

Draco strolled into the room, the vacated radius around him shifting with his steps. The kitchens always flowed with utter fluidity, which was a little creepy too, if worthy of appreciation. "Do you have breakfast down here every morning?"

"And lunch," Harry said, shaking Bissy slightly as she still clung onto the plate for dear life. "And dinner."

"And your fans and wannabe friends don't have a problem with that?"

Harry glanced towards him again. "Do they have a choice?"
Draco smirked, hooking his thumbs into the waistband of his slacks. This Harry was definitely interesting. Fuck Pansy and Blaise and their stupid speculations. What Draco had with Harry in the past was a rivalry, and now? Now it was something different, and he wouldn't let his so-called friends ruin it for him. Besides, other than those two, few enough students at the school had a grain of wit besides Harry. Draco had never noticed before. Maybe he'd acquired it when he'd been on the run as well?

"Just so you know," Draco said, leaning against the edge of the nearest table, "you'll probably have a posse descend on you within an hour or so."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"Your name was in the papers and the world suddenly adores you again."

It took Harry a heartbeat to comprehend the meaning of Draco's words. When he did, the plate slipped from his fingers and Bissy was racing towards the nearest sink with a triumphant cry as though her life depended upon it. Harry didn't even seem to notice.

"Fuck," he said.

"Very eloquent of you," Draco agreed.

"I knew it would happen eventually, but... fuck."

"Not so eloquent upon repeat, however."

Harry barely seemed to hear him. He ran a hand through his fringe, raking it from his face enough to reveal the spider web scars around his eyes. The interesting scars. The... strangely intricate scars, Draco thought. It was an unfortunate by-product that Harry had been blinded, true, and he probably wasn't too keen on the scars himself, but they added an oddly appealing aspect to him.

*No, not appealing,* Draco reminded himself. *Pansy's a bitch and Blaise is a bastard, and Harry's not appealing.* He swiped an apple from a fruit bowl behind him and stuck it objectionably into his mouth. Only to speak through a mouthful a moment later. "How can you see, by the way? You never told anyone properly."

Harry was frowning at the ceiling overhead – and very definitely looking – but he drew his gaze towards Draco at the question. That much itself was something of a surprise; Harry, Draco had masterfully deduced, didn't like to be questioned. That, and he seemed to zone out upon occasion and ignore Draco entirely. Which was absolutely unacceptable.

"What?"

"The eyes," Draco clarified, gesturing to his own with his apple. "How do they work?"

Harry stared at him, and with his fringe swept aside, Draco could actually make out the flatness of his gaze. "They don't. I'm blind."

"No shit," Draco sighed, exasperated, and took another bite. "I know, because they 'stopped working' or whatever, right?" Harry only nodded. He never expanded all that much on that particular sequence of events. He never expanded much on anything, for that matter. "But you clearly still see."

"I don't see."
"Bullshit."

"I don't see, you moron. It's my magic."

Draco paused mid-chew. "With your weirdly friendly magic? Do you ask it nicely, then? Ask politely and it shows you?"

Harry glared at him and Draco had to swallow a triumphant grin. Just as with each of Harry's admissions, it was usually triggering disgruntlement that egged him into speaking. If nothing else, Draco knew he was good at aggravating Harry Potter; that much, at least, hadn't changed over the years, even if Harry had in a wealth of other ways.

"I did, actually," Harry replied, shoving his hands into his pockets. "And I'd bet my magic likes me a whole lot better than yours does you. But it still doesn't help me see."

There he goes again with that weird magic thing, Draco thought, shaking his head slightly. Magic wasn't a person, he knew, but the frequency Harry raised the subject in class triggered mild curiosity on the subject. "So you can't see but you see? A paradox, or are you just confused? Did some Death Eater curse you in the head and –"

A piece of toast sailed towards Draco's head in a manner remarkably similar to the way he'd thrown towards Blaise barely minutes before. Draco ducked deftly. "Don't throw food, Potter," he said as he straightened. "It's unsightly. At least use magic to do it."

"That's a stupid thing to use magic for when I have perfectly good hands," Harry huffed, sticking said hands into his pockets. "And no, actually, I'm not confused or cursed. I just perceive magic."

Draco paused in settling himself back against the table, mouth hanging open for another bite. "You see magic, you mean?"

"Basically."

"Like spells and shit?"

"Yeah. And shit."

"How does that work?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "See spells. See your magic. See you. Simple." He shrugged, disregarding what, to Draco, didn't seem very simple at all. "Get over it already. There're bigger concerns to worry about."

"Like your posse," Draco said.

"Like my – why the hell are they a posse, exactly?"

Draco grinned. "Do you need a hand? Some supportive evasion tactics?"

Harry opened his mouth to reply before slowly closing it. He tipped his head slightly, quizzically, and definitely, definitely stared at Draco. With his eyes. Draco didn't care what he said, he definitely looked at him, however the hell that worked. "What are you suggesting?"

Draco took a final bite of his apple. Then, glancing over his shoulder, he tossed it towards a wide rubbish bin. It fell short – dismally short in a way that would have sorely depressed any witnessing Chaser – but the deft bat of a house elf's frying pan rerouted it into the trash.
Draco barely noticed. He wiped his hands on his slacks in a manner that would have horrified both Pansy and his mother, were she still alive to witness the crime. "I'll offer my assistance," Draco said casually.

Harry blinked. "You'll help?"

"Of a sort, yes. Me."

"You?"

"Me."

"Why?"

Draco shrugged – still casually, definitely casually. "Because it's fun to poke shit at Gryffindors and make use of the network of Hogwarts castle's hidden corridors." Not for any other reason at all, Draco reminded himself.

Harry shook his head slowly. "You're weird, Draco."

"I'm the weird one?"

"You used to hate me other, remember."

Draco wrinkled his nose. "I never hated you. Little Me didn't even know what hate was."

Harry blinked at him. Again. His gaze was so utterly intent that they could be no way his eyes weren't working. The liar. "Huh."

"What 'huh'?"

"I never hated you either."

Silence hung momentarily between then. It was a strange silence, interrupted by the clattering and chattering and working of house elves, but notably loud nonetheless. Draco almost smiled. Almost, because he had to stop himself before he ran the risk of looking like a fool.

Hooking his thumbs into his waistband once more, he half turned towards the door into the kitchen. "Good to know," he said, dampening his smile to a smirk. Smirking fit more comfortably upon his lips anyway. "Shall we get a move on, then?"

Harry stepped slowly, almost hesitantly, towards him. Then he was shaking his head, though not quite in disagreement. His hand drew from his pocket with a crinkle of parchment. "You know, I don't exactly need help," he said, pausing beside Draco and dropping his attention to the ragged parchment.

"What is that?" Draco asked simply because he could. Harry might not answer other people's questions, but Draco's? Draco knew he was an exception. He made himself one.

"A map," Harry said, unfolding it. "Came with the return of all my 'precious possessions' or whatever. Come on, then. Maybe I can show you some secret passages. And Bissy, I'm cleaning my own plate tomorrow, thank you!"

Draco ignored the words flung to the house elf and the indignant retort, following Harry in step. "I doubt you know more than me."
"You'd be surprised."

"Is that a challenge?"

Harry rolled his eyes again, but he was smiling. Just a small smile, but definite nonetheless. "Is everything a competition with you?" he asked.

Draco nodded immediately. "Everything."

"Predictably," Harry said, shaking his head as he swung the kitchen door open.

"Committed, you mean," Draco replied, following after him. "I'm a very faithful person."

"Yeah. Right."

"Is that scepticism I hear?"

Harry spared Draco a glance over his shoulder as he started down the corridor in the vague direction of the Potions dungeons. His eyes were very green, Draco noticed absently. How hadn't he noticed that before? "Draco, if you haven't realised that much about me by now than I think I know which of us is really the blind one."

Draco didn't reply, and not only because if he did it would be in agreement of – and admission to – Harry's words. He did know. This Harry, the Harry that wasn't Potter or Gryffindor's Golden Boy, was a sceptical, witty, sarcastic pain in the arse. And surprisingly, Draco found he might… he actually might…

*It's not quite liking,* Draco rationalised as he lengthened his stride to walk alongside Harry. *Not quite.*

Even Draco heard the lie in his words. He decided it was a very good thing that neither of his friends were Legilimens. A didn't think he could withstand their mutual smugness *and* the horrifying reality that he abruptly realised wasn't so horrifying at all.
Two Too Many

Chapter Notes

A/N: Okay, I'm not even going to apologise for Harry anymore. Sorry if he seems unjustified in his resentment but... well. I think he's embracing my inner repressed teenager who never quite spoke out and is thus acting like a little snot. Oops. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stepping onto the balcony, Harry didn't spare a glance around its modest expanse, despite knowing that Draco was already there. Without pausing, he simply collapsed.

Groaning, Harry kicked his legs out behind him, stretching on his belly and pressing his forehead against the marble floor. He laced his fingers at his nape, arms effectively wrapping around his head. "I hate my life," he grumbled.

"Said every teenager ever," Draco said from somewhere to his right. "Did you actually crack your head just then, or did your magic catch you before you did yourself any real damage?"

"Why do people have to make things so annoyingly difficult?" Harry asked, more of himself than of Draco.

"I would suspect the magic," Draco said, continuing his own tangent. "Although, you've always seemed somewhat careless about injuring yourself."

"And worst of all, they're everywhere."

"Wandless and wordless?"

"Always asking questions and always, always making demands."

"I need to learn how to address your 'magic' directly, I think. You have a problem with ignoring people of importance."

Harry barely heard Draco. The marble beneath his brow – still nearly frozen, because the Scottish highlands had a ridiculously brutal winter that pervaded even magical boundaries and the beginnings of spring – was vaguely soothing of his headache. He always had one, these days. It was because of the people, Harry suspected. So many people. Everywhere.

"You're ignoring me again, Harry."

Why did they always have to follow him? Always asking questions and making assumptions that became offended when those very assumptions were proved unwarranted? It wasn't Harry's fault that he didn't meet the expectations of the people. Those people could go and fuck themselves for all he cared.

"Hey." Draco nudged his foot with what Harry knew from experience was his own foot. "Don't ignore me. I don't like it."
Harry raised one of his elbows that hugged his face just enough that he could glare beneath it in Draco's direction. As always, Draco leant against the balustrade – standing today – with the casual slovenliness that he wore surprisingly well. He regarded Harry in return, the silver-grey pulsing of his magic slightly sharper in his unspoken curiosity.

"Poor you," Harry said. "Do you have to withstand something that annoys you?"

Draco smirked, and the magic settling upon his lips brightened with amusement. "I never withstand it. I just force others to change their manner so they don't vex me." He fell silent as Harry dropped his elbow and buried his face once more, but only for a moment. "What happened?"

Harry grunted.

"Were you chased by adoring fans again?"

Harry hummed a negative.

"Did someone use their brains efficiently enough to work out which of the corridors you're using to get around unseen?"

Another negating hum.

"Granger and Weasley are being their oblivious selves again?" Draco gave his own thoughtful hum. "Yes, I could see that happening. I was wondering where you'd disappeared to all afternoon."

Harry raised his elbow again to peer towards Draco, though this time without the glare. "Were you here all afternoon?" he asked curiously.

Draco raised an eyebrow. "What makes you think that?"

"Because you just said –"

"I wouldn't wait all afternoon for you to grace my personal space with your presence."

"I didn't mean for me," Harry said, though he couldn't help but smirk just a little himself. "You spend entirely too much time up here, Draco."

"Of course I do," Draco replied, slouching, if possible, even further against the balustrade. "It's my spot."

Harry shook his head and dropped his elbow once more. For a long pause, silence but for the persistent whistle of winter wind encapsulated the balcony. Harry's headache actually began to fade a little, though maybe that had more to do with his brains freezing upon the marble beneath his brow than the momentary reprieve.

But, given that it was Draco Malfoy Harry found himself with so often of late, that silence didn't persist for long. "So, was I right?"

"What?"

"About Weasley and Granger."

Harry grumbled words even he didn't understand under his breath. With a heave that took more effort that it rightly should have, he twisted himself into sitting. "They're always a problem," he said, which sufficed for pretty much all of it. "I've actually decided that I hate school."
Likely unconsciously, for he wouldn't often lower himself intentionally to another's level, Draco slid to the balcony floor across from Harry. He stretched his legs out before him, crossing them at the ankles. *He's not wearing socks,* Harry thought idly. *Is it laziness or deliberate laxness?*

"You're just realising you hate school now?" Draco asked. "It's a bloody castle in the middle of nowhere, entirely isolated from ready access to modern civilisation, and you're just realising it now?"

Harry scrunched his nose as he shook his head. "It's not the castle itself I'm talking about."

"Oh, right," Draco said, clicking his tongue as if in self-reprimand. "Of course, you have a weird fetish for the castle –"

"It's called fondness," Harry corrected.

"- because of its old magic or whatever." Draco rested his head back against the balustrade and actually managed to make the pose look comfortable. "What is it, then? What happened?"

Harry didn't know why Draco asked. After two weeks of sharing his company – and unexpectedly sharing, for he still hadn't deduced the exact reason for Draco's abrupt camaraderie – he'd discarded bothering to ask. Strangely enough, Draco was one of the few people that Harry actually didn't mind being around. Everyone else…

The professors were stupid in their oblivious transference of knowledge. It was all wrong, and Harry could feel it. Meanwhile, the students of the school only ever looked at him with awe, and in the weeks since he'd been forced – yes, forced, Harry had decided – to return to Hogwarts, that awe had only intensified with every frivolous *Daily Prophet* article.

Those in Harry's own year were even worse, in some ways. They carried their awe, their 'respect', and yet at the same time seemed to think they were entitled. That they knew him, that they were still close friends, or at least classmates. To many, it seemed almost as though the past two and a half years hadn't existed at all.

Seamus was far too touchy-feely in his friendliness. Parvati seemed to consider the fact that they'd shared dismal company at the Yule Ball in their fourth year a point in her favour and took every chance to remind everyone of that fact. That kid from Hufflepuff – Susan? Harry thought her name was Susan – seemed to think herself 'in the know' because her aunt was part of the Wizengamot that had listened to Harry's reluctant confession of how he'd supposedly 'beaten' Voldemort.

The boy from Ravenclaw that Harry didn't bother to learn the name of. The other girl from Hufflepuff that Harry only remembered was named Hannah because she took the liberty of reminding him at every possible opportunity. Neville with his almost stammering adoration and Lavender in her open flirtatiousness. It was all a little sickening.

But worst of all were Hermione and Ron.

They'd changed. They'd both changed so much over the years, and Harry was made blatantly aware of that fact for their attempts to accompany him everywhere and to plop themselves on either side of him in every class when they could manage. Harry had learnt more of their lives than he likely would have wanted to hear even had he asked it of them.

Harry hadn't. He didn't really care about his old friends, and cared even less when he recalled their disregard when he'd truly needed them years ago. When they'd barely replied to his desperate letters, when they hadn't so much as given him the time of day unless he asked it of them. When
they'd abandoned him. They'd all changed, barely resembled the people they'd once been, and Harry couldn't find it in himself to care for them. Not anymore.

"Hermione's always been a massive nerd, but I swear she studies in her sleep sometimes," Ron told him as they sat together before Charms. He spared a glance for Hermione as though she weren't within hearing distance and regarding him flatly. "I reckon that's why she has to wear glasses now; all that late-night reading."

"Well, Ronald has taken to doing so little study that I'm surprised he even passes his classes," Hermione retaliated over Harry's head.

Ron hardly seemed to hear the criticism. "She cut her hair at the beginning of sixth year, which is a bit sad 'cause it looked nice long, but I think it suits her."

"Just as Ron's attempt at a beard suited him last year, too," Hermione replied. "And not only because he was about the only person in our year who could grow one."

"She got all Outstanding in her OWLs except in Defence."

"He's got a contract with his brothers for his new shop, did you know, Harry?"

"She's really good at –"

"I've always admired how he –"

Back and forth, speaking at Harry rather than to him, and Harry rapidly deduced a number of things in barely a handful of days. One, that Hermione and Ron hadn't really been friends for a long time. Two, that they both had blatantly obvious crushes upon one another, and it was a sickening to witness their obliviousness.

And three, that they were both morons. Not that they were bad people, Harry supposed, because Hermione was nice enough in offering to study with him, and Ron always had an amiable joke up his sleeve. But yes: morons. And it was starkly apparent from the words that Hermione managed to ask him at least once a day.

"We don't study much together anymore, Ron and I, but maybe we could this afternoon? Or this weekend? Like how we used to go down to the library and work on our essays together, do you remember?"

Harry remembered. Of course he did. Just as he remembered their friendship, and that he'd once thought Hermione and Ron were the absolute best people in the world until they'd abandoned him after fourth year when he'd been hurting. They'd ignored him when he needed them. It didn't matter their excuses – "Dumbledore told us not to," and "We wanted to, really, we did, but we couldn't," – because they were Harry's friends anymore and they'd let him down.

Harry had moved on. He'd moved away from them, become someone else, and he didn't want to turn back. Unfortunately, Hermione and Ron didn't seem to realise that fact. Harry's slipping through the back corridors, admittedly as much guided by Draco's suggestions as the Marauder's Map he'd grown reacquainted with over the past weeks, was as much an attempt to avoid his ex-friends as it was every other bloody person in the castle.

It was exhausting. Frustrating. Harry had incessant headache that had been nagging him for the past few days seemed unlikely to truly vanish any time shortly. But that wasn't the reason he was so disgruntled that evening.
"What happened," Harry replied to Draco's question, "was that Dumbledore called me to his office."

Draco stared at him for a moment, blinking slowly. His curiosity welled as a brightening flush of his magic, but he otherwise hid it well. He was remarkably good at that, Harry had grown to realise. Far better at hiding his emotions than he'd been as a younger kid.

"To lecture you?" he asked.

Harry shook his head. "Not this time. Probably soon, though."

"Was it about a reporter again?"

Harry cringed. Three days ago, Dumbledore had requested his attendance in his office regarding potentially sitting for an interview with a reporter to 'clear the air'. Harry had stormed out and the entire castle had thrummed in an echo of his indignant magic for the rest of the afternoon.

"Fuck no," he said. "Thank God, no."

"Then what?"

Harry pursed his lips. He frowned, scrubbing a hand through his hair, and turned his glare in the general direction of Dumbledore's office. He could feel it, even at a distance; the Headmaster's quarters shone like a beacon to his magical senses regardless of where he was. "My godfather happened. That's what."

Draco didn't smirk. He didn't grin with malevolent delight at Harry's frustration as he might have done when they were children. He didn't even brush aside the words as Harry could have anticipated from a past rival.

Not anymore. For whatever reason, Draco had decided to start talking to Harry with something less than hatred. And to listen. "Tell me," he said simply.

So Harry did. For reasons that he couldn't quite explain, reasons that found him in Draco's company more than anyone else's and not really hating that company, he told him.

"So I got this letter…"

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There was exactly one good thing about the fact that Harry had been all but attacked by an owl that morning. Only one, as far as he could see it, and that benefit lay in that he was skipping Transfiguration that afternoon.

Harry didn't like his classes. He'd never been a studious person to begin with, but now? Now, he pretty much hated them. It felt so wrong to see his classmates using magic for such trivial tasks that dimmed the enthusiasm of that magic before his eyes. Magic was natural, pure, and wanted to be used and appreciated – but to turn a sock into a stocking? To cause hives to erupt on skin, or to tickle someone senseless for nothing but a prank?

Magic might not be human or even alive, but it felt. Harry could feel that it felt, just as he could feel its skewed echo of disappointment for not being used properly. He felt its discontent at being twisted and confined into useless enactments rather than pursuing what it was meant for.

Where was the flooding of the senses, the coursing through the blood, that would invigorate the user with exceptional physical capabilities? Where was the instinctive Healing from fatal injuries
because Magic so loved its caster that it couldn't bare to witness torn flesh or diseased bones? The protection against the weather, against attacks, against the darkness of the world, of both a magic user and that world itself? Harry hadn't seen anyone besides Sprout use magic to help a plant grow, or to coax noxious weather into raining or snowing where it had built yet seemed reluctant to properly fall.

Harry knew that witches and wizards used magic wrongly. He'd known it for years, ever since he'd begun to grow so close to his own magic. He just hadn't fully appreciated that, in a way, the supposed Light used it almost as incorrectly as the Dark. It made for some very frustrating class discussions.

Striding in the direction of Dumbledore's office, Harry was grateful at least for the chance to avoid one such discussion. McGonagall didn't understand any more than pretty much anyone else did.

"Magic is a tool, Potter," she'd said countless times.

"It's not just a tool," Harry had replied just as often. "It should be used properly."

"There is no proper way to use magic if it is within the boundaries of possibility," McGonagall had often sighed in exasperated chiding. "So long as it isn't Dark."

*Just because it's not Dark doesn't make it right,* Harry thought to himself, stuffing his hands further into his pockets as he turned the final corner to the headmaster's office. *How can people be so bloody daft? Can't they feel that their magic doesn't like it?*

Shaking his head – because Harry doubted he would ever get through to most of his professors, to say nothing of his classmates – he drew to a stop before the griffin statue standing sentinel before the headmaster's stairwell. It wasn't a particularly attractive gargoyle, and hardly did justice to the mighty griffins it mimicked, but it thrummed with the castle's old magic in a rich upwelling of swirling browns.

"Hey," Harry said, and the griffin blinked. "Can I come up?"

He could have offered the password. Dumbledore's note had provided it for him. *I have a taste for apple fizzers, if you've an interest in knowing,* he'd written, right below an admittedly cryptic invitation to his office:

*Harry,*

*I hope to find your classes have been well thus far. I regret we haven't spoken much since your arrival. If it would please you, my guests and myself would appreciate your company after lunch hour. They are, as I understand it, most excited to see you.*

*Headmaster Dumbledore*

Who the guests were hadn't been specified, which was kind of annoying. What was also annoying was that apparently Dumbledore 'regretted' that they hadn't spoken 'much' since Harry's arrival. Much? Bloody hell, they hadn't spoken *at all.* Harry would have thought the old man absent from the school entirely had he not the understanding that he attended the Great Hall for meals more often than Harry did himself. Draco had mentioned it a couple of times with an offhanded, "Dumbledore saw fit to conduct an utterly ludicrous speech at dinner tonight," or something to the effect.

Harry had been less aversive to Dumbledore after their first discussion; he'd actually made sense, and seemed to consider Harry as more than just a doll in the shape of an almost-adult to play to the
whims of others. He'd seemed to understand that Harry had an opinion on the matter of his schooling, and that it objectéd most profoundly to that of the Department of Education.

But in his absence? In Dumbledore's complete disregard over the past two weeks? It reminded Harry too much of his time after fourth year. Bloody Dumbledore had likely been the ringleader in the whole 'tell Harry nothing until he snaps and says "Fuck it all"'.

So though Harry attended to Dumbledore's words with reluctant compliance, he didn't have to fit the mould. He didn't have to meet every expectation placed upon him. Something within him knew that he'd rather have his tongue ripped out that use the headmaster's provided password.

Instead, Harry stood expectantly before the gargoyle griffin. "Please?" he asked, and his magic welled within him to nudge the guardian.

The griffin blinked again before tipping its head and hopping to the side of the stairwell with remarkable fluidity for a stone creature. Harry nodded obligingly to its allowance and climbed the spiralling stairwell. Something like satisfaction rose within him for that fact; regardless of the security of the headmaster's suites, the right person with the right understanding of magic could slip past it with remarkable ease.

That satisfaction dried up like a prune as soon as Harry shouldered through the stupidly heavy door into the office.

Dumbledore sat within. In his high-backed chair, straight and proud and smiling benignly in all of the pink rosiness of his magic, he looked nothing if not a presiding judge before his inferiors. Harry hardly saw him but to immediately disregard him; Dumbledore was in his Bad Books again, regardless of how lenient he'd been upon their last meeting.

But Harry hardly considered Dumbledore at all. How could he in the presence of the two men seated across from the headmaster, twisting in their seats at his entrance?

"Harry," Dumbledore greeted him warmly. "Thank you for joining us. I apologise that you have to miss your classes, but…"

He said more, but Harry didn't hear him. His attention was focused upon where Sirius and Remus stared at him with unwavering eyes.

They looked different, the two of them, glowing in their respectively violet and amber-gold magic. Changed, if just a little. Sirius had filled out from his gauntness, the hollowness of his eyes lessening slightly until he would have looked almost human but for the strangely desperate violet light that had replaced that forlornness. He stared at Harry unblinkingly, hands grasping the arms of his chair as though fighting the urge to leap to his feet. Or to rip those very arms off; Harry wasn't sure. The realistic side of him had accepted over the years that Sirius Black was probably a mite less than sane after his imprisonment.

Remus looked as faded and worn as ever. If anything, he seemed older than he had last time Harry had seen him – which he was, naturally, yet he seemed older again than he should have been. The war that had ended only so recently clearly hadn't been kind to him. Thin-faced and thin-fingered, the amber colour of his magic spread translucent and mellow, Remus stared at Harry with eyes as wide as Sirius' and with a hint of the same desperation.

Harry froze on the threshold. His hackles all but rose and the need to leave now! welled within him.
He didn't hate Sirius. He didn't hate Remus, either. The fact of the matter was that, just as he felt for Hermione and Ron, for Dumbledore and his professors and just about everyone else who'd once meant something to him, he'd moved past them. He didn't need them anymore, and he didn't want them. Harry had forced himself to not think of them, because to dwell upon the relationships of his past would provoke old anger and resentment that was better kept brushed aside. Except that they kept popping up in his face and staring at him like that, and he couldn't help but feel himself drawn back to the past.

They'd abandoned him. Like everyone else, Harry had been abandoned when he most needed the support of his friends. Maybe it hadn't been their intention, and maybe it had been necessary. Maybe they would have even come for him had he waited long enough. But those maybes didn't change the fact that Harry had wanted them, had needed them, and they'd left him. They'd all left him alone and at the Dursley's, of all places, left with thoughts of a boy he hadn't been able to save and a madman reborn out for his blood. Harry often wondered if Dumbledore had half wanted him to go mad himself that holidays - or he had wondered until he'd forced himself not to wonder anymore.

It didn't matter if they were sorry. It didn't matter if they regretted their actions. What mattered was that Harry had moved on, had moved past them, and had reached a place where he didn't know he would ever be capable of fully forgiving them. He didn't know if he really wanted to, for any of them. They saw him as the boy he'd been years before without seeming capable of realising he'd grown and experienced more than they could possibly know. Because none of them did know.

They didn't know what it was like to wander dark streets with barely a tenner in their pocket and not even knowing where they were. They didn't understand the discomfort of sleeping in a kid's playground, tucked into a cramped tunnel because it was better than being left out in the rain. They didn't understand why they turned out to be not as much of an asshole as they could have been, or the charity of a pizza joint worker that spared the burnt disaster of a discarded order for a hungry mouth, or how it felt to run from crazy people who were as likely to be Death Eaters as they were run-of-the-mill lunatics on the streets of London.

Fear, loss, worry, resentment, more fear, and then finally reaching a place where such feelings weren't really felt at all anymore. Because they didn't do anything. They didn't help. It was better to simply get on with the job as best as could be done. Alone – but for the magic that had always been with him, even before Harry had known what it was. He had grown content with his magic as his only company; now his past was rearing its head and shaking him from his acceptance and he didn't like it. Not one bit.

None of those people from his past knew. Hermione, with all of her encyclopaedic knowledge, didn't know. Ron, with his murmurs of, "I get it, mate, I get it," certainly didn't. Not Dumbledore, who didn't pretend to try, or the Weasleys, who'd once been his family until they'd abandoned him just like everyone else. Certainly not Sirius and Remus who, when Harry considered it, he didn't know all that well at all in the first place.

Standing just inside the headmaster's doorway, Harry was abruptly reminded of what he'd known for years. I don't know these people, and I don't really want to know them. Not anymore. A longing for the balcony in the Clock Tower, and maybe the surprisingly easy companionship of someone who was a prat but still somehow kind of good company, welled within him. I should have just gone to Transfiguration, even if it's all a load of bollocks.

But there was no escaping anymore. Not when Sirius was already rising from his chair, Remus right behind him, and they were crossing the room. Before Harry had a chance to retreat more than
a step, he found himself trapped in a breathlessly tight embrace, his face all but crushed into Sirius’ shoulder.

"Harry," was choked into his hair, warm breath tickling his ear, and it felt... Unpleasant. There was nothing good about the feeling. Nothing at all. Harry wasn't used to being hugged, and certainly not like that. It felt wrong.

Maybe his lack of response, his complete lack of reciprocation, was indicative of his aversion to Sirius on a subconscious level. Or maybe Remus had urged him to let go; Harry wasn't sure. He couldn't see much of anything until Sirius released him from his constricting hold, taking half a step back so he only grasped his shoulders. For whatever reason, Harry was grateful. Briefly.

Then he was back to regretting every action that had led him to the office as Sirius beamed at him with watery eyes. "Merlin, Harry, we missed you. I… we…" He spared a glance for Remus over his shoulder before drawing his gaze back to Harry again as though compelled. "Merlin."

As eloquent as always, Harry thought in a manner that reminded him detachedly of Draco. The urge to shrug out from beneath Sirius' hands almost made him twitch.

Instead, he swallowed down the urge. Harry didn't like doing what people told him to do, what they expected of him. Whether old friends, ex-family, or something less close to home, that feeling persisted. But just for a moment… if he could endure it for a time, maybe Sirius could slink back to wherever he'd been hiding for the past three years.

Because he had been hiding, Harry knew. The few glimpses he'd had of the Daily Prophet over the years would surely have exploded if 'Mass Murderer Sirius Black' had shown his face. What he was doing in the school at all was something of a mystery.

Though maybe Dumbledore's managed to pull some strings now Voldemort's been incarcerated, Harry thought, and it wasn't with satisfaction. Harry simply didn't care if his godfather was a free man. Sirius might have been special once, might have been the closest thing Harry had to family, to his parents, but…

He didn't want to care. Not anymore. And he didn't know Sirius.

"Hi, Sirius," he said anyway, because the entirety of the room – from Sirius' eyes richly cast in purple and Remus' amber, and Dumbledore's, too – was all turned intently towards him and demanded his returned attention. "It's been a while."

Sirius uttered a choked laugh that sounded almost like a sob. He nodded rapidly, his fingers squeezing Harry's shoulders. "Yeah. It has been. You've grown, kiddo."

"That tends to happen to kids," Harry replied.

Another laugh, less sobbing this time. "Yeah, it does. Not much taller, though."

"No." Harry shrugged. "Surprise."

"And you kind of look less like your dad, too." Regret touched in Sirius' words. "Shame, that."

This time, when Harry shrugged, it was to rid himself of Sirius' hands entirely. It took a surprising effort to withhold a scowl. Sirius didn't look like his father, did he? And that was, what, regretful?

Hindsight was a remarkable thing. Harry truly hadn't had the chance to get to know Sirius, but that hindsight put his godfather in a decidedly different light to that perceived by the adoring fool he'd
once been. How Sirius had been attentive and friendly, and how Harry had wanted – had needed – that. How he'd been supportive, and a link to Harry's parents, and he'd needed and wanted that, too. But also how everything was a comparison. How Harry had been a little James Potter rather than just Harry.

Hindsight often blew memories out of proportion, skewing and exaggerating particular features, but Harry didn't think he was so biased as to misinterpret it that incorrectly.

Ignoring the touch of confusion to Sirius' expression, the wariness darkening Remus', Harry took himself to Dumbledore's desk. He flopped himself into the third seat set before is, twisting sideways and hooking his legs over the arm. Not only was it comfortable, Harry had found, but most authority figures tended to have a problem with such a manner of seating. Harry liked that. Authority figures were often too puffed up on their superiority anyway.

Then he turned to Sirius, to Remus, and addressed them with as much consideration that he could muster. Admittedly, it wasn't much, but... "What are you both doing here?"

What followed was perhaps the most gruelling hours of Harry's life. It wasn't terrifying, as he'd experienced being hounded by Death Eaters. It wasn't physically painful, as he'd also undergone on occasions too frequent to be wholly acceptable, and more often the result of a flung curse than anything. It wasn't even as achingly boring as his time in questioning, his hours waiting for Ministry reps, and his identical conversations with Inquisitors had been.

This was frustrating in a whole new way.

"Where have you been?" Sirius asked when he'd resumed his seat. "You just up and disappeared, Harry. You've been gone for so long."

_ Stating the obvious_, Harry replied silently, and maybe a little unjustly. _Wildly perceptive of you, Sirius._

"We were worried about you, Harry," Remus added quietly, and that quietness, that tangible sincerity, drew Harry's attention more than Sirius' almost feverish question had.

Harry shrugged. "Away."

"Away?" Remus echoed.

"Away to where?" Sirius asked.

"Just... away."

There were questions of why. Of "how could you do that" and "it was so dangerous for you", as if Harry hadn't learned that for himself. "I know," he replied and, "Because I didn't want to stay with the Dursleys anymore," as though that were the only reason he'd left at all.

"You could have come and stayed with me," Sirius said quietly, shooting a glance to where Dumbledore sat, quietly observing behind his desk.

Harry smothered a scowl. "Could I?"

Sirius glanced back towards him. "Of course."

"Really?"
"Really."

"Didn't seem much like it," Harry muttered, more to himself than anyone in the room, and that was the end of that. Or at least as much as Harry was prepared to allow; Sirius attempted to pursue the topic, but Harry wouldn't have it. He was done.

After that came the worrying. "We were so scared for you, Harry," Remus said in his eternally quiet voice. His sincerity was almost painful to behold, and even more so because it was annoying. Why was he worried now anyway? The past was past. "No one knew what had happened, or if you were alright."

"You were chasing Death Eaters?" Sirius asked. "Was that what you intended? To hunt down Voldemort?"

"That was terribly dangerous of you, Harry," Remus said.

"A bit foolhardy, I'd admit," Sirius agreed.

"Why didn't you tell us?"

"You could've been killed."

"We could have supported you."

"We could have helped."

"I don't need help," Harry said flatly, regarding the flaring purple and amber magic of Sirius and Remus respectively. They tingled and sparkled in visible agitation. "Clearly."


"Incredible…" Remus murmured.

"We're proud of you, kiddo."

"Incredibly so."

"How'd you manage it?"

The questions. Always the same questions. About where he'd been, why he'd left, how he'd defeated Voldemort. The concerns about his safety, asking if he was okay. The hurt, as though they deserved to feel hurt over Harry's leaving.

They didn't. Harry responded to their words, and as had grown within him with Hermione and Ron, the resentment for a past long disregarded resurfaced. It didn't matter to Harry how sincere Remus was, or how fondly Sirius' magic glowed as he stared at Harry like a long lost keepsake. It didn't matter that they actually apologised for not contacting him to keep him updated the holidays he'd made his fateful decision – especially because it was mentioned with such disregard that they clearly didn't understand just how big that lack of contact had been.

They regretted, they worried, they expressed their mutual relief, and they questioned. Always the questions. It was frustrating, and annoying, and Harry had nearly risen to his feet to leave the room a dozen times throughout their hapless conversation so far.

The real cherry on top of the sundae, however, was the chiding.
They'd been talking in circles. In the gentle warmth of Dumbledore's office, the tinkle of music and instruments that weren't musical at all playing in the air, and the headmaster himself utterly silent in his watchful attendance, the chiding began. Unsurprisingly, it started from Remus.

"You shouldn't have left, Harry," he said with a sigh, leaning more heavily upon his knees as he'd been leaning for the past hour. It was a different kind of lean to the one Sirius had fallen into; from Sirius, it seemed as though he was attempting to lean just a little closer to Harry, and Harry didn't like that. Not at all.

Or he didn't like it when he attended to the both of them. For the past half an hour, he'd been fiddling with an oddment plucked from Dumbledore's desk. His apparent distraction had silenced Sirius and Remus briefly, and something like affront, an unspoken: "You're not wholly attending to the conversation we've forced upon you? How could you do such a thing?" hung audibly in the air between them. Then it had been disregarded, they'd begun questioning once more, and Harry contented himself fiddling with something that seemed a magically triggered puzzle of sorts.

He paused in the act of twisting a cog of the little device and glanced towards Remus. The amber glow of Remus' eyes smouldered with the intensity of his gaze; in many ways, Remus was more attentive than Sirius in his unblinking watchfulness.

"What?" Harry asked.

"It was foolish of you. I don't speak in reference to the worries that not a single one of the people who care for you underwent –"

Of course you don't, Harry thought.

"- but solely of your own safety. It was dangerous."

"Even if you did manage to beat him," Sirius added, "you should've asked us along, Harry."

"A fifteen year old boy up against the most dangerous wizard of our time?" Remus bowed his head for a moment. Harry felt more than saw his eyes close as though somehow the thought pained him. "It's terrifying to consider."

"It worked out well enough," Harry said, and he wondered if Sirius or Remus could hear the disgruntlement in his voice. "Voldemort's defeated, right?"

"Of a sort," Dumbledore murmured, speaking up for the first time. Harry ignored him, and Sirius even spared him a short, "Not right now, Dumbledore." Surprisingly, Dumbledore seemed to accept whatever reprimand was shot his way, only smiling with his usual contentedness.

"Even so, an underage wizard without full capacity of his magic against a Dark Lord and his minions?" Remus continued as though Dumbledore's interruption hadn't arisen at all. "You're lucky to still be alive, Harry."

"Well, lucky is my middle name," Harry said, returning his attention towards the puzzle in his hand. He kicked his legs slightly where they hung over the arm, but it did little to alleviate his annoyance.

Sirius chuckled as though they shared a joke. The brightness in his eyes hadn't faded since Harry had stepped into the room. He reached a hand out and knuckled Harry's knee, seeming entirely oblivious when Harry deliberately moved his legs out of reach.
"You've got a talent, Harry," Sirius said. "Always been magically strong. Just like your dad."

"Like you'd know," Harry muttered.

"What?"

But Harry only shook his head. _Like your dad_ wasn't equivalent to understanding Harry himself. If anything, it was simply frustrating.

"Still, it's probably a good thing you've decided to come back to Hogwarts, Harry," Sirius said.

Harry raised his gaze sharply once more. Decided? "What?"

"Your magic is still raw," Remus explained, smiling slightly. A little condescendingly, too, Harry's thought. "You still have much to learn."

"Spend the next few months cramming, eh, Harry?" Sirius said, knuckling Harry's knee again because he _clearly_ hadn't gotten the message the first time Harry had avoided the touch. "I could teach you a thing or two about school stuff."

"I'm sure it will be strange, returning to a school environment," Remus said, "but it must be nice to be no longer running anymore, yes?"

"And to see your friends again," Sirius said. "Ron and Hermione missed you, I'll bet."

"Should you need any assistance, Harry, any at all, please feel more than free to ask it of us." Remus gestured to himself and Sirius indicatively. "Either of us. We're always here to help. You know that, I'm sure."

Except when you're _not_, Harry thought, fingers tightening around the puzzle until his knuckles all but squeaked.

Sirius nodded. "Always. And maybe try and keep the mischief to a minimum." He winked conspiratorially. "Just for the time being, right, Harry? School's important and all that. Take it from one who knows, even if I never really abided by the rules myself."

Harry stared at him. Then he stared at Remus. He was the only person in the room whose attention didn't shift when the puzzle cracked and crumpled in his hands.

It would have been better had the conversation ended then. Or it would have been for Harry, at least. For each passing hour that followed, each passing minute, his longing to stand, to depart the room without a backwards glance, mounted only further. He didn't quite know why he didn't. Why didn't he just leave?

Maybe some affection still remained. Maybe, just maybe, there was a part of Harry that felt residual fondness for Sirius, his godfather and father's best friend, and Remus, his once-favourite professor and similarly a friend of his father's. Maybe that residue clung to him like a stain, even when, on a conscious level, Harry wanted nothing to do with them anymore. He'd moved on. He didn't _want_ that affection anymore.

No more Sirius and his reminiscing for his late friend. No more Remus with his kindly gaze that was slightly paternal but a little condescending, too. No Hermione, or Ron, or the rest of the Gryffindors that Harry had done his best to avoid. No McGonagall that dutifully retained her affection for Harry despite their nearly constant debates, nor Slughorn who seemed to have taken a strange liking to him, or merry little Flitwick or stoutly kind Sprout.
Harry was just… done. And when he finally managed to pry himself from Dumbledore's office, all but running from the room to the headmaster's called, "We'll speak again shortly, Harry," he didn't look back. Harry didn't want to see Sirius' hurt gaze that arose at the absence of a hug or proper farewell, nor Remus' quiet understanding of something that he didn't really understand at all.

*Stay at school. Do your work. Be a good kid and remain under the thumb of those who had proved ineffective in the past.* That was what they wanted. What they wanted. But everyone – professors, the ministry, and those who had once been important to Harry – didn't know. They didn't understand. They hadn't realised – yet.

The didn't know that Harry was different. He wanted differently, hated the confines he'd unwittingly escaped from years ago. And with Remus' suggestion that he 'knuckle down' and Sirius' rueful suggestion that he 'be good', the urge to do the exact opposite welled within Harry.

He was done with playing to others' whims. Dark Lords or members of the Light be damned, because he was done. In the wake of an unwanted confrontation, Harry strode away from a commitment that he hadn't agreed to in the first place.

Silence met Harry's words. Not that there had been all that many words anyway; he'd hadn't given Draco a blow-by-blow of the conversation. Why would he? And why would Draco want to hear it? A bare skeleton was all that was necessary.

Lying on his back and staring up at the night sky, at the flutter of magic roiling overhead darkened in imitation of what Harry couldn't really see, he released a swirling puff of glittery breath. It felt unexpectedly good to vent, if only a little bit. Draco might not welcome it, but he hadn't objected either, and it felt good. Good to just talk.

But, as was always the way with Draco, even the less aggressive and strangely companionable version of him, he couldn't remain in silence for long.

"I'm going to comment," he said.

Harry didn't bother to spare Draco a glance. "Is that a question or a statement?"

"Clarification," Draco said.

"Ah."

"Your godfather, my cousin, seems like —" Draco paused thoughtfully for a moment. "A bit of a dickhead?"

Harry was grinning before he realised it. He drew his gaze towards Draco where he'd sat himself against the balustrade as he often did, semi-reclined and glowing more vibrantly silver for the Warming Charm he'd draped around himself. "What gives you that impression? I hardly said anything about him at all."

"He compares you to your father."

"Lots of people do. Remus does sometimes too. And... other people."

"And those other people seem to have forgotten their past slights."

"What slights?" Harry said, more out of curiosity for Draco's opinion than because he disagreed. To many, the 'slights' might seem negligible, but they rung resoundingy to Harry. He was
surprised that Draco even considered them such; though they might be companionable, he had no reason to instantly agree with Harry's opinion. Besides, he'd barely even heard Harry's opinion to agree with in the first place.

Draco kicked at Harry with his outstretched foot, nudging his boot as he so often did in a demand for attention. "Don't play daft, Harry. He's a wanker."

"Noted."

"Shut up. You're looking for validation, anyway."

"Am I?"

Draco nodded. "That's why you told me in the first place, wasn't it?"

Harry stared at him for a moment, frowning, before drawing his gaze up to the sky once more. The hazy mix of sparkling, fluid navy, indigo, deep, deep scarlet, and something vaguely golden, was an enchanting mixture. Harry could lose himself in it almost as easily as he could in his thoughts.

He'd told Draco… he'd told him because…

Harry didn't think he sought validation. He'd never needed that – or at least he hadn't in the time he'd been alone. Why would he? Harry acted as he did because he wanted to, and at the end of the day, nothing that anyone could say would really mean anything. Short of breaking the law, Harry could do whatever he wanted. So he did. And most of the time, what he wanted was…

"Why do we do what we do?"

"What?"

Harry closed his eyes. "We're the same in that regard, I guess. You and me. Maybe that's why I don't find you as annoying as everyone else is."

For an extended pause, Draco didn't reply. The sounds of night, of distant birds in the Forbidden Forest and owls a little closer to home as they took flight from their owlery, were soothingly sedate. No people. No nagging. No questions.

Until Draco spoke, because Draco always spoke. "You don't find me annoying?"

Harry opened his eyes and tipped his head towards Draco once more. Not for the first time, he studied through the filtered reflection upon the past. The image he'd had of Draco for years, the one he'd barely considered because it was irrelevant to absolutely everything he was fighting through, had been one of sneering objection. Draco had been prim and proper, a pureblood in name and presentation, and a Slytherin to the core. Not quite aloof, because aloofness didn't entail embroiling in fights of the magical, verbal, and even physical kind variety but certainly superior.

And pretty. Harry remembered he'd been pretty, when he'd still had eyes to see him. Or maybe not quite pretty, because the sharpness of his features and his almost ghostly paleness might be better considered otherwise, but definitely something. Definitely interesting in a way that Harry hadn't quite appreciated in his younger years.

Now he was different, and not just because Harry couldn't visibly see him anymore. His silver-grey magic showed him enough, though – showed that he'd grown almost as much as Ron, though without the breadth Ron had acquired to invalidate his once-gangliness. Draco had never been gangly, but he didn't have quite the bulk that Ron possessed. Coupled with his eternal slouching,
his gave the impression of nothing short of a layabout.

But still interesting. From the fact that he was a bit of a scruff in a manner that Malfoy from the past wouldn't be caught dead embracing, to his disregard for the pettiness of those around him, Draco seemed more aloof as he was now than he'd ever been with his nose tipped into the air and a permanent snarl upon his lips that mimicked Snape's just a little too well. Draco was different, and changed, and –

And his own person. Or mostly. He didn't want and didn't act like others expected of him. Or he didn't most of the time. That 'most' resounded with Harry most profoundly.

"You're an objectionable arse, Draco," Harry finally said, propping himself up onto his elbows. "You're a disgrace to your family name – don't pretend you're not because we both know it –"

"I'm not denying it," Draco said, raising a hand with such careless disregard that Harry was sure his younger self would have flinched in horror. He couldn't help but smile for the thought.

"Right. So you hate your family now, or something?"

"I don't hate them, Harry. I don't hate anyone except –"

"Voldemort. Right." Harry nodded. "That makes sense. But you don't much like anyone, either."

"Very perceptive of you."

"Except for maybe Pansy and Blaise."

"Maybe. And only sometimes."

Harry turned his smile up to the sky once more. He really didn't find Draco all that annoying at all. Certainly not as annoying as he'd once been. "You dress like a slob because you used to do the exact opposite."

Draco grunted. "Your perceptiveness isn't so impressive that you need to state the obvious at all times, Harry."

"And you barely study because you once did, too," Harry continued as though Draco hadn't spoken. "And likely because you don't need to, either. You scare the other students because they're all a bunch of terrified sheep –"

"Very much so."

"- and you apparently have no drive for anything but getting to the end of school. Am I right?"

When Harry finished, he glanced towards Draco once more. This time, it was to see Draco regarding him with a slight frown. His foot rocked idly where it rested on the balcony floor, as though contemplating. "What are you suggesting, exactly?"

Harry shrugged. "I'm just stating the facts as I see it."

"And?"

"And nothing. Just wondering why we do what we do."

It took Draco longer to reply this time. When he did, he spoke slowly. "You're the same as me."
Harry nodded. "At least a little, I'd wager."

"And?"

"And nothing. I'm just stating a fact."

"Bullshit, Potter," Draco said, reverting to Harry's surname as he often did when he slipped into derogatory speech. Harry didn't like it particularly, but it rarely happened so he overlooked the annoyance. "You don't say things without meaning them."

"How perceptive of you," Harry teased.

Draco snorted. "What are you hinting at? What do you want?"

Harry pursed his lips, then settled for chewing on the inside of his cheek. What he wanted... was out. But if he couldn't do that yet, not without risking the Wizarding world forever hounding him, then seeking solace with a likeminded soul – about the only one Harry could stand in the school – was almost as good.

"I'm bored, Draco," he said. "And school's a bitch."

"You're just realising that?" Draco asked.

"We already established I've known it for quite some time," Harry replied, pushing himself upright to sit properly. "Let's do something about it."

Draco's expression didn't change. Not his expression, nor the rhythmic jiggling of his foot. But his magic brightened distinctly in a glowing flare. "What did you have in mind?"

Harry felt his smile spread once more. He was sick of people, those he'd known and believed they still knew him and the newer ones that thought they had the right to direct him in anything he did, but there wasn't much he could do about avoiding them. He didn't want to remain at school any longer, but there wasn't much of a chance of escaping it before the end of the term, anyway. Sirius and Remus' abrupt appearance had been just one push too far, and Harry realised in a clinical fashion that he needed an outlet.

"Play a game with me," he said.


Harry wasn't fooled by his words for a second. Draco's magic still remained bright. "Regardless. Truth or Dare, Draco. Are you up for the challenge?"

Slowly – deliberately slowly, Harry knew – a smile spread across Draco's lips. If possible, he slouched with even more languid grace than he'd been sprawled before. "Harry, you have no idea."

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked the chapter! If so, or if you have anything to say, please leave me a review to let me know your thoughts! I'd love to hear from you. Shout-out to all of the lovely people who've already left a review; you're all wonderful!
Hidden Truths and Daring Dares

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The dungeon was studiously quiet that afternoon. Draco liked it when it fell into such silence; he'd learnt long ago how tedious it was the endure the nattering of his classmates for hours on end. Draco liked Potions, had always liked it, but recent years had found him appreciating his classes in a way that he hadn't before.

The crushing of ingredients, the precise chopping, the scraping and pouring and stirring, counting each of those stirs in his head to make them just right… Draco might have disregarded much of his schoolwork for the irrelevance that it was – he likely wasn't even going to use his NEWTs for anything when he graduated – but Potions was different. It was always different.

Except for that particular day when it was even more different than usual.

As Draco chopped the last batch of his almond roots, an elbow nudged his side. Glancing sideways, he spared a moment to meet Pansy's shrewd gaze. Draco raised an eyebrow, and that was all the incentive Pansy needed.

"What are you smiling about?" she asked so lowly that even Draco almost missed the words.

He blinked. Had he been smiling? He hadn't even realised it. Raising his gaze, Draco drew glanced briefly around the room in a quick study to discern if anyone else had witnessed such impropriety. It took little effort to determine; Slughorn was at his desk, sipping on something that, to Draco's knowledge, wasn't exclusively hot chocolate but something else with a bit of a kick in it. His classmates were all frowning, or scurrying around their desks, or pausing in concentration as they worked on their own potions at various stages in the procedure. From a glance, Draco could see that Granger was a whole step ahead of him, though the slightly muddy tinge to her yellow potion would have been concerning had Draco found his own turning such a shade.

At his side, Pansy had just begun chopping her own roots; they often kept pace with one another, as much out of simple instinct as because they had a similar approach to their brewing. At that moment, however, Pansy had paused to stare at him suspiciously.

Draco shrugged. "I'm not smiling."

Pansy rolled her eyes. "Draco, dear, I can recognise such a hideous expression when it's spitting me in the face."

"Spitting?" Draco let his smile widen. "How unsightly."

"I wouldn't put it past you," Pansy murmured beneath her breath. She flipped the cutting knife in her hand in a manner that was just a little disconcerting given her propensity for threats of maiming. "What are you plotting?"

Draco scraped his roots into his cauldron, the ingredients plopping gently. "Plotting?"

"Yes. Plotting."

"I'm not plotting."
"Draco, you're always plotting something."

Draco couldn't help himself. He hadn't been expressly trying to hide his smile, only to deny its existence as his objectionable self demanded. But at Pansy's words, he felt it widen even further. "You know me too well, Pansy." Then, with as little restraint as he'd had for smiling, Draco glanced over his shoulder towards Harry.

Harry was sitting almost exactly as he'd been the last time Draco had peered his way – which wasn't saying much, given that he'd only looked across the room to Harry's table moments before. The amusement that welled within Draco rose once more. It always seemed to when regarding Harry these days.

That amusement wasn't because Draco was interested in him, though he was and didn't even attempt to deny it to himself anymore. It wasn't because thought of their conversations on the balcony, of the game they'd started barely a week ago, called forth a surprising upwelling of fondness. It wasn't even because Harry's deliberate disregard for Weasley, who persisted in attempting to sit beside him at every opportunity, or Granger, who tried to help him at every turn, was nothing short of hilarious.

It was, Draco knew, because he liked watching him. He liked to see what he did. Far be it from focusing upon finishing the school year without incident, distraction, or interference, Draco had found Harry to be an unexpected delight to observe. And it wasn't only because, just as he didn't deny his regard anymore, Draco admitted to himself that he very much liked what he saw. Harry had always been fit, in Draco's opinion. It was just a little easier to admit it now.

That day in Potions, however, Draco admitted his fondness for another reason entirely. Harry was leaning over his cauldron, arms propped atop the rim, and plucked at what appeared to be the mangled remains of a Scotch banana. Why he even had a Scotch banana Draco didn't know, given it wasn't necessary for the potion they were brewing that day, but he seemed wholly and solely attentive towards it. Much to Granger's distress, too, Draco had noted with further amusement. Harry disregarded her just as he did the rest of the room. Just as he had Slughorn when he'd asked just what the hell he was doing.

Harry blinked up at him, pausing in his peeling. "I'm conducting an observational experiment, Professor," he said with an expression so utterly bland that Draco had to question how he hadn't been Sorted into Slytherin.

Slughorn frowned at him with more confusion than disapproval. "An experiment, my boy?"

"It's enthralling, I can assure you," Harry continued, beginning his peeling once more and promptly dropping the skins onto the dungeon floor without utter disregard. "Truly fascinating."

"Mr Potter, today's Potion is the Enrapturing Brew, of which the Scotch banana has little consequence –"

"They have the same colour magic as the crab-fingers," Harry overrode Slughorn in that way he seemed capable of doing to all professors without contracting reprimand. "I think it's useful."

Strangely enough, Slughorn didn't any reply to that. Professors tended to grow a little unexpectedly lost for words when it came to Harry, Draco had noticed. Just as every other student did, for that matter. Maybe it was his fame, or what he'd done with Voldemort, or simply how he spoke with such surety and straightforwardness that it forbade argumentativeness. Draco didn't know, but he'd certainly grown to admire Harry's linguistic dancing skills over the past month. He might have even considered it a regret that Harry hadn't been Sorted into Slytherin had he still cared at all
about Houses.

When Draco glanced towards him for the nth time that class, Harry was still peeling bananas. From the modest heap of orange-pink skins on the floor, it was at least his third. Draco didn't really care what he was doing with them, or if he did nothing at all. It was the act itself that counted.

Just as Draco's would be. Pansy hadn't been wrong in her suspicions; Draco was always plotting something. It just so happened that this time, that plot wasn't instigated solely by himself. Turning back to his cauldron, Draco began mixing his brew once more.

"I suppose you'll just have to wait and see, Pansy," he murmured under his breath.

"Don't smile when you say things like that," Pansy muttered in reply. "It makes me question your sanity."

"Don't you already?"

"Well, it makes me question it more."

Draco smirked. He'd felt the upwelling of something akin to excitement growing within him throughout the entire class, and it had nothing to do with the Enrapturing Brew. Or at least very little to do with it. And Draco was nearly there. He'd been plotting, and he was nearly… nearly…

His potion roiled beneath his stirring rod, a faintly luminescent glow arising that was far superior to Grangers, in Draco's opinion. He took the moment to pause and reach for his cutting board once more. A shudder of further excitement tingled down to his fingers as he scooped up the handful of dandelion seeds, their feather-light weight nearly slipping through his fingers.

Draco spared a glance for Slughorn where he still sipped at his spiked hot chocolate. Then he glanced to Harry just as Harry dropped another skinned banana into his cauldron for Merlin only knew what purpose. Harry must have felt his attention rest upon him, for he glanced up just as Draco turned towards him and met his gaze. As always, despite his professed sightlessness, his eyes were widely intent behind his fringe. The wink he spared Draco was so brief that Draco doubted even Weasley – ever-attentive Weasley – would have noticed it.

"You're staring at Potter, Draco," Pansy muttered at his side.

Draco turned back to his cauldron, raising his hand above the brew. "Very impressive of you, Pansy. Your observation skills are remarkable."

"This is wrong. So wrong."

"Pansy –"

"What happened to our agreement, Draco?" Pansy's voice lowered once more, narrowing her eyes and staring at him keenly. "We have stipulations for this year, and one such rule –"

"It's not a rule, per se," Draco said, idly crumpling the dandelion seeds in his hand. He'd wondered when Pansy would bring up the obvious – that Draco wasn't remaining quite as removed from his fellow students as he and his friends had made the commitment to earlier that year – but… well, Harry was different. He was an exception.

Pansy's lip curled slightly, almost as though she'd heard his unspoken words. "You're becoming invested."
"I've always technically been invested in Harry Potter," Draco pointed out, because that much, at least, was true. That much Pansy wouldn't even bother attempting to deny, either.

Which she didn't. Sighing sharply, she gave a rather violent stir of her cauldron, sloshing its contents dangerously. "I know. Will you just get on with it and fuck him already? Get it out of your system, and then get yourself back on track."

Draco stared at her, hand of crumpled seeds dropping to rest on the rim of his cauldron. He slowly raised an eyebrow, hooding his eyes in the only way he could manage to smother the instinct to glance once more towards Harry. Maybe Draco might admit to himself that his friends weren't quite so ignorant as to presume a significant degree of lust on his part, but he didn't have to aloud. Just as Pansy hadn't had to so distract him with putting the thought into his mind.

As if you weren't already thinking it, Draco thought, and gave a mental shake of his head. That, at least, wasn't new to him. Even when Draco hadn't expressly liked Harry years ago, the notion of a good ol' hate-fucking wasn't foreign to him. Pansy's just assuming it's for the same reasons this time.

Shaking his head in actuality this time, Draco disregarded her words. He had something that was almost like friendship developing with Harry; hate-fucking wasn't much of a possibility on the table anymore. But more than that…

Are you up for the challenge?

Harry had spoken those words a whole week ago, and Draco had thought himself more than proving he was 'up for the challenge'. The dandelion seeds were just one more card laid upon the table of their game thus far.

The first in an actual classroom, though, Draco thought, and grinned. Then he opened his hand and dropped the seeds inside the cauldron.

To clamp his hand over his nose would have been too obvious. Draco simply stopped breathing instead. As his brew swallowed the seeds, stilled briefly, and then burped in an upward, yellow-tinted smog of vapour, he stifled his inhalations and let the wave of tainted air wash past him.

It flooded the dungeon. In an instant, pungent yellow air swept across every student. As Draco glanced over his shoulder once more, he was just in time to see Granger's eyes widen, Thomas sneeze profusely, and Bones nearly fall face-first into her cauldron before collapsing to the floor.

Thud.

Thud – thud.

Thud – thud – thud.

Like splatters of bird shit, bodies collapsed throughout the room. Eyes remained widened and open, staring open-mouthed as though captivated by an invisible wonder, and stirring rods, handfuls of ingredients, and cutting utensils clattered around them. Draco would have been at risk of laughing had he not been holding his breath.

Slughorn didn't succumb, which was a credit to his name. Despite the alcohol likely swimming thickly through his veins, he was on his feet in an instant. "Merlin, what's going on here?" he squawked, wand rising with his abruptly startled tone. Rolling to his feet, he was casting a protective dome around his own head and tottering from his desk towards his students who had all fallen to the floor with barely a surprised grunt. All of his students but Draco, that was.
And Harry. Of course not Harry.

Draco glanced over his shoulder towards where Harry had paused in the act of peeling yet another Scotch banana. He must have been holding his breath too, or maybe his magic that seemed to respond so sporadically and specifically had leapt to his support. Draco didn't know, but he was glad Harry hadn't collapsed on the ground like even Pansy at his side had. There was something decidedly satisfying about matching Harry's smothered grin with his own.

"What happened here?" Slughorn all but barked, for once sounding nearly angry.

Draco was forced to turn towards him as Slughorn cast a protective dome around Draco's own head. He drew a breath before replying, adopting an expression as regretful as he could manage – which wasn't particularly so, but Slughorn likely didn't expect it to be. "I believe it's my fault, Professor."

Slughorn huffed, his walrus moustache fluttering. The frown upon his forehead furrowed further. "What in Merlin's name were you doing, Malfoy?"

Draco gestured vaguely towards his potion. "I believe I misread the instructions, sir."

"You – you misread the –?"

"Yes, sir. Misread."

"You did?" Slughorn's eyebrows rose incredulously.

Draco nodded. That bubbling amusement welled within him once more, and it was nearly impossible to withheld it. Such a small thing… If Draco had known that something so brief could bring him such entertainment, he would have instigated 'accidental' disruptions long ago. Hogwarts was, after all, nothing if not a tedious trial. If he could alleviate that tedium even a little bit…

"As impossible as it is to believe, I admit that I must have erred." Draco sighed and glanced down at where Pansy stared dumbly at the ceiling. Maybe he should have felt a touch guilty for not warning her, but she likely wouldn't have for him had she been in his situation. They shared a hard love. "I regret that my Enrapturing Brew seems to have enraptured in a somewhat different manner to anticipated."

Slughorn's moustache waffled once more. He too glanced down at Pansy, then at Boot where he lay a table over, then Bones where she sprawled at the foot of her cauldron. Then he peered into Draco's brew and finally –

"Potter, you weren't affected?"

Harry, typically, had returned to picking at his bananas. He didn't even pause as he glanced towards Slughorn, only shrugging an absent shoulder. "Seems not."

"How would you -?"

"Must be the banana's, I reckon," Harry said. He dipped a hand into his cauldron and plucked out a fistful of the pink fruits. "They've got a pretty strong magical smell. Probably protected me from it, I'd say."

It was a blessing that Slughorn seemed to have grown momentarily enraptured by Harry, albeit in a somewhat befuddled manner, for otherwise he would have seen Draco's struggle to withhold his laughter. Harry was smart, apparently; he'd give him that. Smart enough to think of an excuse
before he even needed one.

Glancing sidelong at Harry from across the room, Draco met his gaze long enough to receive of his brief winks. A renewed flood of satisfaction rose within him, and Draco had to turn aside to avoid falling prey to the urge to laugh.

"I dare you to fuck up a Potion in class," Harry had said only the previous afternoon.

"You want me to mess up a potion?"

"Yeah." Harry had grinned at him from his perch upon the edge of the balustrade of the balcony. "Or aren't you game enough? And after I deliberately set Snape's robes on fire yesterday for your dare and everything..."

How could Draco pass up such a challenge?

So he'd done it. He'd done it, just as he'd done every other dare Harry had posed to him in the past week – bewitching Filch's cat into following McGonagall for a whole day, adding a mild Mania Potion to the professors' table's morning coffee, charming every tie in the school into plain blackness purely for the hell of it. This one was more deliberate, more noticeably his own work, and Draco felt pure delight for it.

Another point for me, Draco thought, dropping his chin as though in guilt that he couldn't be further from feeling. It helped to hide the grin spreading across his lips. Who knew Harry Potter could be quite so much fun?

Whatever Pansy had said about following their stipulations posed at the beginning of the year, about ignoring and avoiding and keeping their heads down as much as maintaining their aloofness, Draco had determined that much. He'd discovered he wasn't as firmly set in his intentions as he'd previously thought.

"Truth or dare."

Draco leant across the balustrade, arms dangling over the edge. The grounds were remarkably clear of fog that evening, the sky painted a glorious mixture of pink and orange beneath the puffy clouds, but Draco barely noticed them. Though his gaze rested upon the edge of the Black Lake that was no longer frozen beneath the weight of winter, his attention was solely for Harry.

"I'm feeling somewhat lazy today," Draco replied.

Harry snorted. "Aren't you always lazy?"

"Intentionally so," Draco said. "But still, your Dares seem to lean towards the energetic end of the spectrum most of the time. So Truth."

Harry's legs swung absently over the edge of the balustrade where he sat perched upon the edge. His audible, thoughtful hum puffed a breath of white fog into the evening air, an illustration of the persisting cold that his minimal clothing blatantly denied the existence of. Draco had never seen Harry cast a Warming Charm upon himself, but that wasn't entirely unexpected. Harry's magic seemed to just do things for him sometimes.

"Alright, then," he finally said. "Tell me: did you ever actually dob you father what happened every time you claimed you would when we were kids?"
Draco couldn't help himself. He dissolved into laughter. Dropping his chin until his head nearly brushed the top of the balustrade, he briefly closed his eyes, shoulders shaking.

"That's your question?" he asked, peering at Harry sidelong.

Harry shrugged, a hint of a smile tweaking the corner of his lips. It was almost conspiratorial, somehow knowing, and Draco found he quite liked that. "I'm curious. You always said it."

"No," Draco said.

"No?"

"I didn't tell him."

Harry cocked his head. "Ever?"

Draco shook his own. "Never. My father was an arsehole, Harry."

"Ah."

"Very pureblood in his ways, which largely entailed dominating the family and all within it."

"I see..."

"No you don't," Draco said, because he couldn't help himself. "You're blind."

Harry snorted again. At least he never took offence to Draco's admittedly cruel jabs. He hardly seemed to care at all but shrugged them off easily enough. "So he was an arsehole," Harry said, more of a statement than a question.

"Yes."

"Did you actually like him at all? From what I understand, most people are supposed to like their parents."

Harry's question went beyond the Truth he'd initially posed, but Draco found he didn't mind all that much. Surprisingly, Harry was almost irresistibly easy to talk to. Maybe it was the lack of pity – or disgust – he spared for Draco that did it. It was refreshing in a way that Pansy and Blaise's casualness didn't quite manage.

And besides, Draco thought, he's never had any parents that he could remember, and his relatives were arseholes too.

That much Draco had learnt from his own posed Truth barely two days before. The way Harry spoke with such nonchalance of being locked in a cupboard under the stairs for most of his life, or cooking and cleaning like a house elf without any of the satisfaction the creatures were rewarded with, or dealing with a bully of a cousin and, the worst in Draco's opinion, residing with people who belittled magic itself – it was all frankly horrifying.

It had changed Draco's view of Harry somewhat in a way that Draco had already known it was changing. It made him somehow relatable. In some ways, Draco almost felt obliged to tell Harry what it was really like to have parents, and that in some ways, it probably wasn't all Harry had cracked it up to be. Or at least it hadn't been in Draco's house.

"Maybe most people like their parents," Draco said, rocking forwards on his feet until most of his weight rested upon the balustrade. "They're probably supposed to. But pureblood families are, to
my understanding, somewhat different. A family is relevant because of blood-relatedness as much as affection. Usually more, for that matter. My father –” Draco paused for a moment before continuing with a click of his tongue. "Mother was alright, if a bit spineless. She caved to Voldemort when she didn't want to, after all. Father, on the other hand…”

"Was a snooty arsehole who mistreated house elves and considered himself nothing less than a prince among men?" Harry offered.

Draco scoffed, and mostly because it was true. That fact, and the reality that he didn't really care for his parents all that much if he anymore if he ever had, was a long-acknowledged fact. He held his tongue on the truth of the matter – that his father's mistreatment hadn't stopped at house elves, even if its extension was to a lesser degree. "Yes. That. Not exactly up to wholesome Weasley standards."

"Yeah…” Harry murmured, gaze turning distractedly out to the grounds. "I always found them a little weirdly wholesome, too. Far too affectionate."

*Maybe that's how families are supposed to be?* Draco didn't say, because such would almost sound like he was complimenting the Weasleys. Even as increasingly disregarding of his parents and family name as Draco was, some elements of his upbringing remained firmly embedded within him – such as a dislike for weasels.

They fell silent for a time, mulling over Draco's Truth and the words that had followed. Draco propped an elbow before him, dropping his chin into his palm, and heaved a sigh. Evening was peaking, painting the sky in deeper pinks and hinting at nightfall, but he felt no inclination to retreat indoors. Harry's company was comfortable in a different way to Pansy's or Blaise's.

*If only I'd known that years ago,* Draco thought to himself. *Maybe we wouldn't have been at each other's throats so often.* Then he banished the thought. Their fights had been what Draco had lived for some days; even had the offer of friendship been accepted all those years ago, Draco couldn't regret the years that followed. Besides, Harry had changed since. They probably wouldn't have really been friends anyway with who they'd both been barely a handful of years before.

*Me as much as him,* Draco thought, and felt himself smile. He knew he wasn't pureblood material anymore, and he didn't really care. The war had changed so much for so many people, but it had slapped Draco with the hard truth: that he didn't *want* to be a Malfoy, nor simply 'pureblood'. Not at all.

*I'm my own person, and I can choose to be whoever the fuck I want to be.*

Drawing his gaze sidelong as he could rarely help himself from doing, Draco considered Harry's, slouching comfortably as he was rapidly becoming swallowed by shadows. Those shadows were both a blessing and a curse; his watching became less obtrusive for the darkness, but it also made it harder to see Harry at all. And Draco had decided he liked seeing Harry. He liked it a lot, for that matter.

He shook himself from his thoughts a moment later, and mostly because, though he was looking barely short of intently, Harry wasn't attending to him in the same way. He often lost himself in thought, Draco had discovered. It was a little weird, and Draco withstood his obliviousness to benefit his own watching to an extent. But beyond that…

Draco did *not* like being ignored.

"Truth or Dare," he posed.
Harry blinked before slowly turning towards him. He raised an eyebrow. "Hm?"

_He's so out of it half the time_, Draco thought with a shake of his head. _I wouldn't be surprised if he admitted he was high for most of the day._ "Truth or Dare," he repeated.

A small smile played across Harry's lips in a thoroughly distracting manner. "I'll take a Dare, I think. Can't have you thinking I'm copying you."

"Perish the thought," Draco said, smiling himself. It was nearly impossible not to. Perhaps it was a good thing that, before Harry had reappeared, Draco had never seen him smile properly either. Or not at him, anyway. He didn't think he would be capable of replying in anything but the same manner if he had.

Still, much and all as Draco might like that smile – and quite a lot, for that matter – and he liked the Harry that was barely short of crazy just as much. _That_ Harry usually paid more attention to him. The notion of a Dare niggled at Draco demandingly.

"Do something crazy," he said promptly.

Harry's eyebrow rose higher. "Like?"

"Like the sort of thing that would give McGonagall a heart attack and make most of the school think you're insane."

Harry laughed. "I'm pretty sure they already think I'm insane for shunning them and talking about magic like I do. That, or that I'm very, very warped."

Draco shrugged. It was unexpected to hear Harry speak of his self-awareness, but not significantly. Warped he may be, but Draco was rapidly coming to the realisation that he was unexpectedly intelligent, too. "Does it matter? It keeps the clamouring hordes off your back."

"Most of the time."

"Yes, most of the time. And my re-routing skills manage for the rest."

Harry laughed again, tipping his head backwards to stare up at the sky. His hair spilled behind him in a dark, messy tail, and Draco had to curl his fingers upon themselves to withhold the urge to touch it. It was sorely tempting for reasons he couldn't quite define.

"Your re-routing skills?" he said.


Harry didn't retort himself but simply shook his head. Then he was climbing to his feet until he stood precariously balanced upon the edge of the balustrade. "Something crazy, right?" he said, gaze turning briefly down towards Draco.

Draco smirked. "If you think you can manage."

Harry grinned. "Challenge accepted."

An instant later, he was throwing himself from the balcony. In the midst of Draco's horror, to the sound of a shout he hadn't even realised he'd uttered, he found Harry's craziness the most glorious thing he'd ever seen.
As Draco stepped into the Great Hall, the sound of the usual inane chatter of hundreds of students washed over him. He was slightly earlier than usual, a fact that his sleepy mind still protested even nearly half an hour after waking. Draco wasn't a morning person, never had been, but it was a reality he'd only begun to embrace when the duty of a Malfoy – always proper, punctual, and prepared for the day – had been shrugged from his shoulders. Sometimes he didn't even make it to his first class for the blessed embrace of his bedsheets.

That day, however, Draco had to get up early out of necessity. There was a Dare to enact, after all.

Striding into the room, he wore all the casual comfort in his own skin that he possessed. A few heads turned, and then a few more, frowns as often as open incredulity crinkling brows. Draco ignored them, even if the response was quietly satisfying; he didn't need the attention anymore, didn't often enjoy the limelight for what it entailed since the war, but sometimes… sometimes that attention was certainly satisfying.

*Let them stare,* he thought. *At least it's for a better reason that usual, though I'd wager most would still somehow link it to the fact that I'm the son of a Death Eater.* The thought drew a scowl that was as amused as it was disgruntled, and Draco was content to see a Ravenclaw girl flinch and hastily turn away from him as he passed her.

Draco dropped into the seat alongside Pansy and immediately reached for the nearest jug of pumpkin juice. Unlike himself, Pansy had an unshakeable urge to be up and about at the earliest opportunity. Such often resulted in over an hour of attendance in the Great Hall. Pansy, Draco had long ago discovered, had an unshakeable distaste for missing out on any particularly tasteful morsels of interest. She outgrew the gossipmonger she'd once been, as much because her network of loyal informants had dissipated with the war and its entailed accusations as for any maturity on her part, but that distaste remained nonetheless. It simply meant that she was the primary gatherer of her own gossip.

Which, it seemed, she was content to put aside that morning for more important concerns. "Draco, what in the good name of Morgana are you doing?"

Draco plucked a piece of bacon from the plate before him, dodging the expected slap of Pansy's fingers. That she always responded to his 'slovenliness' in such a way was half of the reason he persisted with it. "Whatever are you talking about?" he asked.

"Your robes, dear."

"What about them?"

"Where are they?"

Draco smiled languidly through a bite of bacon. "I find myself disinclined to adopt the usual school attire today," he said.

Pansy regarded him flatly before dropping her gaze deliberately to Draco's clothes. "And the rest of it?"

Draco didn't deem her words necessary of reply. He was quite content with his choice of dress, for that matter. School robes had never been high on his stylistic preference list, and it was somewhat liberating to be without them, regardless of what school rules dictated of uniform standards in the Great Hall. Seventh years had always been afforded greater liberties. And as for his choice…

*Well, it wasn't expressly my fault,* Draco reasoned. *It's Harry's Dare, after all.*
"Draco, you appear to have climbed out of Potter's wardrobe," Pansy said flatly.

Draco's smile widened and he took another deliberate bit of his rasher of bacon. "Don't be ridiculous, Pansy. He doesn't have a 'wardrobe' of such; that would entail having clothes to actually put in it."

To say that Draco was quietly satisfied with his outfit would have been an understatement. He didn't bother with fashion anymore – it took far too much effort – and maintaining impeccable grooming standards tended to eat into his sleeping time. But the comfortable jeans and boots, the jumper charmed big enough for him and the oversized T-shirt beneath... Harry was definitely onto something.

And so, it appeared, was Pansy. She regarded him with her usual shrewdness, eyes narrowed. "You've been spending time with Potter," she said, a statement more than a question.

Draco took a sip of his juice. "What are you talking about?"

"Is that where you go every afternoon? To Potter?" Draco raised an eyebrow, regarding Pansy sidelong, and her eyes narrowed. "Are you really fucking, then?"

"You have far too much interest in my sex life, Pansy," Draco replied.

"Your business is my business, Draco," Pansy replied, her voice low enough to avoid the usual possibility of eavesdroppers. "If you're fucking some boy toy, I have the right to know."

"What's this?" Blaise's voice sounded over Draco's shoulder. "Are you up in someone's pants, Draco?"

How Blaise could hear Pansy's hushed words, Draco didn't know, but he somehow managed even at a distance. Draco had long ago discarded trying to understand it; Blaise simply had an ear for Pansy's every quip.

"You're both too invested in my sex life," he said, turning to glance up at Blaise as his friend drew alongside the table and dropped into the seat beside him.

If Blaise replied, Draco wasn't sure. He could hardly be blamed for his distraction, however; not when Harry abruptly fulfilled his own half of the Dare exchange. The rest of the Great Hall became suddenly trivial as Draco's attention fastened upon him.

Harry stood in the doorway, regarding the room though the flop of his fringe as ever. His hands were, typically, shoved into his pockets, and he was dressed in that one outfit that he similarly always seemed to wear, the one that Draco had charmed to mimic for his own Dare. There was nothing particularly remarkable about him. No more than usual, anyway.

Except for the fact that he stood in the Great Hall as he barely had since his first morning back at Hogwarts.

Harry was noticed, of course. The students of Hogwarts had a magnetised radar for his presence, one that Draco knew Harry himself found nothing short of tiresomely vexing. Faces turned and conversations muted, a rippling hush cascading through the hall. Or at least it hushed until a particularly abrasive Weasley leapt up from the distant Gryffindor table and frantically waved his hand.

"Harry!" he called, his voice echoing with delighted surprise and enthusiastic greeting. "I didn't know you were coming today. Over here, mate, over here!"
Whispers rose to almost the same volume that the previous conversations had reached, and Draco couldn't help but roll his eyes. He didn't pity Harry, exactly, but he knew what unwanted attention felt like, even if Harry's opinion on the matter was slightly different to his own. Harry didn't like any attention from the masses. None at all.

Draco could see it in the blankness of his face as Harry turned to glance briefly towards Weasley. It was possible that no one else perceived it, but to Draco, he saw what was almost a downward curl of touch his lips.

"I don't hate them," Harry had said in reply to a Truth three days before. "They're just annoying."

"Understandably," Draco had replied. "They're Weasley's and Mudbloods."

Harry had shot him a frown at the word that Draco would admit had been a deliberate jab but didn't otherwise express his disapproval. If anything, his wordlessness had been more effective that any reprimand could have been; Draco abruptly decided he didn't have much interest using that particular term anymore. It was, after all, a juvenile turn-a-phrase.

"I meant because they're the same as Sirius and Remus," Harry had instead continued. "They seem to forget that it's been years, and forget what they did before those years, and it's just…"

"Annoying?" Draco had offered, echoing Harry's earlier words.

"Yeah. Annoying."

Draco saw that irritation well briefly in Harry's expression and found himself raising his chin and a hand quite without realising it. "Potter," he called over the whispers of his surrounding housemates, "I trust you haven't forgotten our bargain?"

There was no such bargain, of course. Draco had Dared Harry to attend the Great Hall simply to see if he'd do it. And Harry had, even if he clearly hadn't – didn't – want to. There was nothing included about sticking around, however. Except that, when he glanced towards Draco, there was something akin to gratitude that so briefly eased the set of his shoulders that it was almost invisible.

Then Harry was skirting around the room in the opposite direction to the one every other Gryffindor had ever taken.

A bout of silence fell again before it erupted into more hissing whispers. Draco had the satisfaction of momentary limelight – and of a different kind than usual this time – and further smug delight for Weasley's stupefied incredulity. Only for a second, however, before he was forcibly pushing Blaise further along the bench away from him to make room.

"Move your arse, Zabini," Draco said.

Blaise appeared too surprised himself to be offended. "Did you just invite Potter to have breakfast with us?"

"Of a sort."

"Draco," Pansy said, her tone threatening. "What the bloody hell are you doing?"

"Enjoying myself," Draco replied with utter truthfulness. He certainly was, and more than he had in a long time.
"We have a deal, Draco, dear," Pansy said, her smile so twisted it barely resembled a smile at all. "To finish the year and avoid unnecessary distractions."

"I've all but got it tattooed on my back," Blaise said.

"Really?" Draco asked, glancing towards him in a subtle, sweeping glance around the room. Harry was nearly upon them. "I didn't know you had the balls to so defy your mother by acquiring a tattoo."

"Draco," Pansy said, her voice lowering even further and edged with threat.

"I know, Pansy." Draco turned back to her and smiling benignly. "And I haven't done you a disservice. This, however, I assure you, is entirely necessary. To me."

Pansy blinked at him, the curl disappearing from her lip, and Draco fathomed that Blaise's expression was likely the same for his sudden silence. "Necessary?" she echoed.

Draco nodded. He knew she understood. 'Necessary' as much entailed 'want' as 'need'. And Draco wanted. For all of his denials, his proclamations of otherwise, Pansy and Blaise both knew that much.

"We were right," Blaise murmured, as though he'd just read Draco's thoughts.

Draco ignored him but to raise a leg and – to the sound of Pansy's disapprovingly clicked tongue – kicking Blaise further down the bench. "I said move over."

"Bastard," Blaise said through a grin.

Draco ignored that too, though mostly because Harry was abruptly at his shoulder. The whispers still ensued, and Draco was certain that almost every pair of eyes in the hall rested upon himself and Harry, but he disregarded them. It was surprisingly easy to do so with Harry monopolising his attention.

Stepping over the bench, Harry settled himself at Draco's side. He immediately reached for the toast rack, though shot Draco a sidelong glance as he did so. "This is pretty fucking unpleasant," he said.

Draco grinned. "And yet here you are."

"I'm not a chicken-shit," Harry said with a snort that Draco noticed caused Blaise's eyebrows to jump to his hairline. "What do you take me for?"

Draco dropped his chin into his palm as he watched Harry stare down a Slytherin reaching for the butter bowl. Maybe he had been a little cruel to drag Harry into the Great Hall, but he'd never claimed to be a kind person. Besides, Harry owed him; after his leap from the balcony days before, plummeting before the castle's magic caught him midair, he owed Draco some recompense for the near heart attack that had struck him.

Not that Draco was thinking of such at that moment. He was content to ignore Pansy's pointed gaze, Blaise's increasingly rising eyebrows, and the stares of everyone else in the Great Hall, to instead watch Harry. Even more so when Harry glanced towards him with a slow, contemplative blink.

"You look fit in my clothes," he said offhandedly, taking a bit of his toast. "You should wear them more often."
Had Draco not already been smiling, he wouldn't have been able to stop himself. Pansy's muttered, "Bloody hell," and Blaise's, "Did he actually...?" were barely passing considerations. Draco might not care for appearances – or not anymore – but if it had Harry looking at him like that...

He could maybe find it within himself to wake up just a minute or two earlier to dress himself accordingly. Maybe.

"That's brave of you."

"Brave?" Harry pulled a face. "Call it lazy, if you would. I just can't be bothered to get up and enact whatever Dare you'd come up with."

Draco closed his eyes briefly, tipping his head back to lean against the balustrade. He'd taken to sitting on the floor of the balcony that day, charming the marble beneath him to emit a comfortable warmth, and leaning back against the barrier that served as little protection for foolhardy idiots that took to leaping over that barrier. He was blinking his eyes open to stare up at Harry a moment later, however. Increasingly of late, he'd found it a little difficult to look away.

For himself, Harry was straddling the balustrade with one leg dangling close enough to Draco that he could have touched it had he lifted a hand. Night had long since fallen, and the light of Draco's *Lumos* accentuated him in sharp lines and eerie shadows. He'd never really noticed it before in their past rivalry – or at least never acknowledged noticing it, despite Pansy and Blaise's words – but Harry was kind of...

*Breathtaking might be a bit of an exaggeration,* Draco chided himself, but he had to admit that 'attractive' certainly covered it. Even with his hair eternally obscuring his face, and his oversized clothing, and the scars that wove around his eyes, Draco could admit that much. He found he thought he might like Harry's hair a longer, and the fall of his sleeves over his hands was almost cute, and the scars around his eyes were... kind of pretty.

*Fucking hell, I'm such a sap,* Draco thought, shaking his head. What was his mind coming to, that it had caved enough to even allow such thoughts to birth? "Am I wearing off on you, then?" he asked.

"Hm?"

"Laziness is my middle name, after all."

"Really?" Harry said, tipping his head peer over the edge of the balustrade. "I thought it was after your father."

Harry's eyes seemed to glow a little at night, Draco had discovered. Maybe it was his magic that did it, the same magic that allowed him to see at all despite his blindness, but whether for that reason or something else entirely, when Draco had overcome his uneasiness for the sight of it, he'd grown to quite like it, too. They were changeably opalescent, a vivid green like the muted, discoloured mimic of Draco's *Lumos* charm.

Draco couldn't help but smile up at him, though it was almost more of a smirk. *Who'd have thought I would be willingly smiling at Harry Potter?* "You know my middle name?" he asked, and he could hear the smugness in his own voice.

Harry swung his leg slightly so it butted Draco's shoulder. "It doesn't take huge powers of deduction to guess it."
"Still. You know my middle name."

"Draco –"

"You know it," Draco all but purred. He flicked Harry's foot as it butted him again. "For someone who claims to disregard the world at large, I'm flattered that you would take so much interest in me."

"You shouldn't be," Harry said. "And I never said I disregarded the world."

"You've more than insinuated it."

"I think I'm actually something of the Wizarding world's poster boy at the moment."

Draco chuckled. "Yes, I have seen the Prophet of late."

Harry arched an eyebrow. "Really? You still keep up with that bullshit?"

"I have to know my enemies."

Harry uttered a quiet laugh before leaning forwards until he was lying flat upon the balustrade. His leg slowed its swinging until it rested lightly against Draco's shoulder. "Whatever. What's your Truth?"

"Hm," Draco pondered, frowning as he thought. What to ask… He'd learnt more of Harry with his 'Truths' than he'd ever thought possible to learn in the past week. He'd learnt of his home life – or his once-home life – and drilled him for information upon his magic which, regardless of explanations, remained almost as baffling as it ever had been. He'd learnt of how Harry had defeated Voldemort too, which was just as confusing.

"His magic didn't like him," Harry had said simply. "He used too much Dark. It wasn't much of a struggle to encourage it to abandon him."

"You asked Voldemort's magic to abandon him?" Draco had asked slowly, not quite believing his own words.

Harry had shrugged. "Of a sort. I guess he could get it back if he repented enough, but…” Another shrug, and that had been the last of that Truth. Draco still had questions, of course, but it would take another couple of Truths to get to the bottom of it.

"How do you talk to your magic?" was met by, "The same way that I talk to anyone. Just to, you know, my magic."

"When you say that Voldemort was abandoned…” was finished by Harry's prompt, "It pretty much turned its back on him. Yeah, he's a bastard. Maybe even worse than your father, Draco."

And finally, "How did you even learn to do any of that? Did someone teach you?" had Harry replying with his usual nonchalant shrug and the words, "I've picked up a lot over the years. Self-reliance and all that."

Draco had a plethora of questions to pose about those years. He simply hadn't gotten around to asking them. Yet, he thought to himself, then straightened a little in his slouch against the balustrade. "Okay, I've got one."

"Then please, share it," Harry muttered, absentmindedness thickening his voice. "I'm breathless to
"Breathless... That particular word had rather specific connotations that Draco had dwelled on increasingly frequently of late. He shrugged the thought aside for the moment, however, raising his hand to flick once more at Harry's leg.

"What were you doing for the past two years?" he asked.

Harry was silent for an extended pause. It was so long that Draco eventually tipped his gaze upwards once more to meet his slightly luminescent eyes. Harry blinked slowly, then shrugged with similar slowness before resting more completely upon the balustrade, cheek pressed to the sandstone and arms dangling on either side just as his feet were. He looked like a cat on a tree branch.

"Just stuff, I guess.

"Well, that's expansive," Draco drawled. "Say no more."

Harry snorted, his lips curling with a smile. "What do you want to know, exactly?"

Fiddling idly with Harry's bootlaces, Draco shrugged. "Where did you go after you ran away from those bastards who called themselves your relatives?"

"Hm..." Harry hummed and fell silent. He continued after a pause. "I train hopped around for a little bit. Security is ridiculously easy to bypass in the Muggle world when you have magic."

"I heard you didn't bring your wand with you," Draco said, frowning.

"Of course I didn't," Harry replied. "I'd likely have been traceable if I had. But I still had my magic."

He's got a weird relationship with 'his magic', Draco thought, not for the first time. "Right. So you worked out how to use wandless magic pretty quickly, then?"

"Sometimes. I didn't have to use magic for all that much, actually."

"What? Why?"

"Because I have incredibly developed social skills and people just love me and give me things."

Draco was laughing even before Harry finished speaking, and a glance towards Harry once more found him grinning himself. "You have shit social skills, Potter."

"I know."

"Always have."

"Yeah, I know."

"Honestly, if you didn't have that bloody scar, I doubt any reporter would take a second look at you."

Harry poked at the top of Draco's head with a jab of a pointed finger. "Well, apparently some people like me. I was put up for a bed and breakfast for free more times than I bothered to count."

"That's because people feel bad when they see a starving kitten," Draco said. "It's an instinctive
"response. They can't help it."

"Even you?" Harry said curiously, his head tipping slightly where it rested.

"Kittens are adorable, Harry. Don't you forget it."

Harry laughed quietly. "You're actually a sap, aren't you, Draco?"

"Never," Draco said with a sniff, but there was no vehemence to his words. He found that, unlike in the face of the rest of the world, he didn't care if Harry knew his supposed 'weaknesses'. Pansy, for one, had discovered his fondness for all things small and clumsy a long time ago. So long as it wasn't a house elf – because those creatures would always be disturbing – Draco found himself partial to melting before them. It was a very un-Slytherin reaction, but then, Draco didn't truly care all that much about being Slytherin anymore, either.

"So where did you go?" he prompted Harry again, tugging on his bootlaces once more.

Harry had closed his eyes – a regret, but not worth commenting upon – and sighed with another hum. "I train-hopped."

"Yes, you already said that."

"Made my way up north and out of London," Harry continued as though he hadn't heard Draco. "Pretty much right off the bat I had people tailing me. I wasn't sure for a while if they were Death Eaters or ministry reps or whatever, maybe even just Muggle policemen, but…" He paused, shifting slightly. "Got to this place outside Cambridge – this woman at a pub offered me a bed for the night – and that was the first time I actually fought someone. That's hard to do without a wand when you're not familiar with the logistics, but wasn't so bad. Came out of it relatively unscathed."

"Some random woman put you up for the night?" Draco said with deliberate slowness. "Just like that?"

"She said something about the fact that I looked pathetic and desperate," Harry murmured. He cracked an eye open briefly and smiled down at Draco before closing it once more.

That brief glance was enough to warm Draco almost as much as the heated marble beneath him. *What the fuck have I become?* he thought to himself, then brushed the thought aside. "No particular favours asked, then? I call bullshit on that."

Harry laughed. His finger poked at the top of Draco's head again, and Draco surprisingly found he didn't mind it so much. Had anyone *else* done it… "No, she didn't ask me for any 'favours'. She was just being nice, I guess. Besides, she was at least four times my age –"


Harry laughed again, and Draco couldn't help but smile smugly. No one else in the school made Harry Potter laugh, though that fact was only half of the reason it felt so good to be responsible for it. "She didn't. I swear. And I only actually consistently slept with one person as anything even resembling a 'favour'. He put me up for about a month, but I think he thought we were actually dating for most of that time, so that's different. Other than that, there was this bloke who I think saw himself as something like a father figure to me, and this girl who was barely older than I was…"

Draco barely heard Harry as he continued. His mind had stopped functioning from the moment Harry mentioned he'd actually fucked someone who'd given him a bed to sleep in. That was…
unexpected. That the Boy-Who-Lived and all-round pure Golden Boy who was only recognised as being something not quite so pure upon his reappearance – he'd actually… that he'd all but prostituted himself…

A different kind of heat spread through Draco, and he found himself scowling before he realised it. There had to be something very wrong with him that, at the mention of such necessary measures, his first response was envy. Sharp, hot envy that bordered on bubbling anger. Draco clamped down upon it with an iron fist.

It's not like they were dating, he told himself as Harry continued to speak of the second instance of his Death Eater confrontations. Harry even said they weren't; only that the guy thought so. And what the fuck is wrong with me that I'm so focused on that?

"Because you're hot for him, you bloody idiot," Pansy's voice muttered in Draco's ear, so clear and precise that Draco wouldn't have been surprised to find she'd abruptly appeared beside him rather than existing as a phantom presence. "It's so obvious. Surely you're not that oblivious."

"All that sexual tension between the both of you," Blaise's phantom voice sounded in his other ear. "So much for being enemies. I should have laid money on this. Should've guessed it."

Shut up, the both of you, Draco thought at his imaginary annoyances, and they subsided with snickers. Draco forcibly shoved their words – and the trigger for their existence – from his mind just as Harry's own registered once more.

"… bloody explosion right in my face that took my eyes out," he was saying, and a glance up at him saw his hand rise to rub absently at one closed eye, fingers tangling momentarily in his fringe. "It was a good thing that my magic had already started syncing up with me more by that stage. It wasn't too much of a leap to start seeing with magic rather than my eyes."

Draco regarded him, his fingers still locked in Harry's bootlaces. There was no denying it now. Not at all. Draco was, if not smitten, significantly invested in lusting for Harry Potter. It was just a little shameful, for he didn't like the thought of being driven by his libido rather than his mind, but the fact that he actually enjoyed Harry's company soothed him a little. It was the mental stimulation, at least a little.

Even as realisation of that appreciation sparked, something unexpected rose within Draco. "Some bastard cast an Exploding Hex right at your face?" he said flatly.

Harry blinked his lambent eyes open. "Yeah, pretty much."

"Who?"

"Dunno. Some arsehole Death Eater."

Draco tugged at Harry's boot. "Do you remember what they looked like?"

"What?"

"The person who shot at you."

"Huh?"

Draco sighed. "Honestly, Harry, I know you're oblivious half of the time, but please try and keep up with the conversation. If you could tell me, then I could make sure to kill the fucker if I ever see them."
Harry stared at him, a slight frown touching crinkling his forehead. His hand drifted down to poke at the centre of Draco's forehead once more. "Are you actually being protective? Of me?"

Draco frowned in return. "Is that wrong?"

"Dunno. Just unexpected, maybe?"

Draco sighed again. "Potter," he said deliberately, "given that I would consider us almost something like friends," and not more, unfortunately, "it's not irrational for me to be protective of you. I might have little regard for my family anymore, but the people that I choose?" He raised an eyebrow and said no more.

Harry regarded him, still frowning. He opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again to speak. "You..."

Draco waited a beat before prompting him. "What?"

"You see me as a starving kitten, don't you?"

For a moment, Draco could only stare at him. Then he burst out in a bark of laughter. Oh, if only you knew. "Yes, Harry. That's exactly how I see you."

"Knew it," Harry muttered. "That's so un-Slytherin." Then he sighed himself. "Okay, Draco: Truth or Dare."

"You've hardly answered my Truth yet," Draco said.

"There's not much to tell. Ran around all over the place, slept on benches as often as strangers' couches, fought Death Eaters." Harry shrugged. "Unremarkable."

"Unremarkable, my arse..."

"Besides, I've got one for you."

"One what?" Draco asked suspiciously.

Harry smiled. "A Dare."

"I didn't specify whether I wanted a Truth or a Dare."

Harry's smiled grew taunting. "Well, you could always just deflect, I guess, and ask for a Truth. But then you'll just never know what my challenge is. It's up to you."

How could Draco pass up such an opportunity? He'd never been good at ignoring Harry's challenges. "Alright, then," he said. "Tell me."

"Dare?"

"Dare."

Harry pushed himself upright until he was straddling the balustrade once more. "I Dare you to do the most un-Slytherin thing you can think of."

Draco pushed himself off the wall too, twisting so that he was looking directly at Harry for the first time in over an hour. "That's your Dare?"
"That's my Dare. You always say you're not so much a Slytherin anymore. Prove it."

Draco regarded Harry for a long moment. He liked it when Harry smiled, even if there was a hint of victory to it. It reminded him of their old rivalry, if from a different angle. That realisation – of just how much he truly liked Harry smiling – only added to what Draco had been growing to realise with increasing clarity over the past weeks.

Prove it, Harry had Dared him, and Draco was fairly sure he would have taken aboard that challenge even if it hadn't been a part of their little game.

It didn't take much effort to call forth an idea, and within seconds Draco found himself smiling slowly too. "Alright, then. I've got an idea."

"That was fast," Harry said, swinging his free-hanging leg over the balustrade until he was facing Draco directly. "Is it actually a good one?"

"The best one," Draco said. "But, as it happens, it'll need your help."

"My help?" Harry arched an eyebrow, until it disappeared beneath his fringe. "This is your Dare, not mine."

Two can play at this game, Draco thought. He folded his arms casually, slouching where he stood. "Are you saying you won't take up the challenge, Harry?"

Harry knew what Draco was doing. Draco could see it in the widening of his smile, the sudden brightening of his eerie eyes. It didn't stop him from falling prey to the taunt, however, just as Draco had done days before. "Bring it on, Draco."

The moment Draco stepped into the common room, a hush fell. He didn't mind. If anything, that hush was quietly satisfying. Draco used to revel in being at the centre of attention, but that revelry had decidedly faded over the years as such attention became tinged with aggressive distaste. This, however – this kind of attention he could get used to again.

It was late, so the common room itself wasn't intimately crowded. The majority of first, second, and third years had already retreated to their dormitories, and a significant proportion of older students had clearly sought their beds too. The ring of leather couches around the greenly-flickering fireplace were only half occupied at most.

It was enough, however. Enough to make a scene. Enough that, when eyes turned towards Draco in recognition before widening with surprise, he could indeed revel in the moment.

Whispers silenced. If nothing else, Slytherin House was more capable of holding their tongues when the scene warranted it. It was, naturally, Pansy who spoke into that silence.

"Draco," she said, straightening in her seat alongside a desk of discarded textbooks. "What exactly do you think you're doing?"

Blaise rose to his feet from the chair at her side and regarded Draco with the same surprise that held everyone else in the room suspended. His surprise, however, hadn't yet shifted into an expression of horror. "Draco," he said, curiosity rather than the threat of Pansy's words touching his tone. "What the fuck is this?"

Draco smiled complacently. He opened his mouth to reply, but before he could say a word, a fifth
Draco regarded her. He stared unblinkingly, eyes hooded, until she slowly lowered her arm. He remained staring until, with a scowl, she sunk back into her seat, shoulders hunched. Only then, to the persistent staring of eyes, did he glance over his shoulder.

Harry was dragging his gaze around the common room with nothing but mild curiosity. He might as well have stepped into the midst of a sedate, welcoming party rather than a nest of prim and pompous snakes too big for their boots. As Draco watched him, his eyes skimmed over the fireplace, the students seated around it, the clusters of desks, and the expanse of bookshelves across one wall, before pausing briefly upon the stone steps that descended towards the dormitories. Then his gaze drew towards McConnelly and he raised an eyebrow. "Is that some unspoken rule? About Gryffindors?"

"Of course it is," someone said immediately.

"Other Houses definitely aren't allowed here," said another.

"Especially Gryffindors."

"They can't –"

"They shouldn't be –"

"It's not –"

To the sudden revamping of voices, Draco turned more fully towards Harry and all but ignored the room and its students. His smile widened. "I take it I've completed my Dare, then?"

Harry glanced at him. "This is the most un-Slytherin thing you could think of?"

Draco waved a vague hand towards the sea of students rapidly raising their voices in indignation. "Can't you hear their collective distress?"

Harry grinned. "Alright, I'll give you that. Although," he edged around Draco, stepping more fully into the room. The scrape of the brick wall entrance rumbled behind him as it closed. "You might have to choose a better Gryffindor. I don't think I really count anymore."

"Nonsense," Draco said, following after him. He kept his voice clear and resounding enough that those around him would certainly be able to hear his words. "You have a history of being a Gryffindor, and the Gryffindors themselves still consider you one of theirs. Why shouldn't you be deemed as such, even if you've left such a heinous past behind you?"

Harry paused alongside the desk next to Pansy and Blaise, seemingly oblivious to Pansy's intent stare and Blaise's visibly growing curiosity. He'd seemed similarly disregarding of their increased attentiveness to him over the past days, which had indeed heightened. Pansy especially seemed to have made it her duty to watch him like a hawk for reasons Draco didn't care to consider.

When Harry glanced towards Draco, however, he forgot about Pansy and Blaise entirely. They could have been entirely alone in the common room for all he cared, because when Harry smiled at him like that, Draco hadn't much interest in anything else.

"I suppose," Harry said, leaning back against the table. "Except that I was almost Sorted into
Slytherin, so maybe I'm a little less Gryffindor than the everyday Weasleys of the world."

He'd spoken loudly enough to be heard by more than just Draco, but Draco didn't even glance
towards the owners of the surprised gasps and renewed whispers. He felt his eyebrows rise. "What
was that?"

But Harry had turned away from him again to nod an absent greeting to Draco's friends. "Blaise.
You're looking remarkably fish-like with your mouth hanging open like that. And Pansy – hating
me as fervently as ever, are you? You're positively radiant for it."

"Only always, Potter," Pansy said, though she sounded as though she spoke in a stupor.

"Wonderful," Harry continued. "At least I know where I stand." Then he promptly plopped into the
nearest chair as though he was entirely comfortable with the situation. Draco knew it was a farce,
because Harry didn't like being around people, but he admired the pretence nonetheless.

*He'd fit in well with us,* Draco thought, considering less the Slytherin House as a whole and more
the trio of people before him who were, by and large, the only three at the school he had time for.
*Maybe when Blaise manages to actually close his mouth and Pansy overcomes her 'hatred', we
could make something of this.*

He didn't speak as such, however. Instead, Draco slumped into a chair of his own and deliberately
ignored the whole of the common room for the rest of the night. No one would bother them, he
knew; it had been more surprising that McConnelly had stood up to him at all. Draco, Pansy, and
Blaise were 'the seventh years not to be messed with'; and even if they did suddenly pull a
Gryffindor – or a sort-of-Gryffindor – into their midst, there was no denying them their wants. Not
at all.

Draco settled himself into a surprisingly comfortable evening thereafter, pondering the strange turn
of events his year had taken. Harry's arrival, his Truth or Dare game, his revelation of his less than
holistic Gryffindor tendencies… and the mention of one particular lover that still sat upon the
edges of Draco's thoughts, niggling infuriatingly.

He abruptly found himself with more Truths than he'd thought himself inclined to ask, and found
was looking forward to unveiling them. Draco didn't like to be ignored, and he didn't like to remain
ignorant almost as much.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you so, so much to all of the lovely people who've commented already. It
has been SO wonderful to hear from you all, and to recognise the familiar faces
(faces?) each chapter. Thank you all for your absolutely beautiful words, and for
keeping up with the story. I'll see you next chapter!
Harry was having a shit day. Surprisingly, because more often than not over the past few weeks, his days hadn't been all that shit. With his navigation of the less used corridors, his persisting use of the kitchens to avoid visiting the Great Hall, and his evenings on the balcony where he still slept most nights, he could almost escape the discomforting attention of the professors and student body.

But that day? Utterly shit. Ron's words at the end of their final period for the afternoon, however, were the part that really added the cherry on top the shit-pile sundae.

"I heard rumours that you went down to the Slytherin common room," he said barely seconds after the bell sounded. "What the bloody hell is all that about?"

Harry only withheld the urge to sigh and deliberately dismiss Ron's words with a struggle. That morning had been one hassle after another: the house elves were particularly picky in the kitchen, and then Draco had shown him an article in the Daily Prophet that put out a reward of sorts for 'anyone who can obtain an interview with Harry Potter', like he was a particularly rich treasure trove to be discovered. Then McGonagall had pulled him aside with a gesture after a decidedly ridiculous lesson of Transfiguration.

"Potter," she said, voice low and intense, "I just wanted to make you aware that the headmaster has informed the staff of a number of particular… unsavoury individuals lurking outside Hogwarts' wards."

Harry stared at her. A sudden tightness squeezed his gut that wasn't quite fear but was certainly discomforting. Death Eaters? Was that it? Had they decided to take revenge for the incarceration of their lord? Harry hadn't felt fear for Death Eaters in years, but it was concerning nonetheless.

"Who?" he asked flatly.

McGonagall blinked, drawing away from him slightly. For reasons Harry couldn't fathom, she still seemed a little surprised when he spoke to her like a human being rather than a subservient student. She gathered herself quickly enough, however. "Reporters," she said. "And they're growing increasingly demanding, at that."

Harry sighed and briefly closed his eyes. "Bloody fantastic," he muttered.

"Potter," McGonagall began, a hint of reprimand to her tone.

"Thanks for the heads up, Professor," Harry said, turning from her and starting from the room after the tail end of his classmates. If she was going to reprimand him – for cursing, or dismissing, or anything else – he didn't want to hear it. "I'll make sure I deprive myself of any further vitamin D by remaining indoors for the rest of my life."

He left her calling sharply in his wake.

Then came the letter from Sirius, owl-borne and about three hours after the post was supposed to arrive. It wasn't unexpected, as Sirius' mail assaulted Harry at least every second day. What was worse was the owl that delivered the second note from Dumbledore requesting a spontaneous meeting.
P.S. I have a taste for treacle toffee at present.

So Harry went, because if he didn't, Dumbledore would likely hound him down for the rest of the day. He stepped into the office and was turning on his heel to leave again less than five minutes later. Surprisingly, with his head bowed and grumbling silently to himself, Harry nearly walked headlong into Draco two corridors away. It was only his magic tingling like a puppy pricking its ears that alerted him to his proximity.

"You look to be in a fine mood," Draco said, his silvery magic pulsing with amusement.

Harry scowled. "Dumbledore's being an arsehole."

"Unsurprising," Draco said.

"I know. Still, he could at least pretend to be something other than a complete twat."

Draco laughed, and regardless of the edge of teasing to the sound, Harry felt just a little lighter for it. He found himself liking Draco's company more and more of late, which was surprising given that Harry didn't really like anyone all that much. Even those he'd spent up to weeks with over the years – strangers that had become almost friends before falling back to the status of strangers once more – hadn't been more than convenient company. Even Les, who Harry had spent nearly a whole month with, faded into disregard given time.

But Draco stuck around. Surprisingly, he persisted, despite the lack of anything defined between them but an entertainingly extensive game of Truth or Dare. Maybe it was his laugh, or the fact that he didn't treat Harry like a bloody idol. Or it could have been the way his eyes shone just slightly when he smirked, or that he seemed to have as little consideration for the learning institution and its student and staff body as Harry did.

Or it could have been his magic. Harry liked his magic. It was a nice colour; somehow warm and cool at the same time, and always seeming to glow just a little brighter when they played their game, even in the absence of actual magical conduct. Harry felt he could almost properly see Draco when he glowed like that.

It was likely that unexpected comfort that had Harry sighing and admitting as he did when Draco asked what the headmaster had said. "He wants me to help him hunt down Voldemort's soul pieces or whatever."

Draco's magic flared in surprise as his eyebrows rose. "What?"

Harry flapped a hand at him. "It was some fucked up magic Voldemort did. Totally messed up his own magic, mind, which is probably part of the reason it so readily abandoned him. But anyway – long story short, his soul's evil, broken into pieces, and Dumbledore wants to find those pieces and collect them or destroy them or whatever to defeat Voldemort properly."

Draco regarded him. Confusion settled visibly upon his features, but Harry barely noticed. His frustration for Dumbledore had arisen from where it had briefly mellowed, and he was thoroughly distracted. He scowled at his feet.

"What the fuck does that mean?" Draco asked, drawing his attention once more.

Harry glanced towards him. "Huh?"
"Soul pieces? Voldemort broke his soul apart?" Draco shook his head slowly. "That's really fucked up."

"Tell me about it," Harry agreed, and the shiver that dribbled down his spine wasn't foreign. He'd felt the taint upon Voldemort's magic as he'd suppressed it and channelled it free. Whatever Dark magic Voldemort had done was very fucked up indeed.

"So what?" Draco continued, his unease twitching his magic as he folded his arms across his chest. "Dumbledore's planning on collecting and destroying them?"

Harry nodded. "Apparently."

"And he wants you to help?"

"Yeah. Apparently."

"But… why?"

Harry threw his hands into the air. "I have no fucking idea! Why does he need my help?"

Draco nodded, his incredulity faded from its initial stupor into commiseration. Draco was good like that; he seemed to take Harry's at times insuppressible blabbering of trivialities – or not-so-trivialities – in stride. "In my opinion, I think you've done enough to stop the war, actually."

"Thank you," Harry sighed. "At least you're speaking sensibly."

Draco smiled, and it wasn't quite as smug as Harry knew he could manage. Silver magic played over his lips, impressing briefly into the barest shadow of a dimple in his cheek, and that in itself was somehow soothing. Harry was always eased by magic in some way or another.

"I'll take that as a compliment," Draco said, his chin rising slightly.

And there's the expected smugness, Harry thought, but he found he didn't really mind so much. Not anymore.

It was only in the pause that followed that Harry actually realised Draco was alone. He glanced over Draco's shoulder, mildly surprised that Pansy and Blaise weren't tagging alongside him. They usually did except for Draco's visits to the balcony. "You're alone."

Draco glanced over his shoulder too before turning back to Harry. "That's very observant of you."

"Shut up," Harry said, absently poking Draco's shoulder. "I just meant – were you looking for me?"

If Harry had expected Draco to disregard the notion immediately, or at least make up an excuse, he was sorely wrong. Draco nodded readily enough. "I was. Come on, I'm going down to the kitchens for lunch."

"Why?"

"Because our stupid classmates are driving me insane."

"What happened?"

"They're stupid," Draco clarified, as if such explained everything. Which, at least when it came to Draco, it kind of did.
That lunch hour was about the only part of Harry's day that wasn't insufferable. Charms was boring as all hell, and even worse because Flitwick honed in upon him when he noticed Harry all but falling to sleep. "Mr Potter, would you like to attempt the charm yourself?"

Harry raised his head from the desk, regarding the little man vaguely. His gaze flickered momentarily to the rest of the students where most were periodically conjuring flame into existence before them with wordless magic before extinguishing it once more. It was, in Harry's opinion, an utterly redundant use of magic. Conjuring flame wasn't so hard, and Harry hadn't really needed to speak an enchantment in years, but that kind of practice? It was a disservice to magic to use it in such a way, even for the sake of knowledge. Harry would have balked at the thought even if his own magic hadn't already grumbled its discontent.

"No," Harry said, scrunching his nose. "I can already do that."

"Practice makes perfect, Mr Potter," Flitwick said in a way that was about as merry as a scolding could be.

"Yeah, but it also wastes magic."

"Magic cannot be wasted," Flitwick began. "It is an endless well –"

"Just because its endless doesn't mean it can't be wasted," Harry overrode him.

Flitwick blinked, his frown furrowing in confusion. "Potter, such a thing makes no sense at all. Why, the very concept of endlessness entails…"

And thus had begun a lengthy lecture that had Harry thoroughly bored and increasingly disgruntled. Flitwick thought he understood magic, just as every other professor did, but he was wrong. He had no idea. The way Harry saw it, the usefulness of magic was about on par with a helping hand; so long as help was asked for, it could be endless, but just because repeated askance would always offer that help didn't mean that the hand it came from didn't tire of fulfilling inane wants. "Make a fire. Now extinguish it. Now make it again," could only be repeated so many times before even the most patient grew weary of the request.

For it was always magic that wearied, Harry had discovered. Not the caster so much, as he'd been taught in his younger years, but the magic. That was something that no one else seemed to quite understand, despite it being so bloody obvious.

As such, Harry was already in a decidedly disgruntled mood when Ron rose from his desk and skirted the table to plant himself directly before Harry the second Flitwick dismissed the class. The question he posed seemed almost a tattletale. It took all of Harry's strength to withhold the urge to scamper from the room and leave Ron without reply.

But he didn't. Because Harry wasn't a bastard – or he wasn't most of the time. Or not sometimes. Occasionally, he had the capacity to not be a bastard. Maybe.

"They're not just rumours," Harry replied to Ron's askance. "It was only the once. Just a couple of days ago."

Ron visibly paled and, over his shoulder, Harry could see several other Gryffindors who'd clearly been eavesdropping turn with similar expressions of horror. "What? You went into… into the Slytherin…? Harry, that's –"

"A cardinal sin, I know," Harry said, and very nearly rolled his eyes at Ron's wide-eyed expression. "Blasphemy is my middle name."
"But…" Ron glanced to his side where Hermione had appeared, her eyebrows drawn into a frown behind her glasses that were only vaguely visible to Harry's eyes. "But you haven't even been to Gryffindor Tower yet, even though it's been weeks. How could you go to the dungeons before coming back to your own common room?"

Harry had to bite his tongue to withhold the retort that threatened to spill from his lips. That maybe he didn't really want to be around his old friends. That maybe Gryffindor Tower didn't suit him anymore. That maybe, even if the dungeons didn't quite suit him either, it was marginally more comfortable than his old common room.

"You fit in almost as well as we do," Draco had said idly the evening that Harry had shared with he and his friends in the dungeon. "Which is to say not particularly well, but adequately enough."

"Maybe you do have a little Slytherin in you, Harry," Blaise had said, already adopting Harry's first name in a mimic of Draco. Blaise was a remarkably affable bloke.

Unlike Pansy, who was a bitch. A bitch that Harry found surprisingly amusing, but a bitch nonetheless. She'd shown her colours with her own muttered words. "Good things come in threes, you know. Not three plus a puppy."

Draco had laughed at that, which had paused Harry in his own retort long enough to swallow the words that bordered on a curse. It wasn't only because Draco's laugh was kind of nice to simply listen to. The pause reminded Harry that he wasn't sure Pansy would ever recover from his magic taking up the unwitting suggestion of turning her into a puppy herself.

Still, even with Pansy's bitchiness, Harry considered he'd likely feel far more comfortable in the Slytherin dungeons than Gryffindor Tower. But he'd deterred Ron, Hermione, and all the rest of his old housemates long enough, and with the way the day had gone already, Harry considered it couldn't get much worse by ticking that box.

"Alright," he said. "Whatever. Do you want me to come up to your tower this afternoon, then?"

The change his words brought to the face of every Gryffindor in the room was instantaneous. Hermione beamed with a glow of caramel-coloured magic, and Ron's smile was so wide it seemed almost to stretch beyond the boundaries of his face, shining vibrantly yellow in a way that seemed to quiver the sparkles of his own magic. The cluster of additional Gryffindors grouped around Harry in decidedly disconcerting closeness an instant later.

"You're coming up to the Tower?"

"Awesome, mate!"

"It's been so long!"

As Harry was shepherded from Charms class, he managed only the barest glance over his shoulder for the almost desirable sparseness of the classroom he left behind him. Only a handful of students remained, and the predictable ones, at that. Harry saw Blaise, peering after him, wearing an expression of mixed amusement and something like sympathy, Pansy for once not smirking but seeming almost to wince in commiseration, and Draco…

Draco gestured up to the roof, at just the right angle to point towards the balcony floors above. How he managed such accuracy without being able to see the magical presence of their balcony through the walls, Harry didn't know, but he understood the message.

*I'll be up there after dinner, like always. Come and vent.*
Harry appreciated the offer, even as he marvelled that, in the whole of Hogwarts, it was Draco Malfoy who was the person that helped him to retain what was left of his sanity. He never would have thought it. Harry didn't care much about the past and old histories and rivalries, but he still wouldn't have expected it.

The trail towards Gryffindor Tower was dotted with bright footprints of magic. Gryffindors, Harry had realised weeks before, glowed with a different kind of brightness than other students. It was, he'd decided, because they were, by and large, a little crazy. Too vibrant. Too energetic. Too enthusiastic, too, and it seemed to echo in the colour and vigour of their magic. Walking in their midst, Harry was nearly blinded by the upwelling of excitement that surrounded him.

That was to say nothing of the Tower itself, though.

Brightness was everywhere; in the fire that flared somehow more vividly than that in the Slytherin dungeons. In the tall windows charmed to deflect the spring chill fogging the glass. In the thrum of voices and magic practiced by students throughout the room, the impressions of more footprints smearing the floor and leaving colourful shadows in seats and upon cushions. And that was to say nothing of the students themselves.

They were so, so bright, it hurt Harry's head, and that brightness flared even more upon his entrance. Voices crashed into him.

"Merlin! Harry?"

"It's Harry! Harry's here!"

"No way, really? He finally came?"

"Oi, come down! Guess who's here!"

It was almost as though the past weeks in which the hype and excitement had substantially died were forgotten. Harry had gritted his teeth and withstood the worst of it until it had died; to be so slapped in the face by Gryffindor enthusiasm once more seemed infinitely worse because of that reprieve.

Standing just inside the common room door, Harry weathered the mayhem that gripped Gryffindor Tower with a churning babble of voices and a roiling rainbow of movement. It seemed that every Gryffindor had abruptly and impossibly Apparated into the room, and their over-bright colours, the excitement seeming to seep from their pores, battering Harry's every sense, magical and otherwise.

"I can't believe he's actually here," shouted a boy who looked young enough to be a third year as he led the charge down the dormitory steps. A trail of other third years followed after him, all adding their own shouts to the mix.

"We've been waiting for you, Harry!" someone Harry vaguely recalled as being fifth year said as she and her two friends stumbled to their feet from the rug before the fireplace, all but skipping across the room towards him.

"About time!" Seamus said from Harry's side, as though he was only then fully appreciating the supposed unexpectectedness of Harry's arrival. As if he hadn't just accompanied Harry back from Charms class himself. "This deserves a celebration, I reckon!"

Harry didn't like the sound of that.

Not that he got a chance to voice his opinion on the matter. Amidst too many hands touching his
arms, more hands slapping his back with jarring welcome, and the cacophony of voices that only seemed to mount with each passing second, Harry beheld what did appear to be the initiation of a celebration. A suspiciously fluid descent into celebration, too, the likes of which seemed to have been prepared for an eventuality rather than a possibility.

As Harry was tugged - horribly tugged; he didn't like being touched by so many hands – into the tower and towards the ring of couches at the fireside, ribbons and banners and streamers were strung. Someone unearthed an old wireless that crackled and protested at being used before it began to stutter with music. Fairy lights, the likes of which more resembled actual fairies and _Lumos_ charms than any kind of electric bulbs, erupted into the air like floating will o' wisps, illuminating the room in more bright sparks of magic that assaulted Harry's Sight.

People. Sounds. Hands, and smiles, and so much magic battering at Harry that he could barely keep a hold of his senses. It all seemed to happen so abruptly, so suddenly, and as he was pushed into a couch with Ron and Hermione squeezing into the seats on either side of him, it was to be handed a flagon of Butterbeer a second later. Where had the Butterbeer come from? And the tray of cookies that was thrust upon him a second later, or the bowl of popcorn or handful of sweets that emanated such a suspiciously magical colour that Harry wouldn't have partaken even if he'd felt the urge to eat. They were likely magic sweets. Very suspicious.

People.

Sounds.

Too much touching, and too many voices to actually make out any of the questions flung Harry's way.

"– so many questions to ask –"

"- so surprised when you first appeared –"

"- didn't know where you'd gone –"

"About You-Know-Who? Is it -?"

"Blimey, Harry, it's good to have you here."

Harry regretted coming. He'd known it would have to happen eventually, because Gryffindors were nothing if not tenacious and demanding in that tenacity, but he regretted it nonetheless. Wedged as he was between his two old friends, the friends that were, surprisingly, the least objectionable people in the room, Harry regretted just about every decision that had led to his being drowned in too many sounds and smells and touches, his head aching from the waves of magic crashing over him in too many colours.

Why had he caved to the ministry's order to return to Hogwarts? Why had he allowed himself to be carted by that bloody Inquisitor bastard into a past he'd left behind him? Why did he stay at the bloody cemetery after Voldemort had been suppressed, his magic locked comfortably where Voldemort couldn't reach it, rather than disappearing before the Ministry arrived?

And just as importantly: why was Harry playing to everyone's whims? He'd decided, years before, that he wasn't going to do that anymore. When he'd fled the Dursleys, he'd made that commitment to himself, if not in so many words, and he'd largely stuck to it. When each couch or borrowed bed had been offered for a further night, Harry had turned down the offer because he didn't want to be tied down. When a Muggle family suggested that he would be more than welcome to live with
him indefinitely, he'd turned and walked out their door, because he didn't want that.

Harry didn't play to other people's desires. Why had he allowed himself to this time?

Twisting the flagon of Butterbeer in his fingers, Harry hunched his shoulders and endured. The celebration continued at a backbreaking pace, but after minutes – or was it hours? – the squeeze of bodies around him seemed to ease like a stretched rubber band. There were still too many people on the couch Harry sat upon, enough to make it uncomfortable. There were even more students seated on the rug before that couch than Harry ever remembered seeing in the past, but most of them had turned to speak amongst themselves. Even those whose conversations still revolved around Harry seemed to be more intent upon their words than attending to him.

Harry was, he'd discovered over the weeks, an icon. Not a person so much anymore, but an image. That was likely where the excitement arose from, and it added a bitter taste to Harry's mouth.

"You alright, mate?"

Blinking, Harry glanced sidelong towards Ron. His old friend was wiping at a smear of Butterbeer atop his lip but otherwise seemed entirely intent upon Harry. How long had he been staring at him? Harry wasn't sure. He'd discovered – since he'd been at Hogwarts mostly, though he'd known a little bit before that, too – that he wasn't particularly attentive to those around him. Draco said he 'zoned out' sometimes, and Harry thought it was a rather apt description.

"What?" he asked.

Ron gestured to Harry's Butterbeer. "Not to your taste? You used to scull that stuff just like the rest of us."

A glance around the spread of students surrounding them – still too closely, but no longer stiflingly – Harry saw that the flagons of Butterbeer only just visible to his magical Sight were indeed being 'sculled' and refilled at an alarming rate. He felt his lips twist in distaste. "Mm."

"What?" Ron asked. "What does that mean?"

Harry pulled a face. "No, not to my taste anymore."

"What do you like, then?" Hermione asked from his other side.

Harry shrugged. "I'm more of a gin and tonic kind of person, have to admit. Butterbeer's too sweet."

Apparently, only Ron and Hermione were really attending to him enough to hear his words, for Harry suspected that most of those around him would have similarly fallen into wide-eyed horror at his words. "Harry," Hermione stage-whispered, almost too quietly to be heard through the surrounding din, "that's alcoholic."

"Hermione," Harry stage-whispered back, "you're a legal adult."

"Seventeen is --"

"He's right," Ron said, though his yellow eyebrows were still raised high in his own incredulity. "You always forget that, Hermione."

"Oh, you'd know that, would you?" Hermione said, leaning around Harry to shoot him a glare. "Because you know me so well."
"I know you well enough," Ron replied.

"We hardly spoke for a whole year before Harry came back to school."

"Doesn't mean I don't know you."

"Oh, be quiet, Ron."

"I should be quiet? What about –" Ron cut himself off and glanced towards Harry. "Sorry. Didn't mean to start that up again."

Harry raised his gaze towards Ron in return. "What?"

"That."

"That." Ron gestured between himself and Hermione. "I've noticed you don't like it when we argue."

Hermione sighed at Harry's other side. "I've noticed it too," she said. "Sorry, Harry."

Harry blinked. He didn't like it? What gave them that impression? Truthfully, Harry didn't care all that much beyond a mild annoyance that they should just overcome their angry-flirting and bloody well hook up. It was so obvious that Harry almost felt the urge to announce to their faces what they must at least suspect for themselves.

But mostly, Harry didn't care. He really didn't, and that was the crux of it. Ron and Hermione, despite holding a prominent place in Harry's past, simply weren't important enough to warrant such care anymore. They attempted to sit with him in class, but they studied and did what they were told – or Hermione studied while Ron procrastinated – while Harry withheld his frustration for professor and curriculum stupidity. They still asked him to accompany them to the Great Hall at least once a day, and Hermione to the library more than once a week, but they didn't seem to expect Harry's compliance, and that was about all Harry deemed worthy of consideration.

He just… didn't care anymore. What had given Ron and Hermione the impression that he did?

Shrugging again, Harry swirled his flagon until the faintly honey-coloured liquid fizzled in a whirlpool of residual magic. "I don't really care."

"No," Hermione sighed. "It's wrong of us. We shouldn't always be arguing around you. It's just…"

She paused, her own gaze dropping to her Butterbeer. "It's hard, Harry."

Ron nodded. "Yeah. It kind of is."

"What?" Harry asked, confused.

"Us being together again," Hermione said. "After so much time has passed, it feels… strange."

"So much time," Ron echoed fervently, as though he spoke of a century ago rather than only two and a half years.

Harry stared at him. Then he glanced back towards Hermione. For that moment, despite their still-abrasive noise, the rest of the common room's occupants faded into negligibility. The magical assault upon his senses still throbbed in Harry's temple, but he pushed it aside for a moment.

Only two and a half years… It really wasn't so long, but then, Harry had changed significantly over that time. He'd learnt that he didn't have time for people he didn't care about anymore, and that he wasn't prepared to overlook betrayals in the past when to turn in such a direction took more effort
and forgiveness, more dredging up of disregarded wrongs, than Harry was prepared to give. Ron and Hermione, Sirius and Remus, Dumbledore, the Weasleys, Ginny who sat on the rug a little ways away and Neville at her side, the professors that still considered him an ignorant student who obediently absorbed their words like a flower would sunlight…

Harry didn't care about them. He wasn't prepared to look back into that region of the past, and even less because that past would only be relevant for a little bit longer. Harry didn't have the time or the energy for people who simply didn't matter anymore.

Loneliness was a problem, had always been a problem, but Harry had lived with it his whole life. He didn't need a well of people to attend to him and listen to his every word. He didn't need a family of hundreds, blood-related or otherwise. Harry still got lonely, had been lonely countless times over the past years, but that hardly mattered either. It wasn't a bad lonely, and Harry was prepared to wait for the right kind of person to alleviate it.

Like Draco. Draco was strangely, unexpectedly, a good kind of alleviator. Harry didn't need to forgive the people he'd left behind, the people that he still resented just a little, when he had a sort-of friend in Draco. He didn't need Ron or Hermione anymore, and didn't much want them, either.

Except that, for the first time, Harry realised that the pair of them might not have been as frozen in an unchanging stasis since he'd left as Harry had suspected. They seemed intent upon embracing a past that Harry no longer cared for, but the same? No, Harry didn't think so. Not anymore.

Maybe they weren't so insufferable after all. If nothing else, they were likely the most sufferable people in the overloud common room.

"You alright, mate?" Ron asked again, and it was only then that Harry realised he must have been zoning out again. How long had it been this time?

"What?" he said.

"You get lost in thought quite often, don't you?" Hermione said, her lips sparkling slightly with a pulsing glow of her magic as she smiled. "You never used to be quite so pensive."

"Pensive," Harry echoed.

"She means thoughtful," Ron clarified.

"No shit, Ron," Harry said, and didn't bother withholding a roll of his eyes. His momentary burst of esteem for his old friends faded more than a little. Do you honestly think I don't know what that means? Just because I missed two years of school doesn't make me illiterate.

"I suppose we've all changed quite a bit," Hermione continued as though neither of them had spoken. "We've all got our own lives and directions. While yours is likely the most exciting, Harry, you're not the only one who's been through a lot over the past few years."

Harry turned slowly towards her. She still smiled, but there was no demand in her smile anymore. That, at least, was worthy of acknowledgement. Hermione and Ron were members of only a few people in the school who seemed to have abandoned the urge to repeatedly ask Harry where he'd been and what he'd been doing since he'd 'disappeared'.

Ron chuckled. "Yeah, you can say that again. Who'd have thought I'd actually get a little bit skilled in Charms?"

"You're not that skilled," Harry said before he could help himself.
Ron laughed again. "Well, not as good as Hermione, of course, but apparently good enough for Fred and George. You know they've offered me a job in their joke shop, right?"

*That wasn't the kind of skill I was referring to,* Harry thought to himself. If Ron was considering Hogwarts-style Charms then he was correct in thinking himself 'a little bit skilled'. To Harry, it was all a load of bollocks, but he supposed Ron could be proud of himself for that.

He smothered the urge to explain what no one in the school seemed quite capable of understanding, and nodded. "Yeah, you told me about that."

"They're pretty fantastic," Ron said, grinning. "And even better, they've actually put some of my ideas into production."

Harry nodded again. He was aware Ron was essentially the third twin – or had become one over the past years. He supposed he might even be a little happy for Ron for that fact. Harry wasn't so cruel as to be unable to feel a hint of supportiveness for someone who truly wanted something. Not much, admittedly, but a hint. "Cool," was all he said before, in an attempt to distract from his lukewarm enthusiasm, he poured the entirety of his Butterbeer into Ron's flagon.

"I think so, too," Hermione said, speaking over Ron's murmured gratitude for the fobbed-off beverage. "I mean, I never saw you as one to be an inventor, Ron, but if it makes you happy, it suits you."

"Thanks, Hermione," Ron said, beaming with a brightening of vivid yellow magic in pure satisfaction. "Not quite as impressive as you –"

"Oh, I'm not impressive," Hermione said, burying her own smile in her Butterbeer. Not that it did much to Harry's Sight; he could see the brightness of it through the flagon anyway. "Not really."

"So being a lawyer isn't impressive?" Harry asked. He twitched slightly as someone unexpectedly touched his foot, pulling his leg up onto the couch before him and wrapping his arms around his knee. "Isn't that the internationally acclaimed 'smart person' career?"

Hermione flushed, a swirl of caramel magic welling in her cheeks. "I believe that would be doctoring," she said, awkwardly tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. "But thanks. How did you know?"

"Know what?" Harry asked, drawing his other leg up to his chest as someone touched his lowered foot. *Keep your sodding hands to yourself.*

"That I wanted to be a lawyer."

"It's pretty obvious, I guess."

"Is it?" Ron asked. "I sort of thought you'd end up in the ministry as an official or something."

"She reads criminal justice books, Ron," Harry sighed. "It's Francis Hargrave's law tracts at the moment, isn't it, Hermione?"

"Y-yes." Hermione stuttered, blinking slowly as the flush of caramel magic faded from her cheeks. "I didn't realise you'd noticed."

Harry sighed again. Just because he wasn't invested in a friendship with her anymore didn't mean he was utterly oblivious to her habits. Not as much as Ron apparently was. Or was it perhaps that she, like most of the school, still questioned Harry's declaration that he wasn't as blind as his eyes
made him seem?

"Huh," Ron said. "I sure as hell didn't."

"Of course you wouldn't, Ron," Hermione said, then turned deliberately away from his as he began to grumble a reply, affixing her brightening gaze upon Harry. "What about you, though, Harry?"

"What about me?" Harry asked.

"What do you want to do after school? I confess that I'm not nearly as observant as you are; I haven't noticed any particular inclinations you have. Maybe you'll go into magical theory?"

It was such a strange discussion to be having with people that Harry didn't truly know so well anymore. Or, more correctly, it was a strange situation to be having that discussion in. The noise still reverberated around them, and rainbow-bright swirls of movement skittered across Harry's periphery as students rose to their feet and sat back down, some disappearing briefly into the dormitories while others appeared moments later. A cluster of juniors had begun a dance party of sorts before the crackly whine of the wireless, more Butterbeer – and Firewhisky, Harry noticed from the noticeably darker coloured beverage – flowed freely. Spells flew, laughter sounded, and the Gryffindors were behaving very typical of Gryffindors.

It was, as Seamus had declared it, a celebration. Harry was rapidly realising, as he'd suspected from the moment it began, that it was less of a celebration for him as a victory dance of sorts, as well as taking any excuse to party.

"Harry?"

Blinking, Harry drew his attention back to Hermione. "What?"

Hermione stared at him for a moment, the touch of a frown niggling her brow. Then she smiled slightly. "I just wondered what you were thinking of doing after school let out?"

Oh. She was still awaiting an answer to her question. Sometimes – and much to Draco's very vocal annoyance – Harry knew he absently overlooked questions when they felt less than relevant. Apparently he'd unconsciously done so again.

He shrugged. "I don't know," he said. "Haven't thought about it."

"But…" Hermione faltered for a moment, frown deepening and magic flaring with a different kind of light. "But we're in seventh year. You should be thinking about that kind of thing."

Harry bit back a sigh. And there goes any thought that they might be slightly more tolerable than I'd thought. "I honestly don't really care."

"You could come and work in the joke shop," Ron said, leaning into Harry enough that Harry couldn't suppress the urge to lean away from him in turn. "I'm sure Fred and George would be happy to have you."

"Or you could be an Auror," Hermione said before Harry could reply. "You've got the experience with fighting Dark Arts, and you've always been naturally talented in Defence. You'd make a wonderful Auror, I think."

That experience would make becoming an Auror the last thing I'd want to do, Harry thought but didn't manage to say, because abruptly a voice interrupted them. "What's this? An Auror?"
Harry glanced over his shoulder to where someone – a sixth year girl he didn't know the name of – leant too closely over the back of the couch. He shifted away from her in turn as she turned a smile with far too much familiarity towards him. "Are you going to be an Auror, Harry?"

"What?" someone else asked, catching onto the girl's overloud words. "Is Harry going to be an Auror?"

"Really?" Ginny straightened where she sat on the floor. "Are you really, Harry? That's so cool!"

Harry edged a little away from the anonymous sixth year girl as she casually cropped her elbows onto the back of he couch. "I don't –"

"I think being an Auror's pretty impressive," Seamus said to the agreeing nods of those around him. "Dean and me, we were thinking about that after school. Right, Dean?"

"My brother's in Auror training at the moment," someone said.

"Yeah, my mum used to be one until a couple of years back," said another.

"Trust, that you'd be one too, Harry."

"Kind of predictable, right?"

"Ha! Could you think of a more perfect job?"

Harry's attention jumped from speaker to speaker, from a rose-coloured head to lips of sparkling beige as they spouted stupid words. From a hand that grazed through green hair to pale blue eyes brightening with excitement as they blinked to their friend's words, "You're practically the hope of Wizarding kind in beating the leftover Death Eaters, Harry. Pretty much, right?"

How the focus turned so abruptly to Harry once more he didn't want to consider, but he didn't like it. Maybe it was the topic on hand that was so apparently interesting, or maybe the irksome sixth year girl had just spoken too loudly.

For whatever reason, if Harry hadn't already been disinclined to becoming an Auror, the sudden enthusiasm for the possibility that he would be would have surely dissuaded him. "What a load of bullshit," he found himself muttering.

"What was that?"

Harry glanced towards Hermione where she leant towards him. A number of other eyes drew his way at her attentiveness, but Harry deliberately ignored them. Why in the world had he thought he had to take a visit to Gryffindor tower? God, he was a fucking idiot. "I said," Harry raised his voice slightly, "that I think someone like you would do a better job of being an Auror than me, Hermione. They're law enforcers too, you know."

Hermione blushed, but the surrounding smatter of laughter and crows of disbelief smothered her delight for the redirection of his words. "Not likely," someone said, and Harry didn't turn in the direction of the voice fast enough to catch who had spoken before another person continued.

"Hermione's a book nerd."

"Always in the library, she is. A studier, not a – a –"

"Athletic person?" someone offered.
"Yeah," the boy that had spoken agreed. "That."

"She's really smart," a girl so tiny she had to be a first year said. She flared with a magical glow of glaring, embarrassed purple as gazes swung towards her. "Well, she is. She always helps me."

"Hermione wouldn't make a good Auror," Lavender Brown said, appearing at the arm of the couch beside Ron. She blinked white-blue eyes in wide earnestness. "Everyone knows she's a massive nerd."

"Yeah," Parvati said, seeming to spring into existence at her side. Her magic, like Lavender's, seemed to glow all the brighter for the attention that her interruption brought her. "I mean, she'd got the get-up and everything."

Lavender snorted into giggles echoed by those around them. "Totally, right?"

"Totally," Parvati agreed with a grin.

"Custom-length skirt –"

"Sensible shoes –"

"Messy hair –"

"And Hermione, you know you always, always have ink on your fingers."

Hermione, Harry noticed when he glanced towards her, was blushing again, if for a visibly different reason. To his Sight, her magic seemed to contract, drawing into itself. "I have noticed," she said primly, chin rising even as the colour didn't fade from her cheeks even slightly. "And I personally don't think it's a problem."

"Neither do I," Ron muttered, to his credit.

"Add the glasses on top of that," Lavender continued as though Hermione hadn't spoken at all. "You're practically a nerd wrapped up in a handbasket, right, Hermione?"

"Right," Parvati said, still grinning brightly. Her golden-yellow gaze turned towards Harry seemingly irrelevantly until she spoke. "It's a good thing you don't wear yours anymore, Harry. We could hardly have two bespectacled seventh years. What a fashion scandal that would be!"

For a moment, Harry was stunned. It was stupid. All of it was so stupid. He didn't know how the conversation had arisen, and likely wouldn't be able to track it if he tried. The juniors at the wireless still danced, the few sixth years continuing to add fairy lights to the air still cast, and the seated Gryffindors around Harry's couch still sprawled without any indication that they were likely to move shortly, but for all of that and the supposed 'celebration' that ensued, to Harry's eyes the scene abruptly changed.

Lavender and Parvati had always been giggling girls with seemingly little enough brains between them, and they clearly still were. As little brains seemed to infect the rest of the Gryffindors that snickered and openly laughed, smiling indulgently or muttering, "Each year has its token representation," as though such was a fact communally accepted.

To Harry's ears, it all rung discordantly. He suddenly wanted nothing more than to leave the bloody tower with its too much noise and too much crazed magic. But he found himself speaking despite himself. "What's that supposed to mean, exactly?"
Parvati, momentarily turned towards Lavender, glanced his way once more. "What?"

"Is there something wrong with wearing glasses?"

"Other than the fact that everyone associates it with being nerdy?" Seamus called from the opposite couch with a grin.

Harry couldn't help but scowl at him, and it had nothing to do with the fact that Hermione's magic shrunk slightly further at his side. He didn't care _that_ much for his old friends – little enough at all, really – but such a thing was so unutterably stupid that Harry's tongue was speaking again before he could help himself. "Are you a fucking idiot, Seamus?"

A lull met his words. Seamus' smile died slightly, and so too did those of the smattering of students around him. Harry didn't care. He didn't even care that Seamus had likely been speaking offhandedly, just as Lavender and Parvati had. They weren't bad people – just stupid. And Harry didn't hate them, because he didn't really hate anyone but those who'd tried to kill him – but they annoyed him.

Stupid people.

Stupid Gryffindors.

Stupid, fucking idiots who spoke without using their minimal brains. It set Harry's teeth on edge, a fact that wasn't made any better by the already irksome day he'd had and the headache that pounding with increasing ferocity in his temples.

Gazes turned towards Harry, more with each moment, until even the juniors dancing awkwardly before the wireless slowed in their motions. The tower, if only briefly, seemed to freeze, and Harry didn't care that he'd destroyed their enjoyment. Not at all.

Seamus attempted a grin once more, though it failed a little dismally. "Harry, it was just a joke."

"Yeah, calm down, mate," Dean said, frowning from the cushion at Seamus' side.

"Yeah, I know," Harry said, swinging his legs down from the couch. "Fucking hilarious."

"It wasn't directed at _you_," Lavender said, her magic dulling slightly in much the way that most of the vibrantly coloured students around her did. Harry found he didn't mind that he was upsetting the Gryffindors all that much; the reprieve from the overwhelming vibrancy was a blessing. Harry hadn't ever thought he would need a break from magic, but…

"Why are you so upset, Harry?" Neville asked in a small voice. "We're just having fun."

Harry rose to his feet. "Yeah, well, I'm done. This has been _so_ much fun but –"

"Wait, are you leaving?" Ron asked, straightening in his seat and reaching an arm seemingly unconsciously for Harry.

Harry all but flinched out of his reach. He could feel frustration welling within him, and he didn't even think it had to do with the glasses comment anymore. Had it ever? He wasn't sure. All Harry knew was that he was kind of pissed off and wanted to get away from the tower.

"Yeah, I reckon," Harry said. "This has been a blast and all, but –"

"Where are you going to go?" Ginny asked, piping up. "Where _do_ you even go every afternoon?"
"Yeah, I've wondered that," anonymous student number thirty-something said. Harry didn't think he would ever dredge up the care to learn their name. "Seamus and Dean and everyone in the boys dorm say you don't –"

"You never come up to the dormitory to sleep," Dean overrode them. He still frowned, if apparently for a different reason this time. "What's with that?"

"Where do you go?" someone asked.

"I wondered that, too," another added.

"Do you have your own separate room?"

"You're a Gryffindor; why do you have a separate room?"

"What -?"

"Why -?"

"Where -?"

The questions, tentative at first, restarted once more with a vengeance, and Harry didn't even bother to withhold his resurfacing scowl. Not that it did anything; Gryffindors, apparently, weren't so good at picking up on visual cues like that. Not like Slytherins, anyway; Harry had found that, when he'd visited the dungeons, at least those students had known to back off.

"Do you hang out with the Slytherins?" someone asked. "Is that where you go?"

The question was posed with such perfect synchrony with Harry's thoughts that he almost flinched. Then his surprise died, because as Harry glanced towards the speaker, it was to behold a sea of faces rapidly caving into disgruntlement. Even Hermione, though she was still subdued, frowned in concern.

"That's not right, Harry," Ron said, and though his words were quiet, the expectant silence made them audible enough. "You're still a Gryffindor."

And that was the final straw.

Fingers curling, Harry swung his gaze towards Ron and glared hard enough that Ron actually drew away from him slightly. "Oh, shut the fuck up. 'Still a Gryffindor'? What does that even mean?"

Before Ron or anyone else could gather themselves to reply, he swung to the watching common room at large. "You're all a bunch of fucking idiots if you think that what House you were sorted into when you were eleven actually has any significance. Pull your heads out of your arses and grow some sense, why don't you? Gryffindor? Slytherin? Who gives a flying fuck?"

Ringing silence met his words. The crackling tune from the wireless seemed deafeningly loud for it, but even its static utterances weren't all that objectionable in the stunned silence. Harry liked that. He didn't particularly like intimidating people, and rarely did so unless to get them to back off, but he liked the quietness. He liked that it remained unbroken.

Until some idiot fifth year spoke up. "So… you have been sleeping down in the Slytherin Dungeons, then?"

Harry stared at the kid. He stared, unblinking, at the little shit of a kid who'd spoken until the fifth year was all but wriggling in his seat on the rug. With deliberate care, Harry brushed his fringe
from his eyes; he knew because the only sort-of boyfriend he'd ever had once told him that his 'blind staring' was disconcerting. That fifth year kid sorely needed to be unnerved.

"You," Harry said slowly, "pretty much embody the stupid narrow-mindedness of every Gryffindor in this room."

With three slow claps of derisive applause, claps that echoed jarringly through the yawning tower common room, Harry turned and strode towards the porthole. A shuffle of noise sounded behind him, someone that sounded like Ginny uttering a feeble, "Harry," but he didn't turn.

Fuck the Gryffindors. No, that was wrong – fuck just about every student in the school. Harry hadn't the time for them, or the inclination to care about them. He just… he just…

There was one person in the school he found tolerable. Maybe three, if he stretched his lasso of consideration and a certain pug-nosed girl learned to pull her head in. Right at that moment, if it wasn't one of those three – and mostly just the one – Harry didn't want to be around anyone.

The Fat Lady was silent as the portrait clicked closed behind him. Harry thought it was very wise of the painted woman, but didn't spare her a moment of his attention as he strode from the tower. Most likely he wouldn't be returning again. Whatever weight 'being Gryffindor' truly held, Harry no longer wanted to be a part of it.

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The dungeons were flooded with a rich flavour of magic, but it was different to that in Gryffindor Tower. There wasn't the vivid, blurring brightness of enthusiastic students, or the tangible tingle of magic rippling across Harry's skin. The dungeons were deeper, older, and he found that he quite liked that deep age.

He could have gone to the balcony. A part of him questioned, even as he descended into the castle's depths, why he didn't. Harry was a solitary person, and he did like his solitude. There were precious few people that he truly enjoyed the company of, and over the years he'd accepted that such was who he was. When forced into company, he usually chose to take himself out of it at the earliest opportunity.

That didn't mean he didn't get lonely, however. Paradoxically, confusingly lonely. When such loneliness arose, it was for Harry to either wrap himself in his magic so tightly that the feeling was squeezed away, or…

To find someone who he could tolerate. Given that, in the whole of Hogwarts, there wasn't really any options but one in that regard, his feet set him upon the route down almost without his input. Dinner hadn't even clocked around yet; unfortunately, company wouldn't be awaiting him on the balcony.

The wall into the Slytherin common room was unremarkable. To anyone not of Slytherin, it likely would have been impossible to discern as distinct from any of the surrounding walls, but to Harry's Sight it was different. That patch of wall and the glowing room beyond it hummed a thick, rumbling brown, even denser than the rest of the school's foundations, though not quite vibrant. Not loud, and demanding, and assaulting as the magic he'd only just left was. This was the old magic that Harry liked, the magic that welcomed him like the kindly grandmother he'd never had.

*Can I come in?* Harry didn't quite ask as he paused before the wall. There wasn't much of a need to question at all, because the magic felt him. That was something the professors and students of Hogwarts didn't seem to understand; magic didn't need demands. It responded better without them, for that matter.
The wall parted, and Harry stepped inside.

Afternoon found that most of the Slytherins had embedded themselves within the dungeon common room's confines. There were many – so many that, had they been anything but Slytherins, Harry likely would have found their crowding overwhelming.

But Slytherins, or those that were collectively and exclusively placed under the blanket term, were generally contained. Unlike just about every other student at Hogwarts, they, for whatever reason, tended to smother their magic just a little. As though they were striving for composure, to keep themselves subdued and proper as so many of them with pureblood families were taught to be from before they could walk.

All of them, that was, except for one particular Slytherin that Harry had grown to understand was less adhering to the traditional pureblood stereotype than he'd previously thought. Or at least had become less.

Faces turned towards Harry as he entered the room. Faces wearing scowls and glares, but also sharp with curiosity and unblinking in their watchfulness. Harry didn't like that. He'd never liked being the centre of attention. The stupid papers with their stupid stories and articles stupidly pertaining to his supposed 'heroism' only reinforced that feeling.

So Harry ignored them. Just as he ignored the whispers that arose as he strode with hands shoved into his pockets across the room. Just as he too ignored Pansy's frown, the rose-gold colour of her magic sharply highlighting the lines of her brow and the repressed brightness in her eyes that only brightened further as Harry approached where she and Blaise sat upon one of the leather couches before the fireplace.

"What're you doing here, Harry?" Blaise asked with less distaste than echoed in the whispers in Harry's wake. Blaise was surprisingly welcoming – or at least as welcoming as most occupants of the room could be, which amounted primarily to simply not being unwelcoming.

Harry spared him only a glance, however, before his attention turned towards Draco. He felt himself smile at the sight of him.

Draco had changed over the years. Distinctly changed, even, and it was more than how he dressed himself. It was more than the fact that he largely disregarded his studies, or that he'd all but turned his back upon his family and name in much the same way that he'd dismissed his housemates. It was more than that, far be it from being the idol and role model of his House, he'd excluded himself from all but Pansy and Blaise's company. Harry felt a commonality between them for that fact.

What had changed the most, however, was the fact that Draco was different. He felt different, acted different, and most significantly towards Harry. Harry didn't know why he'd changed that particular fact, but he had. And Harry liked it.

Just as he liked that, rather than taking the perfectly good seat left available beside Pansy, Draco was stretched on the plush rug before the fireplace as though such a sprawling show of impropriety wasn't concerning to him in the least. In all likelihood, it probably wasn't.

Harry liked that. He liked it a lot, and liked even more the fact that he knew that Draco did so in direct dispute to the expectations that his fellow students, professors, and name placed upon him. Harry knew that feeling, just as he knew the drive to act in such a manner. He'd done it himself on countless occasions; if anything, the objection of those around him urged the rebellion.
Fleeing the Dursleys had become as much a need as a desire when Harry coupled it with the fact that he wasn't supposed to. Surely, if those who'd hurt him thought he *should* stay, leaving would be the appropriate option?

He'd left stranger's couches when they'd told him he should remain behind because 'it's not right for a boy your age to be wandering the streets'. He'd worn the same comfortable boots for over a year because someone had told him they were getting ratty and he should throw them out, and he'd let his hair grow out, even magically encouraged that growth a little, when a grumbling old bag had told him that 'boys aren't supposed to have long hair'. Harry liked his boots, after all, just as he'd come to like his hair.

He didn't use his wand in class because wand-waving was pointless, but also because he was told he *should* be using it. He hadn't written back to Remus for over a week when Remus' last letter had told him that 'it would probably be appropriate for you to reply to some of Sirius' questions', as though Sirius deserved an answer and Harry was obligated to give it to him.

Fighting Voldemort had been because Harry had to, but for himself more than for anyone else. He'd fought Death Eaters for the same reason, but when that reason faded with their threat, he no longer felt the need to fight. Not even – or not especially – when the ministry demanded his support. Hell, Dumbledore's specific request for aid with hunting the soul-pieces or whatever they were was more a deterrent than incentive.

Harry was done with the war. He was done with fighting, done with doing what he was told. He was about a nudge from leaving Hogwarts entirely and fleeing abroad just as he'd promised he would after finishing school. *This close.* It was only the promise of being chased down that stilled his feet.

When Harry looked at Draco's slovenly sprawl, reclined in a way that likely no student sorted into Slytherin house had ever done before, Harry saw himself in the gesture. Smile widening further, he was all but collapsing onto the rug alongside Draco before he'd even made the conscious decision to do so. As soon as his head settled upon the softly cushioning rug, it was as though the throbbing of his headache eased slightly.

The dungeons were quiet, as much in the murmur of student voices as in its absence of manic magic. It was darker, but that didn't feel like a bad thing. It felt deeper, more firmly wrapped in Hogwarts' old magic – and Harry liked that. What he liked most, however, was the fact that, even if attention rested upon him, it didn't *matter*. None of that *mattered*. Harry didn't have to play to anyone's whims.

"You look pissed," Draco said, his words little more than a curious observation.

Harry blinked up at the ceiling. The slither of rich, brown magic moved with glacial motions in a far less abrasive manner. Harry exhaled deeply. "Less so now."

"Less?" Blaise asked. "You still look pretty pissed. It's practically radiating from you."

"Blaise, stick your nose out of other people's business," Draco said without any heat.

"My nose is permanently in other people's business," Blaise replied.

"Then cut it off and put it away before I just lop your entire head off."

Blaise snorted but subsided. Pansy, however, apparently felt it necessary to add her piece. "This is our common room, Draco. *Ours.*"
"Should I leave?" Harry said absently. "Can I take this rug with me?"

"No, the rug stays," Draco said. "Unfortunately, otherwise I would have stolen it months ago."

"This bed-like function is a more recent discovery?"

"Quite recent, yes. Sadly so, or I would have made use of it years ago."

"You would not have, Draco," Pansy said. "You wouldn't have been caught dead lying on the floor two years ago."

"I wasn't talking to you, Pansy, for your information. And besides, how would you know?"

"Because I know everything about you, dear. And look at me when I'm talking to you; it's rude."

"You sound like Draco when you say that," Harry murmured, sighing as he closed his eyes. "You two could be brother and sister, I reckon. Unless you've dated like everyone said you did in fourth year, in which case that's kind of messed up."

Silence met his words, and Harry briefly revelled in the respite. With his eyes closed, magic momentarily dimmed to his senses, it felt almost as though he floated in the Black Lake – something that he hadn't tried yet but found himself increasingly inclined to pursue as a means of escaping the masses. The effect was only enhanced by the fact that the rest of the students in the common room spoke only in whispers. Bless them, they actually seemed wary. Harry found he couldn't really find anything wrong with that wariness at the present.

Finally, Draco grunted. "Ew. That's disgusting."

"Potter, please don't," Pansy said, and Harry could almost see her nose scrunch without looking towards her.

Harry cracked an eye open and peered at Draco sidelong. "I'm wrong?"

Draco stared back at him, head slightly turned. "Pansy would be a horrendous choice of a lover."

"Thank you, Draco," Pansy said, as though it were a real compliment.

"I speak only the truth, as always, Pansy."

"Bullshit."

"I'm a little insulted, actually," Blaise interrupted. A glance his way saw him pouting slightly. "He dated me in fourth year, for your information."

"Oh." Harry blinked. He hadn't asked, but he hadn't expected that, either. "Guess it must have been pretty unremarkable if no one knew about it."

A brief bout of further silence met his words before it shattered beneath Draco and Pansy's combined snickers. Pansy grinned, and for once, that grin didn't fade as she raised an eyebrow directly at Harry. "Charming, Potter. And very accurate."

"I try to be," Harry said before closing his eyes once more.

The ensuing silence lasted a little longer this time, and Harry's headache had died to a dull throb. He thought – about the Gryffindors, about his old friends, about Draco and Blaise, and the comfort of the rug beneath him – in comfortable detachedness until Draco finally spoke once more. "So.
What happened?"
"Mm," Harry hummed.

"While I appreciate your noncommittal replies as always, I did ask you a question."

"Mm."

Draco sighed. "Alright, then. I'll have a Truth from you."

"What's this?" Blaise said, the squeak of him sitting up in his seat indicating his attentiveness if nothing else did. "Are you playing Truth or Dare?"


"It's always my –"

"Blaise, dear, shut the fuck up for once."

Harry almost smiled at Pansy's words before disregarding them for Draco's. "It is my turn, isn't it?"

"It is," Draco said.

"What if I didn't want a Truth?"

"Are you going to deny me?"

Harry could. He easily could. But that wasn't the way of the game; the poser as often dictated the decision as the decider, Harry had discovered. That was just how they played – or how they'd grown to play with increasing frequency. "Alright, then. I guess you could say that I'm done being a Gryffindor."

"What?" Blaise asked.

"Why?" Pansy followed right behind him.

Draco grunted again. "I thought you'd decided that a while ago."

"That was before they started a prepared party at my entrance and pissed me off with everything that followed thereafter."

"Ah." Draco sighed. "Gryffindors."

"No," Harry said. "Or at least not exactly. Just stupid arseholes."

Pansy snickered again and Blaise openly barked with laughter. Only Draco didn't seem to find overt amusement in Harry's words. A shuffle of motion at Harry's side drew his absent attention, and even more so when Draco's arm brushed Harry's. It rested just slightly, just gently, and wasn't particularly unnerving. Which was strange, because Harry had never been overly fond of people touching him. But Draco's had warm skin, he found. Comfortably warm.

"Did you want to get back at them?" Draco murmured, quiet enough that Pansy and Blaise might not even have been able to hear him. Might. Maybe. Pansy likely heard on an instinctive level; she'd always had an ear for gossip, Harry's memory.

"I don't want to do anything to them," Harry replied. "As little interaction with anybody would be
He liked that way that Draco didn't need clarification that his 'anybody' didn't include Draco himself. Instead, Draco hummed thoughtfully once more. "Okay. What did you want me to do, then?"

Harry opened his eyes. He frowned. With a turn of his head, he drew his gaze towards Draco to find Draco's own face startlingly closer than he'd expected it to be. The barely visible plumes of his breath, always apparent when Harry concentrated on anyone hard enough, brushed his cheek. "What?"

"What can I do?" Draco repeated.

"You want to help me?"

Draco's finger flicked Harry's hand where they rested against one another's. "Of a sort. So long as you don't ever expressly call it 'helping' again."

Harry smirked. "Alright. Keep your prejudice against labels."

"It's warranted."

"Of course it is."

"Shut up, please."

Harry's smirk widened. Then it died slightly as he contemplated. With Draco's help… "Alright, then. You might be able to do something."

"Your wish is my command," Draco drawled, his magic brightening slightly with amusement, or the challenge, or a mixture of both with a touch of something that almost felt affectionate.

Harry smiled. Even Pansy's, "Sickening," and Blaise's, "Merlin save us all," couldn't hold his attention. Not when Draco stared at him in all of his pretty silver-grey brightness like that.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you, all of you lovely commenters!! Your words give me life and urge the next posting just that much faster. Bless you, and I hope you enjoyed the chapter. I'll see you next time!!
"Potter."

"Huh?"

Draco almost cracked a smile. Almost, and he only managed to suppress the urge by tucking his chin and focusing upon the untouched parchment before him awaiting notations he likely wouldn't bother to make. It was that or descend into snorts of laughter if not to turn and openly stare at Harry.

"Potter, what're you wearing?"

"What are you referring to, Professor?"

Draco closed his eyes, his lips trembling. A squeak of the chair at his side indicated Blaise leant towards him before he spoke. "He's way too good at this," Blaise murmured.

Draco had to agree. For all that he knew Harry was one of the least innocent people in the school, he wore oblivious innocence remarkably well. There was nothing in his tone to suggest that, before Snape's questioning, he was anything but bemused.

Snape sighed, just as every other professor had that day. It said something of how much Harry had changed his tactics – intentionally or otherwise – that Snape's immediate go-to response was no longer a sneer or a thinly veiled taunt. Harry seemed somehow immune to such approaches nowadays. "Potter, your lack of adherence to this school's dress code is abominable at best. That you continue to shirk it is an issue that has been brought to the attention of the headmaster –"

"And remains unresolved," Draco muttered to himself with a smirk.

"- but continuing to flaunt your supposed privilege is both unsightly and ridiculous. Take off those glasses."

Draco couldn't help but turn towards Harry at that moment. It wasn't much of a stretch, for Draco had made a point of moving his – and thus his friends' – seating to the desk before Harry's for the sake of convenience. It was certainly easier to discuss trivialities with Harry when they were so close.

Besides, no one else clamoured for the seat anymore. Whatever had happened in Gryffindor tower the previous afternoon seemed to have had a significant impact upon said Gryffindors' good opinion of Harry. Some of them even openly glared; not Granger and Weasley, though a certain degree of regret seemed to well constantly in their eyes, but in everyone else. Brown and Patil in particular seemed to consider him something of an offence to their delicate sensitivities.

_Not that Harry would really care_, Draco thought to himself with a hint of satisfaction. _He's never liked the attention. That the Gryffindors aren't hanging on his every word and following him around like distasteful shadows is probably a relief for him_.

Draco could understand that. Though he oftentimes revelled in being the centre of attention, he was level-headed enough to know there were different types of attentiveness, and not all of them were
favourable.

Not that Harry seemed to care. As he always did, he lay half across his desk, arms stretched before him and hanging off the other side, and chin settled. He seemed nothing if not entirely and comfortably disinterested with Snape's flat questioning, as if he didn't care that he was being all but scolded for wearing what Draco would admit were a frankly exceptional pair of spectacles. He might have considered them such even if he hadn't been the one to Conjure them. The very sight of them called forth memories of the previous evening.

"Make me some glasses," Harry said as they'd sprawled in the middle of the Slytherin common room.

Draco blinked. "Glasses?"

"Glasses. Please."

"You want me to make you… glasses?"

Reclined on the rug beside him, Harry peered at Draco through his fringe with a stare so flatly direct that Draco would have questioned his sightlessness _again_ if he'd had less of a conscious filter. "If you don't want to, then just bloody come out and say it. But after you offered –"

"Why do you need him to make you a pair of glasses?" Pansy asked suspiciously, once more interrupting what Draco would have quite preferred to be an exclusive discussion between himself and Harry.

Harry glanced towards her, which was unacceptable in Draco's opinion for the fact that it thus drew attention from _himself_. "Because I want to wear them."

"But why?" Blaise asked. "Aren't they annoying?"

"You old spectacles were appalling," Pansy said. "Regression towards such an unfashionable status would be a horror, Potter."

"Am I fashionable now, then?" Harry asked curiously. "Is that some kind of backhanded compliment?"

"You're not _fashionable_," Pansy said deliberately. "No one with one outfit in total could be –"

"Two, actually."

Pansy stuttered to a stop and frowned. "What?"

"I actually have two outfits," Harry said. "They're just identical, so I don't blame you for not noticing." Then, to Draco's satisfaction, Harry turned back to him. "Will you do this for me?"

That Harry asked at all was likely only a reaction to Draco's offered assistance. Draco hadn't expressly said he would 'help' him in so many words, but Harry knew him well enough to understand the sentiment, a fact that Draco was quietly content to discover. He liked that Harry knew him.

"You can't make them yourself," Draco said, more of a statement than a question.

"Nope," Harry replied, shifting onto his side and curling up slightly upon the mattress of the Slytherin rug. He blinked slowly, almost as though he was going to fall to sleep. Draco hadn't often
thought of Harry as a kitten, exactly, despite Harry's speculations to the fact, but this... "Magic doesn't work that way."

"But you're asking me to do it?"

"You already abuse magic. It doesn't trust you the same way it does me."

"That's a double standard," Blaise said.

"Hypocrisy," Pansy agreed with a nod that Draco hardly noticed. He was far too focused on staring at Harry.

Harry was asking him. For help. He was asking Draco to help him, to do something that he couldn't, and Draco didn't care if that askance was a riddle of hypocrisy. He didn't care what Pansy and Blaise – or anyone else for that matter – might have to say about it. Draco was going to help if it cost him an arm and a leg.

Which it wouldn't. Conjuring a pair of glasses wasn't exactly a masterful feat.

"I trust that this will annoy the hell out of the Gryffindors?" Draco asked, simply because he could and the added incentive was tantalising.

Harry smiled slow and wide, and Draco knew he was done. How quickly he'd fallen pray to his once-rival; Draco abruptly realised he'd do just about anything for that smile.

Which was how the following day found Harry attended first Herbology, then Transfiguration, then Defence class wearing the glasses that Draco had Conjured for him. Glasses he didn't need – which was probably a good thing, as Draco knew fuck all about optical prescriptions. Glasses that, even in Pansy's cultured opinion, were certainly appealing.

"I never would have picked him to be capable of pulling off the steampunk look, but..." She'd nodded approvingly in Herbology that morning before smiling just slightly to herself. From Pansy, such words were a giant tick of approval.

As Draco glanced over his shoulder to Harry in Defence, it was to see him staring back at Snape with a smooth expression and the barest hint of a complacent smile touching the corners of his lips. Or at least Draco thought he was looking at Snape; the unnecessary darkness of the glasses' lenses that hid his eyes completely made it a little difficult to discern. He could have been looking at Draco, for that matter.

Draco hoped he was. He liked being looked at.

"Potter," Snape continued, an inaudible sigh that likely only the handful of attending Slytherins heard touching his voice, "you do not need glasses."

"Actually, sir," Harry began.

"To say nothing of shades."

"Well..."

"And if you're intending to make a statement pertaining to the school's dress code, your attempt is both juvenile and irrelevant. Rules are made to be followed, Potter."

"But not, apparently, by me," Harry said, and his words effectively stemmed any further response
Snape might have made. "Or at least not in this regard. Ask the headmaster if you'd like; we've discussed what rules are binding for me. I don't think he'd object."

Coming from anyone else, or even the Harry Potter of three years ago, such a reply would have incited rage from Snape. It would have been provoking and indulgent, taunting and superior, and Draco likely would have hated him a little bit for it.

But not now. Not anymore. Harry was decidedly different, spoke with a carelessness that Draco thoroughly approved of, and from the way he tipped his head slightly in a manner that Draco had observed to accompany closing eyes and drifting into a doze, he apparently didn't care. Not at all.

Draco's smile widened, and he didn't do anything to stop it. Turning back to his notes, he tucked his chin. His smile only widened further when Snape actually audibly sighed again and turned with a snap of his robes towards the blackboard in apparent disregard of Harry's words. One point to the ex-Gryffindor, Draco tallied in his head, quietly satisfied for the fact. He hadn't been close to Snape in years, if he ever had been, and there was nothing quite so amusing as watching his hooked nose become knocked out of joint.

The Defence class passed much as every other lesson had that day, which was with a sedate pace and the boredom and reluctance of students awaiting the final bell. The Easter break was upon them, and for most of the students, that meant returning home the following morning if not that very evening.

Not for Draco, though. Pansy would return because she had obligations to fulfil that were less objectionable than the nagging she would receive by avoiding them, and Blaise's second cousin always demanded his presence so they could partake in a chocolaterie-hopping escapade on Easter Sunday. Draco would be alone for the week with the remaining students at Hogwarts, which would likely be few enough.

Alone – with Harry. That much, at least, Draco knew, and he was silently delighted for that fact. I truly am smitten, Draco thought with a shake of his head as he drew a squiggle instead of his notes in the corner of his parchment. Harry and I... just the two of us. And for once with little risk of nagging Gryffindors.

That absence of Gryffindors, and the withdrawal of those very Gryffindors from their unwavering attentiveness, had been starkly apparent that morning. Whatever had happened in the tower the previous afternoon had clearly carried over to the next day. Something that apparently had to do with classes, or at least in part, given the staring that several Gryffindors assumed and Harry's particular request of Draco. Draco was more than happy to be a part of whatever rubbed them the wrong way.

Defence class passed with absolute dryness. While Draco acknowledged that Snape was an excellent potions brewer, and that he likely had more knowledge on Defence Against the Dark Arts than most people in the Wizarding world, he was a frankly horrendous teacher. Draco's disregard for House loyalty had only made it easier to admit that truth; Snape was an appalling professor. That much was a fact that didn't need to be defensively overlooked.

Draco satisfied himself with painting most of his inkwell onto the margins of his parchment. He had no artistic ability whatsoever, but the preoccupation was sufficiently distracting. Far better than copying down the dusty-dry transcript from the blackboard. Over the past weeks – months, even – Draco had grown increasingly aware of the redundancy of his school learning experience.

That awareness had been manifesting for years, and was largely shared by Pansy and Blaise, but
Draco knew Harry's own likeminded dismissal had a lot to do with it. There was only so many times he could hear Harry's words, "That's really narrow-minded" or "Magic isn't supposed to work like that" or even "When would that ever actually be useful?" before Draco started to hear them without Harry even speaking.

Harry was right, of course. Draco accepted that correctness even without feeling the need to understand his peculiar relationship with magic. If anything was worth investigating it was Harry's take on magic.

Which was why, instead of copying Snape's notations, he contented himself with drawing in his margins and slipping notes to Harry with a toss of parchment over his shoulder. He didn't know how Harry could read or write when he couldn't see, but though he found his curiosity mounting into something almost desperate with every passing day, Draco had accepted that Harry was a wealth of curiosities that he had the opportunity to explore. With leisure, for that matter.

Not then, however. In the middle of class, an outlet for his boredom too great a priority in Draco's mind.

*I think Brown is attempting to murder you with a glare*, he wrote, to which a precisely aimed toss of a parchment ball replied in Harry's scrawled words, *She can try. Her magic probably likes me more than it likes her anyway.*

*Do you think Snape is actually hoping you'll hear his mutters from the front of the class?* provoked a snort and the reply, *Dunno. Should I ask him?*

Of course he should. Draco would have paid him to. Which he did, of a sort, with a posed Dare.

"Sorry, Professor Snape?" Harry called into the hush of the room broken by little more than the scratching of quills on parchment.

Snape, seated at his desk and scowling at the stack of essays before him in a way that Draco could only presume meant he was reading the feeble attempts of first years, slowly raised his gaze. His muttering hadn't ceased for a moment, a habit he'd always had but which seemed to have become more noticeable to Draco over the years. "Potter," he acknowledged with such flatness that Draco suspected most would have cowered before the unspoken suggestion to silence himself.

Not Harry, though. Of course not Harry. Draco doubted much existed that truly scared him. "Were you talking to me?" Harry asked.

Snape blinked hooded eyes. "I beg your pardon?"

"No need to beg for it," Harry said with such offhandedness that the few people who hadn't drawn their attention to the exchange snapped their gazes from the blackboard. "I was just wondering."

Snape's lips thinned until they all but disappeared. "What would give you that impression, Potter? I have little interest in conversing with –"

"I have good hearing, sir," Harry interrupted him, just as easily as he interrupted everyone. A glance his way found him smiling slightly, an expression made somewhat eerie for his sightless black glasses. "Pretty good, actually."

Snape's eye ticked. Draco saw it, and likely so did most people in the room, a fact that would have Snape writhing in his sleep had he realised. But he only narrowed his eyes, shook his head and dropped his gaze back to his marking. "No, Potter. I was *not* talking to you."
"Even though you said my name?" Harry asked. "I heard."

"Even then," Snape said through teeth audibly clicking.

"Oh. Huh."

"Get back to your work, Potter," Snape said, and then proceeded to ignore Harry.

He always did. So did most of the professors nowadays for that matter. Harry was an aberrant in the seventh year cohort, and Snape, like everyone else, seemed unsure of what to do with him. He couldn't be treated like other students because he didn't act like them. He wasn't exceptionally badly behaved, which made punishment next to impossible, but neither could he be threatened with expulsion or suspension because everyone knew that he didn't really want to be at school. Harry had been more than open about that fact over the past months.

Draco thought it was hilarious. He, Blaise, and Pansy had made a commitment at the beginning of the school year. To get through that year. To acknowledge little upset or distraction, and to come out the other side and leave the shit of the war, its prejudices, and the fools at Hogwarts behind them. But they still had that year to finish, and Harry's presence… he made those remaining months infinitely more tolerable, in Draco's opinion. It was wonderful.

*Congratulations,* Draco wrote in a note that he tossed over his shoulder. *I think you've finally actually defeated Snape. He doesn't even seem capable of bothering to argue with you anymore.* Harry didn't reply to Draco's words, but he heard him snort in muffled laughter nonetheless.

The bell sounded for the end of class, and every student hastened in a flurry to pack their books away. They would have likely been just as fast even in a lesson that wasn't as God-awfully boring as Snape's had been. Why they had to learn the history of Compulsion Curses Draco didn't know; surely understanding how to combat them – or, alternatively, to use them – was of greater importance.

Not, apparently, to Snape. Draco was just as eager to pack away his books and scribbled pieces of parchment as the next person. More promptly, too, for he'd already packed his bag before the bell sounded.

Rising from his seat, he took a step towards Harry's desk and perched on the edge. For himself, Harry was still sprawled, arms dangling where they stretched over the edge of the desk. He could have truly been asleep for all Draco knew.

"Are you awake?" Draco asked over the sound of chairs scraping and student voices muttering in muted conversation. "Should I poke you to double check?"

Harry tipped his head slightly so the black lenses of his glasses – the glasses Draco had made for him, he would always preen to think – turned towards him. "Try, and my magic might bite your finger off."

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Have you trained it to do that?"

"It's not a dog, Draco."

"Alright, then. Have you asked it to?"

Harry hummed. "It's very protective. I can't control its urges, sometimes."

*Well, isn't that interesting,* Draco thought. It was a little regretful, too, if only because it meant that
Draco couldn't poke Harry should he like to, but was certainly curious enough to make up for the fact. Harry's magic and the way he spoke of it... Draco had lost interest in school some time ago, but this, at least, he thought might warrant a little study.

"That was the bell," Draco said, casually raising a hand to study his fingernails and, in doing so, pointedly ignoring the smouldering glares of his classmates as they passed. They were mostly directed to himself – especially from the Gryffindors – but a good chunk seemed to include Harry, too.

"I know," Harry mumbled.

"Do you intend to while away the Easter break in Snape's classroom?"

"It could be interesting..."

Draco snorted, not even bothering to withhold his amusement as it drew a smile upon his lips. Harry was entertaining, if nothing else. How Draco hadn't realised it in their younger years, he didn't know. Or he had, just not this kind of entertaining. The more he uncovered, the more satisfied Draco was for the fact, and the more content he was to withstand the glares of his classmates in maintaining his place at Harry's side.

"You're not leaving the school for the break, then, I take it?" Draco asked, shooting a glare briefly at Thomas and Finnegan as they passed him. He was smugly satisfied when they both picked up their pace slightly in retreat from the room.

"And go where, pray tell?" Harry asked, cocking his head where his chin still rested on the table.

Draco shrugged. "I wouldn't put it past Weasley dragging you away to his hovel."

"It's not really a hovel," Harry said idly.

"It's a shitbox."

"Have you been before?"

"I don't need to have. Everyone knows that—"

"Better a shitbox than with a family that hates your guts."

Draco flinched. His gaze, settled once more upon his fingernails, barely saw what lay in front of him. He was only distantly aware of the last of the students drifting from the classroom, Pansy and Blaise strolling with a glance in his direction and Weasley and Granger the same to Harry. He barely noticed, however; not this time, regardless of how curious and pathetic he might consider the two Gryffindors with their feeble attempts at mending a friendship that Harry so clearly no longer wanted.

At that moment, however, Draco didn't really care. Tightness clasped his belly in an entirely discomforting fashion, and it was all he could do to keep his expression smooth and his fist unclenched. Still, he all but scowled at his fingers. "That's low, Potter."

"Hm?"

Draco glanced at Harry sidelong where he'd cocked his head the opposite way to regard him through his flat lenses. It was mildly disconcerting, Draco would have to admit; he wasn't used to being unable to see someone's eyes. Not that such was the whole of it. The disconcerting part
was… "If you're going to kick someone in the balls, at least give them a bit of warning."

Harry stared at Draco – or Draco assumed he was staring at him. His hands ceased their absent swinging from the edge of his desk and, after a moment, his mouth opened slightly. Then closed. Then opened again. "Oh."

"What 'oh'?” Draco echoed, more than a little mockingly. He shot Granger and Weasley a glare as they drifted slightly closer, and it actually managed to still them in place for a second.

"Did you take that to be referring to you?” Harry asked.

Draco returned to regarding his fingernails. They were broken, unrefined, nothing at all like he'd once maintained them, how his mother had maintained them when he was a child. Draco found he quite liked them a little ragged. They were more simply… him. Still, it was with a scowl that he stared because Harry's words, his suggestions – they rubbed him the wrong way. Better a shitbox indeed.

"I thought we'd exchanged enough Truths for you to realise that my own relatives were less than affectionate of me," he said, almost offhandedly.

"True,” Harry said. "But I was actually talking about my relatives."

Draco slowly drew his gaze towards him. "The Dursleys?"

"Hated my guts,” Harry said with a nod. "To be honest, I wasn't even thinking about your family."

"Bullshit."

"Bull-true."

"That's not even a word."

"Not everything I say revolves around you, Draco," Harry said, a quiver touching his lips. "I actually didn't think about you at all when I said that."

"That's bullshit," Draco said. "You always think about me."

Harry only grinned, though in ridicule or agreement, Draco wasn't sure. He found he didn't mind so much; at least Harry wasn't ignoring him, and this, at least, was somehow comforting. He felt his disgruntlement retreat. Draco had expelled every thought of his parents from his mind for the past few years, and didn't miss the memory of them, but sometimes it could still sting. Sometimes, the reminder of the loneliness of a family lost, a family who'd never been much more than a name anyway, still rubbed him the wrong way.

It felt a little less lonely with Pansy and Blaise, but less still with Harry. Harry knew, in a way that Pansy, Blaise, and seemingly no one else really did. Apparently more than Draco had anticipated, too, with this whole 'Dursley' situation. It warranted another Truth for sure.

Before Harry could reply to Draco's words – if he was even going to reply – Snape's voice sliced through their exchange. "While your attendance is necessary for your hours of tutelage, dismissal with the end-of-class bell entails your instant retreat. Potter, Malfoy, get out."

Draco spared Snape a glance and couldn't help but smirk. Snape had mellowed somewhat in the past years – or maybe he was simply getting old. Or Draco's defiance was wearing at him, as he'd claimed all of once in their one and only confrontation after Draco's parents' death. Or maybe it
was Harry, who seemed to have a wearing effect on just about every professor.

Despite how seemingly wearied he'd become, however, he still glared at Draco and Harry in a blatant attempt to chase them from the classroom. He still shot that same glare to Pansy and Blaise, to Granger and Weasley, who were the only other people that hadn't yet retreated. The Gryffindors immediately picked up their feet and scurried from the room with only a backwards glance towards Harry as they did so. Pansy and Blaise hastened in their retreat too, though they didn't so much 'scurry'. No one who'd actually been in Slytherin for more than a year were actually afraid of Snape, even if Draco considered himself and his friends distinctly apart actual actual Slytherins these days.

Harry straightened only slowly. He stretched his arms overhead, sighed expansively, and almost casually rose to his feet. Draco didn't bother to suppress his grin as, still leaning against the edge of Harry's desk, he folded his arms and awaited his company.

"So you're not?" he asked, not even sparing a glance for Snape's scowling regard.

"Not what?" Harry asked, slinging the bag that Draco knew was all but empty of books and school supplies over his shoulder.

"Leaving for the break."

"Nope. You?"

"And go where? To my empty manor with only house elves for company?"

"They really freak you out, don't they?"

Draco pulled a face. "I regret ever letting you find out about that."

Harry grinned. "Like you had a choice. It was pretty obvious."

"Obvious?"

"You magic shrinks a little bit whenever you're around them."

"I'm not even going to pretend to know what you mean by that."

Harry shrugged before visibly discarded the subject. "You want to head upstairs, then?" he asked, speaking as they always about their balcony only in loose terms.

Draco nodded immediately, and didn't care if he appeared eager. Harry would have to truly be a fool if he didn't think Draco enjoyed his company, and Draco knew he wasn't that. Definitely not. "Of course. I'll have to make a show of saying goodbye to Blaise and Pansy, though, or they'll complain."

"And me for Ron and Hermione," Harry said. "Though they won't complain. They'll most likely just make passive-aggressive allusions."

"Why do you still bother with them?"

Harry shrugged again. "I dunno. Because they're still trying?"

"You clearly don't much care for them anymore."

"No," Harry said without inflection. If nothing else, that nonchalance spoke volumes. "But it takes
too much effort to actually force them away, so…” He trailed off.

Draco shook his head. "It sounds like effort to put up with them, to me."

"To you, yeah."

"Why don't you just -?"


Draco spared him a glance before, with deliberate slowness, he pushed himself from the edge of Harry's desk. "Oh, sorry, sir. Did you have to be somewhere?"

Snape scowled, ignoring Draco as his gaze settled upon the stack of essays still awaiting marking.

"Of course he does," Harry said for him. "He's a very busy man. All professors are."

"Of course they are," Draco said.

"We wouldn't want to be an annoyance."

"Never that."

"Why, I'm sure the very sound of student voices must be –"

"Potter," Snape cut in, and Draco could hear his teeth gritting. "Leave before I hex you out."

"You could try, sir," Harry said with a grin, but he turned towards the door anyway. "Have a happy Easter, Professor. I hope you get more chocolate than you know what to do with." Then he left the classroom.

Draco followed after him, but he couldn't quite help but spare a glance over his shoulder for Snape. For his part, Snape stared after Harry's retreat with his scowl still affixed but something else definitely accompanying it. Draco thought it looked a little like resignation. It was hilarious.

Pansy and Blaise were waiting just outside, of course. Outside and to the right, just as Granger and Weasley waited to the left. Draco turned towards his friends just as Harry wandered casually towards the Gryffindors, hands in his pockets and seeming nothing if not oblivious to the wide-eyed yet unspoken demand of Granger's gaze and Weasley's awkwardly and similarly demanding shuffling. Draco shrugged aside the glare Weasley pinned him with; he'd long ago grown accustomed to such attention from him, even if it was for a difference reason nowadays.

"You two are disgusting together," Pansy said as soon as Draco drew towards her.

He blinked at her flatly. "What?"

"You two." Pansy pointed one of her painted talons towards what was undoubtedly Harry over Draco's shoulder before all but poking him in the eye with another point. "Disgusting."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," Draco said, waving her hand aside. "And don't point. It's rude."

Pansy snorted. "Because you care so much about proper etiquette these days."

"No," Draco said, scowling at her finger as nearly poked him in the face once more. "Because I value my eyes and don't want your claws to gouge out an eyeball."
Blaise snickered as Pansy rolled her eyes. She obligingly dropped her hand, however. "Honestly, though. You're obsessed with him, Draco."

"Granted, he's always been obsessed with Harry," Blaise said. Draco couldn't help but glare at him; he'd never been quite content with Blaise calling Harry by his first name. He wasn't oblivious enough to overlook the jealousy of his feelings, but it didn't diminish them any.

"That's true," Pansy said. "You probably fancied him before you even realised it."

"Dray's always been a slave to his libido," Blaise said with a lascivious wink. "I would know seeing as I –"

"If you're going to make a reference to your frankly embarrassing relationship in fourth year, please refrain," Pansy said, raising a hand to all but smack Blaise in the face. "My ears can't take it."

"You love it."

"I most certainly do not."

"You always asked us for a blow-by-blow when –"

"I did not," Pansy interrupted him. "I was simply made to bear witness to your stories that you showed no embarrassment for forcing upon me. At all."

"You loved them."

"I didn't."

"You did, you –"

Draco glanced back and forth between them as they volleyed and couldn't help but shake his head. They called what he felt for Harry disgusting? How he was 'obsessed' with him, which Draco wouldn't deny because, in Hogwarts, Harry was about the only thing worth attending to? They were the disgusting ones. It was so blatantly obvious that they panted after one another as to be almost repulsive.

"- pretend you didn't write down every word in a diary or something –"

"That's pathetic. I did not. And diaries are for fluffy Hufflepuff princesses, not ex-Slytherin queens."

"A queen? Well, I'd certainly say that –"

"Have you quite finished with your awkward attempts at flirting?" Draco drawled, speaking over Blaise's grinning provocation. "And you say I'm embarrassing?"

Pansy and Blaise immediately swung their attention towards him. Pansy glared while Blaise's grin became leering. "Well, at least we haven't denied our attraction for years," he said. His attempt to sling an arm around Pansy's shoulders and was flung off so violently he almost stumbled backwards.

Draco arched an eyebrow. "It's called a slowly burning courtship dance," he said.

"For pretend rivals with too much sexual tension to be able to even pretend to be friends?" Pansy offered snidely.
"You're a bitch."

"Thank you." Pansy smirked. Then she tipped her head over Draco's shoulder once more. "I take it you're staying with him this break, then?"

"I'm staying at Hogwarts," Draco clarified. "And Harry is staying too, yes."

"Just the two of you, then?" Blaise said, still leering.

"We're hardly going to be the only two people at the school. And stop that face, Blaise. You look appallingly lecherous."

"Because I am appallingly lecherous."

Blaise ignored him. So did Pansy as she shrugged aside his second attempt at a one-armed hug. "If you two haven't made some headway by the time we get back, I'll hex both of your testicles off," she said.

"Wonderful image you've presented there, Pansy," Draco said.

"It's an art I've perfected over the years."

"I've noticed." He glanced between the two of them for a moment, then half-turned. "Enjoy your break then, I suppose. Blaise, please refrain from stuffing yourself until you throw up."

"That's only happened twice," Blaise said, raising a pointed finger.

"The fact that it's happened twice…" Draco said, shaking his head. Then he glanced to Pansy. "I've left you an Easter egg in your trunk."

"Oh, joy," Pansy said, pursing her lips. "I don't suppose it's peanut, is it?"

"It's not," Draco said. This time, he thought silently, because after two years ago when he'd pranked her with her 'hated' peanut-flavoured chocolate, he hadn't again. Pranks were only effective the once.

"It's not espresso either?"

"No, don't panic."

"Or caramel? You know how that crap gets stuck in my teeth."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Anyone would think you didn't want the gift."

"From you, Draco, it's more often not a gift at all."

"At least you get something," Blaise grumbled. "I don't get anything."

"If you'll recall," Draco sighed, "the second vomiting incident was on my bed —"

"That's hardly a good enough reason to stop giving me chocolate! You're a cruel bastard, Drake. Cruel, cruel bastard…"

Draco shook his head as he turned away from his friends. He loved them as much as he found them unerringly vexing at times. Like when Blaise stuffed himself with too much chocolate and threw it all back up on his bed. Or when Pansy had directly owled her gifted Easter egg back to him with a
Howler declaring, "What kind of a horrid friend are you that you don't realise how much I detest coffee!"

Draco loved them – he just hated them both a little bit, too. Which was, after all, the best kind of relationship.

They didn't say goodbye as Draco left them. Goodbyes weren't 'a thing' between them, even if only in the casual sense. Pansy and Blaise's muttered exchange – for they would only ever mutter when the potential to be overheard arose unless they actually wanted to be heard – followed after him. But Draco ignored it. As soon as they were out of his line of sight, his attention was turned wholly towards Harry.

Harry, who was, even then, apparently pinned between his two ex-friends. Draco caught wind of the loudly whispered exchange as he wandered with all the entitlement he possessed to Harry's side.

"... would really like you to come, Harry," Weasley was saying. "Mum would love to see you."

"I'm sure," Harry said, his tone utterly bland. Draco almost grinned; he didn't think Harry was a cruel person, but when considering people who'd wronged him? He so clearly had no time for them that it was delightful to witness a relevant exchange.

"It's true," Weasley said, nodding fervently. "She sent me a letter and everything."

"I don't really want to come, actually."

"But –" Weasley faltered. He was frowning at Harry in nothing short of pig-headed confusion. "But why?"

Harry only sighed. And then sighed again when Granger said quietly, "You could just go, Harry. Surely the Burrow would be preferable to staying at Hogwarts by yourself. Right?"

Draco had enough of that. He didn't like Weasley or Granger, but that dislike had taken on a different form since he'd grown to very much like Harry. They were simply so clueless as to where Harry's objection for them lay as to be frustratingly laughable.

So he stepped up to Harry's side and slung an arm around his shoulders just as Blaise had been attempting with Pansy moments before. Harry didn't shrug him off as Pansy had, however, which was wholly satisfying. "Are you ditching me?" Draco asked, fully confident of Harry's reply.

Harry only hummed, but Draco saw the slight twitch of his lips. He might not be able to see Harry's eyes, what with the glasses and all, but he would wager Harry was glancing towards him.

Weasley's spine straightened, cheeks flushing, and the hint of a disgruntled scowl touched Granger's lips. "Malfoy," she said. "Would you excuse us? We're having a conversation with Harry."

"I can see that," Draco said. "But it doesn't seem particularly enjoyable for anyone involved. So you two," he waved his hand towards them both in a way that caused Granger to flinch and Weasley to flush even further, "you can go."

"Excuse me," Granger began alongside Weasley's, "We bloody well will not."

"Are they always like this?" Draco interrupted them, turning towards Harry.
Harry tipped his head towards him. "Like what?"

"All blustering. And pouty."

"Pouty? Is that even a word?"

"Of course it is. I'm an expert pouter."

"I can see that of you, surprisingly enough."

Draco grinned, barely aware of Weasley's continued blustering and Granger's poutiness. "You know me too well."

Harry grinned right back.

"Look, Malfoy," Weasley said, finally managing to find his voice. "Can you just bugger off while we talk to our friend —"

"Your friend?" Draco echoed absently.

Weasley's flush deepened. "Bugger. Off."

"Gladly," Draco said before, arm still around Harry's shoulders, he skirted around both Weasley and Granger and started down the corridor.

"Wait a second," Weasley began. "Harry, what -?"

"Look, Ron," Harry said, pausing in step and drawing Draco to a stop alongside him. "It's not that I don't appreciate the offer. It's very… nice of you." Draco almost snorted at his deliberate pause. "But I don't really want to go to the Burrow –"

"Why not -?"

"Ever," Harry emphasised, continuing through him. "Like, no offence or anything, but I kind of don't want to really be around anyone this Easter." Draco heard the 'any of you' even if Harry didn't say it.

"No one?" Granger said quietly, her pout fading a little sadly. "So you won't even visit Sirius in Grimmauld Place?"

Draco was watching Harry closely enough that he saw the slight downward tug at the corner of his mouth before it disappeared an instant later. "No," Harry said. "Not even Sirius."

"But Malfoy's alright?" Weasley said, Draco's name sounding like a curse on his tongue.

Draco didn't rise to the bait, even if an instinctive retort rose on his tongue. He regarded Weasley flatly, eyes hooded, and plucked idly at the shoulder of Harry's jumper just beneath his hand. Frankly, he was a little surprised that Harry had allowed him to lean on top of his quite as much as he was, but it was a good kind of surprised. Glorious, even.

As it happened, he didn't need to reply. Harry pursed his lips, his eyebrows lowering to disappear behind his glasses. "Yeah, actually. He is."

Then, in an abrupt turn, Harry was starting down the corridor with only a "Happy Easter, both of you," tossed over his shoulder. And he was dragging Draco with him. Most importantly, however, his arm slipped around Draco's waist as easily as Draco's resting around his shoulders.
Weasley and Granger faded from importance. They seemed to disappear from the corridor entirely, in fact, and Draco wasn't sure if they'd suddenly learned to somehow Apparate behind the castle wards or simply disappeared from his awareness. It didn't really matter either way, because that wasn't what was important.

What was important was Harry's arm. The warmth of his hand where it rested against Draco's hip. The easy way he seemed to fit against Draco's side as though they were shaped for one another, and even if Draco cringed at the sappiness of the thought, he allowed himself to think it anyway.

He and Harry. Harry and him. That Harry was letting him do as much… That meant something, didn't it? The part of Draco that twitched with the urge to encourage that 'something' further nearly blurted out his thoughts immediately. He didn't care that Weasley and Granger behind them, and possibly Pansy and Blaise, if they hadn't already retreated, might hear. Draco simply did not care.

Maybe it was a little cruel. Maybe they were both cruel and selfish, Draco thought, and was reaffirmed with such a suspicion as, in a moment of lucidity when he blinked briefly away from his smothering thoughts of Harry, Draco glanced behind him to Weasley and Granger's admittedly forlorn figures. Only for a second, however, before his attention was drawn as though magnetised back to Harry.

"Or maybe we just don't care anymore," Draco thought to himself, and that seemed to resound even more fully. For Hogwarts, for schooling, for old friends that didn't understand why it was 'old' and no longer 'current'. Draco knew that neither himself nor Harry had time for them anymore.

What he did care about was Harry. His friends, too, but at that moment, mostly about Harry. Draco cared for little enough in his life, but Harry's arm resting casually and easily around his waist? That surely had to be the most important thing in the world.

"Ow."

"Don't be a pathetic baby, Harry. Now, feed me a grape."

"Feed yourself a grape, Your Majesty. I'm not your slave."

"Your Majesty? Oh, I like that. And actually, yes, you are my slave in return when I'm doing something for you."

"Something that I didn't even ask you to do."

Draco grinned, and not only because Harry obligingly plucked a grape from the fruit bowl before him and held it out to Draco over his head. Not because Draco could see the exasperated expression he wore when he peered around his shoulder, the roll of Harry's eyes now visible after he'd slipped his glasses off. Not because it was just the two of them, in the middle of the kitchen wrought by pre-feast chaos, or because they felt somehow closer than they'd been even just a day before.

It was likely a compilation of those facts that had Draco comfortably smitten by a warm buzz in his chest. That, and the fact that he'd always enjoyed playing with hair, and Harry's felt really good.

Draco still didn't like house elves, and liked them even less when they scurried around him like crazed ants before a storm, but he put up with them. It was worth withstanding for the chance to accompany Harry in his routine kitchen attendance. He still didn't like the kitchens all that much either – they were too noisy, had too many smells conflicting in both a good and a bad way – but Harry was there so it made his entrance necessary.
There were many things, in fact, that Draco didn't like. Like pestering Slytherins or badmouthing Gryffindors. Like getting out of bed before breakfast, or bothering to make himself presentable, because that took unnecessary effort. He didn't really like his classes anymore, or the content that he'd once absorbed like a plant would sunlight, because it was just a little bit trivial and just a little bit wrong. Or it was in Harry's opinion, and that opinion was one Draco was growing increasingly respectful of.

Draco didn't like people touching him, either, and didn't much like touching others, because why would he? People were gross, and had been largely gross even when he'd dated Blaise in fourth year. Except that now? For one person in particular? Draco didn't find it all that repulsive. Not at all.

Luckily for him, apparently neither did Harry. Quite suddenly too, at that; almost at the same time that the particular switch had been flicked in Draco, the switch that wrinkled its nose at the thought of the cretins around him touching him with their fingers and their regard, Harry's had been flicked too.

He'd let Draco put his arm around his shoulders. He hadn't shrugged that arm off, and he even hooked his own around Draco's waist. He sat beside Draco when they plopped down onto the benches in the kitchens, and when Draco had – almost compulsively – sat so close that their shoulders brushed one another's, Harry hadn't pulled away. If anything, he'd settled comfortably against him.

Did that mean something? Maybe. Draco hoped so, because if not, the world was stupidly unjust and the distinctly warm arousal that had been idling in his gut for the past half an hour would be regrettably unfounded.

That arousal was half the reason that Draco had taken to standing behind Harry and demanding he let him fix his hair. Only half, that was. Only half. The other half…

"You know," Harry said, picking at the dessert platter before him, "for someone who likes playing with hair, your own is always a right bloody mess."

"A deliberate mess," Draco said, combing his fingers through Harry's hair as he'd been doing for so long his skin had begun to tingle. Or maybe it was tingling for another reason. Most likely it was for another reason. "My hair is an art form."

"Is it abstract, then? A Picasso-rendition?"

Draco snorted. "Come, it's not that bad."

Harry flashed a smirk over his shoulder and Draco wished he hadn't almost as much as he was thrilled he had. That smirk wasn't doing his arousal any favours, and he was abruptly very happy he'd decided to stand behind Harry.

In placation – or distraction – Draco dragged his fingers through Harry's hair with more force than was necessary. Harry winced, and his smirk turned to a glare. "Do you fucking mind?"

Draco only smiled in return. "Well, if you let me use magic to get the knots out, it wouldn't be quite so painful."

"Let you?" Harry asked.

Draco shrugged. He wouldn't admit the validity of that particular posed question. Not that he wouldn't – couldn't – use magic for something so trivial around Harry. It sounded and felt rather
foolish, but it also felt wrong to do so. Like... almost like a slap to the face. Harry was weird about magic, and regardless of his reasons for being so, Draco didn't want to annoy him.

Besides, he quite liked touching Harry. He liked grazing his fingers through his hair as he'd always liked playing with hair since his mother had first let him do so as a child. It was about the most intimacy he'd ever shared with her. Draco wouldn't risk annoying Harry into taking that unexpected gift away from him.

The kitchens roiled around them, but Draco mostly ignored them. Or ignored as much as his discomfort around house elves would allow. The feast dotted the tables with more and more desserts, most richly bedecked in thematically astute chocolate, that rose magically to the Great Hall moments after placement. Draco had partaken of his fill, plucking the most obvious pieces from each dish that was set before him if only to provoke unease from the dinners a floor above them, before he'd become distracted.

By hair. By the hair that, quite unknowingly, Draco found he'd longed to touch for quite some time now.

"Can I?" Draco had asked a full half an hour ago, because even if he did believe himself entitled to whatever the hell he wanted, Harry might not think so. And Draco didn't want to irritate him that night. At all.

Harry glanced up from the tart he was picking apart with his fingers more than his fork and raised an eyebrow. "Can you what?"

Draco gestured to his hair. "It's a mess. I want to fix it."

"Fix your own hair first," Harry replied with a wave of his fork.

"I don't give a fuck about my hair. I want to do yours."

"Why?"

"Because."

"Because why?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "Because I have a hair fetish? I don't know. Bloody hell, Harry, yes or no?"

Harry smirked, pressing the prongs of his fork into his lips in an entirely distracting manner. That had been happening a lot of late, for that matter. The distraction, if of a different kind to how their rivalry and then friendship had been. Draco found himself watching Harry's lips far too much. And his neck. And his throat and collarbones where his jumper failed to cover. And his fingers that had been wreaking havoc upon Draco since dessert had been served.

Surely Harry was doing it on purpose. Surely no one could be quite so oblivious in swiping cream with their fingers before sucking clean those very fingers in a slow, delectable manner. Surely. Or maybe Draco just had a bit of a fingers-fetish, too.

Surely Harry was doing it on purpose. Surely no one could be quite so oblivious in swiping cream with their fingers before sucking clean those very fingers in a slow, delectable manner. Surely. Or maybe Draco just had a bit of a fingers-fetish, too.

Not that Harry seemed to mind. Rather, he seemed entirely disregarding of any strangeness of Draco's request. Draco took it as a point in his favour – though against what, he wasn't sure – when Harry scooped another bite of tart into his mouth and shrugged. "Do whatever you want. If you can manage it. My hair's a bitch of a mess so I don't bother."

So Draco did. Blessedly so, because he didn't think he could stare at lips and fingers and exposed
collarbones for much longer without acting upon his urges. Just when they'd become defined urges, Draco wasn't sure, but the tightness in his pants was certainly telling. Discomfortingly tight, it was, and only growing more so the longer Draco combed his fingers through Harry's hair.

It was surprisingly smooth. A little wiry, maybe, but thin enough to be soft rather than brittle. The loose curls tightened into knots more often than they hung free, and haphazard lengths of hair stuck out of Harry's ponytail, from his head, at his nape in an entirely distracting way. Draco spent a little too long, perhaps, brushing his fingers through one particular curl of hair. The gooseflesh that rose upon Harry's skin with his touch was arousing all on its own.

Draco, it would seem, definitely had a hair fetish. And he had no problem with acknowledging that fact at all.

"So this was a thing with your mum?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Draco said, tugging fingers through a smooth length. *Definitely not the same kind of thing with my mother, though*, he thought. "I just told you that."

"I thought your mum was a cow."

"She was spineless and had little time for me," Draco corrected. "That's different to being a cow."

"But she let you play with her hair?"

"Yes," Draco said, parting a chunk of Harry's ponytail. "Personally, I think it was mostly because I'm an expert hairdresser, but –"

"Are you really?" Harry said, glancing over his shoulder and – damn him, but the way he languidly licked a drizzle of mousse from his fork was goddamned tantalising. Draco felt it in his groin, in the tingle of his fingers, and was especially glad he stood behind Harry. At a distance, too, because standing too close… That would be a bad idea. A very telling idea, too.

"Shut up and eat your mousse," Draco said, deliberately turning Harry's head to face the table once more.

"So demanding," Harry said. "Is that a kink?"


"Are you kinky, Draco?" Harry said as though it was the most normal thing in the world to ask. Draco blinked, his fingers pausing. "What gave you that impression?"

Harry shrugged. "No impression. I just realised I'd never asked you."

"Asked me what?"

"About your and Blaise's relationship. I'm curious."

Draco swallowed thickly. *Curious means…* It could mean a lot of things, really. A comparative curiosity, as Harry had apparently had his own string of lovers – or at least one – that still niggled at the back of Draco's mind with incessant and disgruntled questions. Or judgemental curiosity, though Draco doubted that of Harry. He didn't seem the type, or at least not in *this* situation.

Bored curiosity? Fascinated curiosity? Dare Draco think perhaps even *jealous* curiosity? He licked his lips as he separated another lock of hair and continued braiding. "Blaise and I were a brief
"fling."

"How brief is brief?" Harry asked.

"About the duration of fourth year –"

"That's brief?"

"- but most of that was just experimental messing around." Draco kept his tone neutral despite the chanting in his head. Please be jealous, please be jealous, please be… what the fuck is wrong with me? "Blaise isn't the kind of person to get into a relationship with anyone but Pansy."

"Yeah, I noticed that," Harry muttered. "They're so obvious, right?"

"So obvious."

"They both know it, so why don't they just –?"

"Do it?" Draco finished.

Harry glanced over his shoulder, peering at Draco through the strands of his fringe. His fork prodded tantalisingly upon his lip once more, and it was all Draco could do to ignore the heat welling further in his groin and finish the braid.

Why they were talking about such a thing in the kitchen of all places, Draco didn't know. It seemed absurd, what with all the house elves, and the cooking, and the spread of delectable, delicious desserts upon the table before them that Harry somehow made even more delectably delicious simply by eating. That was to say nothing of the fact that it was barely evening, that they were beneath a hall full of students buzzing in excitement for the coming holiday, and it was far too early to be having such thoughts as those that plagued Draco.

Or was it? He didn't know. Yes. Maybe. Or not really, because was there ever a right moment? Fuck that, Draco found himself beleaguered by such thoughts most of the time in the past days. Weeks? Weeks? Had it been longer than that?

Fingers moving more by habit and muscle memory than direction, Draco met Harry's gaze where he still turned towards him. He had beautiful eyes, really, and Draco wondered how he'd never noticed it before. Had it been the glasses? Had Draco simply not looked hard enough? Now, with the intricate, almost pretty crisscross of pale scarring around his eyes, the nature of which infuriated Draco even if the scars themselves enchanted him, he couldn't help but stare.

Harry blinked slowly. "Yeah. Do it."

It took Draco a moment to realise what he was referring to. His finger curled on the rope of hair he'd just woven and he had to give a mental shake of his head to clear his thoughts. "The sexual tension is just painful to witness," Draco said, knowing even as he spoke that he wasn't referring to Blaise and Pansy any longer.

"It is for most people," Harry agreed, nodding. "People should just, you know, get over themselves and do it."

"Right? Why waste time dancing around the subject?"

"For everyone's sakes, they should just –"
"They should really just –"

Draco’s tongue stilled the moment Harry faltered. Because he wasn’t turning around. He stared at Draco with his beautiful eyes, blind but still seeing, and raised an eyebrow. *It's not just me, right?* Draco couldn’t help but think. He wasn’t a nervous person, believed in his own rights and entitlements, but he couldn’t be sure with Harry sometimes. Sometimes he second guessed, and this time…

"You're definitely staying at Hogwarts for the break," Harry said slowly. "Right?"

"Right."

"Brilliant. And it'll be just you?"

"Just me," Draco said. "For the most part. Until Blaise rolls back in after spending the weekend at his cousin's."

"So just you and me," Harry said slowly. "And, what, about half a dozen other students in the school?"

"And the professors."

Harry pursed his lips, and Draco fought the urge to lick his own again. His hand tightened on Harry's hair once more. "Don't remind me of that. It puts me out of the mood."

"The mood?" Draco asked, pointedly distracting the 'mood' currently gripping his trousers.

Harry raised his eyebrow further. "If you tell me that entire conversation wasn't analogous, then I'm going to hit your, Draco. With my fists."

"Analogous?"

Harry scowled. "You're an arse."

Draco grinned. He couldn't help himself. A thrill of delight – for the possibility, for the chance that was becoming increasingly probably – coursed through him, and he couldn't help but lean into Harry slightly. His hand wrapped the braid around his fingers almost unconsciously. "So, this sexual tension," he began.

Harry's other eyebrow rose. "Yes?"

"Do you have objection to doing something about it?"

A smile curved across Harry's own lips. To the sound of house elves clattering – the stupid bloody things – and water splashing in sinks, plates placed and then retrieved from tables and scurrying feet, Harry deliberately licked his fork once more. He *definitely* knew what he was doing this time, and Draco made no attempt to hide his avid fixation, even if it was a little weird in the context; the kitchens didn't typically induce the kind of 'hot' that Draco found himself afflicted by.

"I don't reckon so," Harry said.

Then he dropped his fork. He twisted in his seat until he was facing Draco. Then he curled a hand around the back of Draco's neck and dragged him towards him. The kiss that Draco found himself sucked into tasted like chocolate, and he found he'd never partaken of a dish more delicious in his life.
Of course it would be at the balcony. *Of course* it was. Draco would be damned if he would take himself back to the Slytherin dormitory that didn't quite feel like home anymore, and anywhere else was bound to have them found out. Harry still had his host of stalkers, even if most exclaimed their indignation that he wasn't 'hero' enough for them anymore.

Fuck them, anyway. They could sod off for all Draco cared.

So the balcony was where they headed. It wasn't where it started, however. In a stumbling step, Draco nearly tripped out of the kitchens and caught himself on Harry before Harry dragged him into another kiss. The stairwell took thrice as long as it should have because Harry nearly stumbled for walking backwards, so intent was he upon maintaining their locked lips.

Crashing into walls, a pause to gasp into one another's mouths in an alcove, and then another pause when the sound of students disrupted their retreat. Draco found himself pressed with his back against the wall, Harry against him, and the entire length of him thrummed at every point of contact. Who knew knees could feel so good? And hands, curled as Harry's were in Draco's hair. And hipbones, and the weight of Harry's chest and – and –

It was a little difficult to miss how aroused they both were. Not when so close. That Draco found it feverishly hot to feel just how hard Harry was against him…

Which of them had decided on going all the way to the balcony, anyway? And why did it suddenly seem so far away?

They managed. In a staggering tumble up the Clock Tower steps, they all but tripped out onto their balcony. Draco found himself falling, sprawling, onto the marble flatness, and in seconds Harry was on top of him again.

Warm, even if the spring air didn't really require the warmth.

Heavy, and in an entirely good way.

Messy, but Draco didn't mind the mess, and desperate, but Draco had been desperate for some time now. And he'd thought Blaise and Pansy were bad? The analogy was a little skewed in that Draco didn't think his two friends needed it that much.

He quickly forgot about his friends. How they'd even managed to slip into his thoughts at all, Draco didn't know. Harry was with him, on top of him, and there was little that could be more important in that second.

"You don't mind, do you?" Harry panted into Draco's mouth, even as he nipped at Draco's lips and seemed to press himself even more firmly against him.

"Mind?" Draco managed. His hands seemed to have a will of their own, clambering up Harry's back beneath his jumper before grasping at the waistband of his trousers.

Harry pressed a warm, wet kiss on his jaw. "Consent is important."

Draco blinked, his hands paused. "You're asking me –?"

"Consent, Draco."

"Do I fucking look like I mind?"

Harry drew away slightly, though he couldn't go far with how tightly Draco was holding onto his
hips. He scowled, an expression nothing short of even more arousing for the flush of his cheeks and his slightly swollen lips. "Don't be a dickhead about this."

Draco shook his head, scaping against the marble floor. What more could he do? If Harry wanted him to spell it out, he would. He bloody well would, and in a heartbeat. Raising a hand to the back of Harry's head, he wrapped the fishtail braid around his wrist once more and dragged Harry down towards him. "Fine, then. Fucking hell, yes."

Harry grinned, and Draco realised he might actually like that more than his objectionable scowl. Harry glowed, and Draco almost, almost thought it might be the kind of glow he claimed he could see with his magic. In the darkness of the night-swathed balcony, Harry's eyes were practically lambent.

"Good," Harry murmured, settling more comfortably on top of him in a thoroughly distracting manner. "Some assholes don't know when to say when, you know?" Then he all but swallowed Draco in a kiss.

Draco didn't know what that meant. He didn't know who Harry referred to when he spoke of 'some assholes', or what had happened. In actuality, Draco realised he knew about as little as – or perhaps even less than – Harry did about himself and Blaise. Draco didn't know who his lovers had been, who that tosser Harry had spent a month with was, or even what their names had been.

Which was a problem. Draco abruptly wanted to know, just so he could erase their existence from Harry's memory.

But later. He would determine that later, because right at that moment, Harry was pressed on top of him, and he was warm, and his lips were demanding, and Draco wanted. He sucked upon Draco's own lips, then twisted his head so that his tongue was grazing along Draco's neck, warm, and wet, and leaving a trail of shivers in its wake. Draco all but trembled beneath it. Everything was hot. Everything – everything wanted.

There was no disrobing. There was no time for that. Instead, Draco fell prey to his arousal, fumbling for Harry's trousers even as Harry slipped a hand down the front of Draco's pants. The feel of Harry's fingers around him, squeezing, and rubbing, and clenching his hardness, gave no space for anything else. Draco barely had the presence of mind to pull Harry off in return, his brain fogged and throbbing, his ears flooded with the sound of Harry's panting where he pressed on top of him, his lips close to his ear.

It was sticky. It was hot. Draco's back arched when pleasure grasped him in the form of Harry's fingers, and he didn't care if he cried out for anyone to hear. He even kind of liked it, because Harry echoed him in a hoarse whimper of his own as warm wetness flooded from him in turn.

Short. Fast. Messy. And entirely delectable, if Draco was being completely honest. Maybe not holistic and exploratory as Draco abruptly decided he wanted from Harry's entire body, but it was enough. For now.

Even better when Harry finally let him go only to collapse on top of him. Draco was sticky, yes. The wetness in his pants was uncomfortable; that was true, too. But Harry panted against his neck, and pressed against him as a heavy weight, and that was damn impossible to pull away from. Draco doubted he'd ever want to.

"Bout bloody time," Harry muttered, and Draco couldn't help but agree. He stared up at the star-rich sky only briefly before he became entirely focused upon pressing his face, his nose, into the side of Harry's head and simply smelling him. Peeling him.
Was it a one-time fling? Draco didn't know. It didn't feel like it. It didn't feel like how it had been
with Blaise, either. Clinging to Harry, with the weight of disregard and disinterest for every other
aspect of his life hanging around him, Draco didn't think so at all.

*I've found something I want*, he thought absently, and tightened his hold around Harry's still
panting chest. *Pansy always did call me a possessively entitled bastard.*

At least in this instance, Draco didn't care at all. Harry was his, had been his for weeks now, if only
in friendship. Draco wasn't going to let that go – not now, and maybe not ever.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: To all of you wonderful individuals that have been commenting on this story -
thank you. Thank you so, so much. It gives that inspiration to post just a little bit faster
(and I'm a sucker for communication, so I love it!). Please let me know your thoughts,
if there's anything you think might need adapting, or anything you liked/didn't like. I'd
love to hear from you!
Easter Break settled comfortably upon Hogwarts. There were little more than a handful of students within its walls, and that reality echoed hollowly throughout the Great Hall at meal times, rippling through corridors when lone footsteps sounded with solitary passage. It was comfortably quiet, many of the professors thought. The school itself seemed to sigh in bliss for that silence, too; though the foundations of the castle revelled in the casting of magic within its depths, the blessed reprieve was much appreciated.

Sunday found prayers whispered by the devout, letters exchanged with well-wishes, and a breakfast overflowing with too much food for those professors and students that remained at the castle. The predominance of chocolate was a traditional necessity that none overlooked, and the younger students all but rolled away from the table with the happy knowledge that they would be suffering from severe stomach aches for the rest of the day.

Holidaying students returned slowly, in trickles and dribbles that increased in speed as the break reached its end. For many, it was to return with revamped enthusiasm, if a little regret for a reprieve passed. It wasn't a particularly remarkable Easter, except for the fact that it was the first in years to be enjoyed without the shadow of Lord Voldemort hanging over their heads. Nothing remarkable at all.

Except what was noticed by a choice few Slytherins.

Theodore Nott realised when he returned to Hogwarts the day after Easter. Blaise Zabini did, too, demonstrating remarkably more insight than many thought him capable of. Not that it required all that much perceptiveness; the change that had infected the Slytherin dungeons would have been apparent to any with a pair of eyes and ears.

If nothing else, the entirety of the house was gripped by a question that would only be answered with time and observation: when it came to Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy, was it really such a good thing? Was it?

As of yet, that answer remained unknown. For many, the fear that something distinctly Other than rivalry would result in even greater explosiveness was resounding. Potter and Malfoy, after all, had a history that was all but famous at Hogwarts.

Who would have thought it would change into that?

Harry had never been much of a talker. He pondered aloud at times, but talking? Not so much.

He'd only realised that fact when he'd left the Dursleys at the age of fourteen. After that, even, when he'd come across the first boy to help him discover that his preferences lay outside of what
his expectations had been. That boy was one Harry had met barely a month after fleeing, and his name was –

"Jackson," Harry managed the word before he sunk his teeth into his bottom lip.

"Jackson?" Draco repeated.

"Mm."

"And then?"

Harry bit back a groan. Jackson had been the first boy he'd ever kissed, and the first person he'd ever touched in more than a passing, casual manner. Jackson had been the one to tell him that he was quiet, something that Harry had never realised of himself because Ron and Hermione had never mentioned it, and the Dursleys likely appreciated the fact.

After Jackson had been –

"Kane," Harry uttered in a huff that was almost pained. Honestly, did Draco have to drag a veritable confession out of him? How was it even any of his business who Harry had been with in the past?

_Or maybe it is a little bit now, _Harry silently admitted. _And maybe I might like him to know, just a little bit. Because when he knows..._

"Kane?" Draco repeated, his voice low. "Kane what?"

"I don't know his last name."

"But you fucked him?"

"Is that jealousy I hear?" Harry said, and _that_ was the very reason he didn't quite mind. No one had ever been jealous for Harry before. _No_ one. It felt kind of nice, even if it was ridiculous and illogical. It felt good, and Harry couldn't help but smile. Or at least he did until Draco moved and squeezed.

Harry groaned. "Draco, what the –?"

"Was he?"

"You're an arse," Harry managed.

Draco smiled in reply, and his hand not curled around Harry's arousal slid up his legs from his hips until his fingers wrapped around his ankle. With surprising gentleness, he pushed Harry's leg back until his knee nearly touched his shoulder, leaning against him. "Yes," he said, "but did he?"

The Slytherin seventh year boys dormitory was empty but for themselves. At mid afternoon on a Sunday, such wasn't particularly unexpected, but it was guaranteed when Draco demanded it.

"Go away," he'd said to Blaise barely an hour beforehand. "And make sure Nott doesn't come barging in as well."

Blaise glanced between Harry and Draco where they stood before the dormitory door, a frown furrowing his brow for a moment. Then it had smoothed into understanding. "Oh, so you're –?"

"Blaise," Draco interrupted him. "Bugger off."
"You mean you're finally –?"

"Blaise."

"I have to just clarify because –"

"Fuck. Off."

Blaise didn't seem intimidated by Draco's threatening tone in the slightest, which Harry thought was a little impressive. Harry himself wasn't, but then, little actually scared him anymore. Certainly not Draco.

Blaise openly grinned, however. He even went so far as to clap Draco on the shoulder and offer Harry a conspiratorial wink. "Bless you both, you've just won me ten galleons from Pansy."

"You bet on us?" Draco drawled.

"Of course." Blaise sounded almost offended by Draco's scathing suggestion. "What do you take me for, Draco?"

He turned to leave after that with only a final glance flung over his shoulder. A glance and a word. "I'll keep Nott away, yeah? Just let me be the first to know if you're ever up for a threesome, the both of you."

Harry stared after him for a moment before snorting with a shake his head. It was certainly an option; Blaise was affable enough, and his magic was appealing in all of its bluey-green shades. Almost pretty. Harry had been a sucker for pretty magic for years.

"Well, I guess that is an option," he pondered aloud. "I mean, so long as you didn't end on a bad note when you were together or anything –"

"No," Draco interrupted him, drawing Harry's attention to his abruptly fierce gaze. "I don't share."

That hadn't been the first indication that Draco was a jealous lover, but it was the one that pushed him over the edge that day. Harry likely should have expected what was to come afterwards; their brief moments of intimacy over the past weeks, grabbed where they could find them, hadn't resulted in any kind of rigour in the questioning department. Their vigour had been reserved for other areas. But now…

Harry should have guessed. Draco had not-so-subtly prodded at the history of his past lovers that Harry barely considered more than brief flings. He should have expected it, even if the means of questioning wasn't quite what he'd considered. Definitely should have, if only to waylay what was to come.

A full half an hour after Blaise's departure, Draco rocked his hips forwards slowly, so slowly, and Harry couldn't help but groan. He might be quiet, as Jackson and Kane had both told him, but only in the verbalisation department. Unintelligible utterances were another thing.

"Draco," was all he could manage, and then a choked moan when Draco squeezed him again. He leant over him, hand sliding up to Harry's knee to press it fully against his shoulder, and even without his urging, Harry felt his other leg rise to join it. The motion drove Draco further inside him until he couldn't help but gasp once more for the feeling of hot fullness.

"Was he your first?" Draco asked.
He wasn't composed. At least Harry had that much on him; for all of his questioning, his slowness, his iron-hard control that his jumping and throbbing magic directly contradicted, Draco wasn't composed. Harry could see the metallic glimmer of sweat upon his brow. He heard the faint gasps of his breath, and he felt the tremble in Draco's fingers where they gripped his knee. How he managed to withdraw slowly and ease into a languid, scraping thrust that sent every nerve burning was a mystery to Harry.

Harry's toes curled. The flood of heat to his groin was almost insufferable, and the grasp of his fingers around where Draco squeezed arousal wasn't doing all that much to relieve it. No with Draco-bloody-Malfoy being a complete **prat**. "Yes," Harry panted. "He was."

Draco lowered his face until his nose touched Harry's collarbone. Harry could feel the whisper of breath as he inhaled as though breathing him, and then he couldn't feel anything else but the ripple of pleasure that coursed from his hips up his spine as Draco thrust with a sharp snap. Then again. And again.

Then he paused. The fucking **bastard**, he actually **stopped**.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Harry gasped, and he knew he sounded desperate, a little choked, but he didn't care. "Do you really have to do this **now**?"

"Yes," Draco said, his voice a little muffled as he dropped his lips to Harry's shoulder. He kissed Harry's skin in a feather-light touch that felt as possessive as his questioning before raising his head and smirking at Harry. "Who then?"

"Draco -"

"Who?"

"Do we have to -?"

"Who?"

"You're such a jealous arsehole," Harry said, writhing slightly and, with a clench of muscles and a deliberate twist, drew a groan from Draco. **Serves you right**, he thought, if a little less vindictively than he would have otherwise because Draco **groaned** and it sounded **so good**.

Almost as good as it felt when he sat back slightly and rocked his hips in another thrust. Again, and again. Harry's hand reached for and grasped the headboard above him in a desperate attempt to hold himself steady.

Then Draco paused.

"Oh, fuck you," Harry croaked, closing his eyes briefly. He squeezed his arousal once more in a desperate search for release, then paused as Draco's fingers flicked his own aside.

"Pretty sure that's what we're already doing," Draco said, though his teasing was somewhat dampened by the sporadic jumps of his magic that Harry witnessed when he blinked his eyes open. "Well?"

"I don't have to tell you."

"You do."

"This is cruel."
"I'm a practiced torturer. Get used to it."

Harry all but whimpered. It didn't help that Draco teetered as waveringly as he did himself. Harry wanted, but Draco was being a fucking arse about it, and even if his jealousy felt so good – "Pete," Harry gasped. "There was Pete."

Draco thrust with slow deliberation. "And?"

"And Benji."

Another thrust, and another, then another, and Harry panted in a feeble attempt to breathe. His one-handed grasp upon the headboard was almost painful, but he hardly felt it. "Anyone else?" Draco asked, his voice slightly broken and panting itself. "Was there anyone -?"

"Leslie," Harry managed to choke out. "Les was the last bloke, the one who –"

"You sort of dated," Draco thrust sharply, fully seating himself, before leaning forwards over Harry once more. His arms curled behind Harry's knees, pushing his legs more firmly into his shoulders. "For two months."

Harry glared at Draco for a moment before leaning upwards to snatch a chaste kiss. It was a struggle and a strain, but he needed something. "Not really dated, you idiot. I already told you that."

"You did," Draco said.

"He thought we were dating."

"I know. Fucking tosser."

"And it's not like I'm going to see him again, so can you please drop this and get on with it? I'm starting to question your performance skills." Harry somehow managed the control to raise an eyebrow, even if his attention was about as far from pulling faces as he could possibly be. "Or are you just unfit?"

Draco grinned. He still panted slightly, and his magic still pulsed erratically, but he grinned, and there was less of the desperately demanding jealousy in his expression than had been. A different kind of jealousy took its place, and Harry didn't even bother denying that he kind of liked it. At least as much as that before. This was more protectively jealous than envious. A hoarder rather than a taker.

Harry quite liked that a lot, actually.

"Is that a challenge, Harry?" Draco asked, sitting himself back and dragging his hands down Harry's legs once more. "Because you know I can never turn down a challenge."

Harry didn't get a chance to reply, because Draco was sincere in that regard, at least. Without further pause, and finally, without taking the time to talk and ask even more irrelevant questions, Draco set to pounding Harry's arse as though he were making up for lost time.

They didn't last long. Not either of them. In the throughs of passion, Harry lost himself to the heat spreading through his groin, to the sharp bursts of pleasure that sparked to his brain and demanded he close his eyes to revel in the sensation. His fingers clung to the headboard as Draco's fingers squeezed just short of painfully upon his hips.
He was fast, and a little erratic, and it was glorious. After waiting for far too long, Harry was more than happy to admit he had little enough control to hold out. Jerking upon his arching hardness, he spilled thickly over his hand in a starburst of pleasure that sent a shower of magical sparks across his eyelids. Draco’s panting, his groans, barely seeped through the thundering roar in Harry’s ears, but it sounded _good_. _So good_, and even the final, sharp thrust, the flood of warm wetness that filled him, wasn’t truly objectionable.

The empty boys dormitory rung with the sounds of ragged pants when Harry managed to hear it again through the thundering heartbeat in his ears. It was a nice enough dormitory – or what Harry had seen of it in the moments before he’d lost himself in Draco as they hadn’t really been able to before. The bed was ridiculously comfortable, too, the blankets soft and thick, the mattress plush…

Harry only really registered that fact for the first time when the pounding in his head and volts of pleasure coursing through him eventually died to a happy tingle.

Draco pulled out from him with a sigh, only to flop into the blankets at Harry’s side an instant later. Before Harry had even completely released his hold on the headboard, he found himself wrapped in Draco’s arms as he’d found himself frequently in the past week.

Draco, Harry had discovered, liked to hug. Unexpectedly – but then, it was only about as unexpected as the fact that Draco apparently had a thing for all things small and fluffy. Harry hadn’t quite known what to do with that knowledge at first, and being hugged wasn’t particularly familiar to him, but it had grown on him. Just as Draco’s jealousy had grown, too.

_Does that make me warped?_ Harry wondered, blinking up at the curtained ceiling of the four-poster bed. _Maybe I am. Kane always said I was a bit socially unsound, so maybe that's why I_ –

"You're ignoring me," Draco muttered into the side of Harry's head, nudging him with a sharp toe to the ankle. "You know I don't like that."

Harry shook himself from his thoughts. Everything had grown groggy, and his limbs felt comfortably heavy. He glanced at Draco sidelong. "I'm sorry, Your Majesty. Were you feeling deprived?"

Draco's magic had slowed to a gentle, lazy swirl, glowing like the warm embers of a sleepy fire. Harry could understand that feeling; his own limbs felt heavy, and though his hips protested a little – because Draco was a prat for what he'd done, even if it ached in an entirely good way – Harry felt utterly relaxed and replete. The softness of the bed rather than a somewhat unforgivingly hard marble balcony made for a wondrous difference.

Humming as he squeezed Harry a little tighter, Draco pressed a kiss to his shoulder. "I am. You should be paying attention to me."

"You're half asleep," Harry pointed out. "_And_ just had a thorough fucking. I think you're fine."

Draco pouted a little as he blinked up at Harry. His hair, perpetually mussed in a way that likely would have horrified his younger self, was even more so at that moment. Harry loved it and couldn't help but raise a hand to graze through the haphazard tufts.

"I don't like it when you zone out," Draco said. "It makes me think you're thinking of someone else."

Harry shifted until he was rolled onto his side. "Was that where that all came from, then?"

"What?"
"The questioning thing. You're worried I'm thinking of someone else?"

"Of course I am," Draco said without a hint of embarrassment. "I'm a jealous prat, just like you always say."

"Just like I always say," Harry said with a snort. "It's been a week."

"Yes, and you remind me of that fact all the time."

He was right on that count. Harry had reminded Draco of that fact, just as Draco had exhibited jealous traits countless times. It had been unexpected at first, because Draco seemed careless and aloof, almost nonchalant, about every other aspect of his life. His family he'd left behind him. His schoolwork he'd all but abandoned. His friends, Pansy and Blaise, seemed tolerated as much as cherished, and Draco showed no particular interest in anything else. 'Lazy' encompassed him wholly; Harry had been mildly surprised to discover that he didn't even partake in broomstick flying or quidditch anymore.

Except that he'd been wrong. Draco wasn't nonchalant – he was simply selective with where he chose to invest his efforts. Not with his parents, because they'd never returned affection, and not to his studies, for Harry understood that Draco had similarly realised his schoolwork was redundant for his personal future. His friends he did consider, but only as much as needed.

Draco was selective, and he'd apparently chosen to invest in Harry. That fact felt as warped in its goodness as the jealousy itself.

"You're doing it again," Draco said, his pout deepening. "Stop thinking about anything that's not me."

"Who says I'm not thinking about you?" Harry asked.

"Because I'm right here. You'd be attending to me better if you were."

"Who says I'm not thinking about you?" Harry asked.

"Because I'm right here. You'd be attending to me better if you were."

He has no idea, Harry thought, then shook his head. Sliding across the minimal distance between them, Harry managed to wrap his arms around Draco in return. It still felt a little strange; Harry had never been physically close to people in an intimate sense. Even Les, his sort-of boyfriend that only hindsight and Les' words had deemed as much, hadn't been particularly touchy-feely outside of sex.

But it felt nice. Besides of the weirdness of it all, it felt… nice. Harry had never had that before.

"You're an egotistical bastard," Harry muttered, leaning towards Draco until their foreheads nearly touched.

"I know," Draco said complacently, almost as though he'd been given a compliment.

"That's not a compliment."

"Maybe not to you."

Harry shook his head, shrugging aside the exchange. "You know, you could have just asked me. I'd rather not have an in-depth conversation in the middle of sex."

"That was hardly in-depth," Draco said, blinking at Harry lazily. He looked on the verge of falling to sleep, which Harry had discovered was fairly typical of him in his post-coital stupor. "And it was the most effective means of getting you to open up."
"You could have just asked me a Truth."

"You would have danced around it somehow. Or zoned out."

"You have a real problem with this zoning thing, don't you?"

Draco shrugged. "I don't like being ignored," he said once more.

Harry smirked. "Yeah, I've realised that about you."

Draco hummed, closing his eyes in a slow blink before opening them again. Those eyes… rich with sleep, the silvery glow of his magic seemed thicker than usual. All of his magic did, Harry had recently realised. Whether it was Draco responding to Harry's own, or simply his contentment that resounded in that magic, he didn't know, but he liked it. Even if Harry didn't quite begrudge his loss of true sight, he liked being able to See with greater definition.

When Harry stared at Draco's face, as richly highlighted in magic as it was, he could make out the very hairs of his thin eyebrows. He could follow the line of his straight nose, could trace the shallow shadows apparent beneath his cheekbones, the curve of his lips and the faintest of dimples in his chin.

Harry liked that. He'd never been able to study someone quite so closely with his magic before, and he found he liked it quite a lot.

Raising a hand, Harry trailed a finger down Draco's nose, then lifted it again to score around his eyebrows. Draco's blinking slowed even further. "You're a bit of a weirdo," Harry murmured.

Draco grunted. "I know. Apparently the whole of the school knows, or haven't you heard the whispers?"

"I don't really like listening to gossip," Harry said. "Never have. But that wasn't what I was referring to."

"And what were you referring to?" Draco closed his eyes fully. How he could go from being so aroused and enthusiastic to all but asleep so quickly Harry didn't know. Apparently it was a thing, though, or so Benji had told him as they commiserated over Benji's own sleepiness, but Harry had never been partial to it.

Still. Weird. "You," Harry said, grazing a finger over Draco's eyebrow. "I never would have expected you to be someone so…"

"Jealous?" Draco murmured. "Possessive?"

"Oh no, I knew that," Harry said, smirking as Draco cracked open an eye to glare at him. "You were always an entitled git."

"Thank you," Draco said, sarcasm thickening his tone.

Harry grinned, then trailed his finger down Draco's nose once more. This kind of easy touching – it was nice. Harry had never had that, either. Not even with Les, which retrospect recognised would have probably been the most likely person to do so with. The simple touch of skin, while not heated and sex-charged, certainly held its own appeal. Even more appealing was the faint trail of green Harry's fingers left behind that mixed with Draco's silver.

"I actually meant I didn't really expect you to care," he said.
Draco was silent for a moment, and Harry thought he might have even fallen to sleep. When he did reply, it was in a voice so low, so quiet, that had the dormitory been anything but silent, Harry likely wouldn't have heard it at all. "I don't, mostly. Not about anyone or anything."

"I'd noticed."

As Harry swept a thumb across Draco's lips, Draco opened his eyes once more. They were heavy lidded, vague in sleepiness, but what little focus they possessed was trained on Harry. "Except you," he said simply.

"Me?"

"I care about you. As unexpected and probably ridiculous as it might seem, I actually care about you, Harry Potter."

He spoke so clinically, so simply, that the heart behind the words almost passed unheard. But Harry had developed rather good hearing over the years, and especially so with the absence of his sight. He smiled as something warm and fuzzy settled in his chest, something he'd never felt before, and curled his ankle around Draco's even as his finger returned to stroking. "Huh."

"What?" Draco asked quietly.

"I kind of care about you, too."

It was slow in coming, maybe waylaid by sleep, but Draco's smile was… well, it was definitely something.

Harry didn't really need people. He didn't really want people, either, and though he knew and understood loneliness, he often embraced rather than hid from it. But this, what he had with Draco…

It was nice to be wanted. Nice to not be taken for granted, or seen as a walking icon, or only for the scar on his forehead. Nice to be seen for who Harry was now rather than who he'd been years before.

Draco was a bit – or a lot – unnecessarily jealous, but Harry found that he could understand that. He thought he might be a little inclined to jealously hoard Draco in turn just as much.

"See? Now that. That's what I don't understand."

Harry glanced up from his muffin towards where Draco sat before him. And by 'before', he meant quite literally before. While Harry sat like a normal person on the bench that he always perched upon in the eternally chaotic kitchen, Draco had hauled himself onto the table instead. Legs stretched before him and hanging either side of Harry, he seemed nothing if not casually spitting in the face of any dining etiquette.

Which was, Harry supposed, was fairly typical of Draco.

Plucking a blueberry from his steaming muffin, Harry popped the wrinkled fruit into his mouth. The heat of it on his tongue was just short of scalding. "Don't understand what?" he asked, dropping an elbow onto Draco's knee.

Draco didn't object to the contact. He hadn't each time Harry had the urge to do so, to test the boundaries, as he had the past few days. Harry had almost expected to be shrugged off – he'd never
understood just how much 'touching' was too much, had never experienced it himself – but he hadn’t pushed Draco to his limit yet. Fingers raking through hair, hands resting back to back, a leg slung over a leg or, as chance would have it, sitting so close on a couch as to be more on top of one another – none of it really mattered. Draco didn't seem to have limits.

Besides, Draco touched back just as much. A casual graze of fingers, the press of a shoulder, the hooking of ankles under a table without comment on the fact. Harry quite liked that kind of touching. He'd never had it before, and while it was a little strange to think that his once rival Draco Malfoy was the one he shared it with, he found that yes, in fact, he'd grown to like it a lot in a rather short period of time.

Draco was making a mess of a slice of buttered toast. He seemed to revel in making any kind of mess, for that matter, a fact that Harry didn't wholly approve of given that he’d once been the cleaner of such careless individuals. But Draco seemed to act as though in direct denial of his own past. "No Malfoy made needless mess," he'd quoted to Harry not even a week before when he’d first begun to accompany Harry to the kitchen at every mealtime. "Apparently it's part of the code."

"The code?"

"It's a wank," Draco had said, waving the thought aside. "I don't abide by it anymore."

So Harry didn’t ask. He still frowned when Draco absently brushed his shirt to rid it of crumbs, but he didn't ask. Besides, the house elves seemed more than happy to clean up after him. One in particular seemed to have added catching every falling crumb to his list of duties.

Taking a bite of his toast, Draco gestured to Harry once more. "You say you don't use magic for trivialities," he said through a mouthful, "and yet you go and heat up a breakfast muffin."

"And?" Harry asked, plucking another blueberry free.

"And," Draco said slowly, "how does that make sense? It doesn't, that's how."

"Heating a muffin isn't trivial," Harry said. At Draco's snort, he pointed his muffin at him objectionably. "It's not. My magic likes it."

Draco snorted again. "Sounds like an excuse to me."

"It's not. Magic tastes the flavours. Heating it up is like coaxing them forth, and doing that with magic brings the elves' magic used to make the muffin to the surface again. Magic likes magic, you know?"

Draco stared down at him, paused in the act of taking another bite, and slowly shook his head. "No, I don't think I do."

Harry shrugged. "Doesn't matter. You'll get it eventually."

Which he would. Surprisingly enough – or maybe not so surprisingly now that Harry knew where Draco's interests lay – Draco had been asking more and more questions of late. Not so much Truths as simple curiosities that in many ways felt better than the challenge of a Truth or Dare.

"So your magic keeps you at a constant body temperature?" he'd asked five days ago. "All the time? Because it likes you to be comfortable?"

"When you say you 'feel the school', that's the magic, right?" had arisen four days prior. "In the foundations? What, from when the castle was first made? That'd be pretty fucking old, wouldn't
Three days, and he'd pondered aloud as they lay half across one another on the balcony. "If magic likes you so much, and acts so readily to your will… that must be why you're so powerful, I'd wager."

Or two days ago, with, "So you see magic, right? In colours? What colour am I, then?"

Harry had felt unexpectedly abashed in the face of such a question. It felt somehow personal to be asked, as though Draco had approached him in open honesty and asked what it was that he most liked about him. But he'd replied after a time and some significant prodding on Draco's part. "Silver," he'd said. "Sometimes grey, and sometimes black, but mostly silver these days. It's... pretty."

Draco seemed to like that. Or at least his magic responded to Harry's words, glowing more brightly than it had almost any time outside of sex itself.

Today, it was blueberry muffins and Heating Charms that Harry didn't much think of as Heating Charms. Why did it even need a name at all? It wasn't like it actually needed –

"Hey," Draco said, knocking his leg against Harry to forcibly drag him from his thoughts. "Did you not hear what I said?"

Harry rolled his eyes, taking a bite of his muffin. "Demand, demand," he sighed, shaking his head. "I'm a demanding person."

"What was it you said?"

Draco pouted a little. It was funny, Harry thought, considering he always complained about other people pouting. "I said how do you know when magic will like what you've chosen to do? Will it kick up a fuss if you do what it doesn't like?"

Harry regarded Draco for a moment. Then he deliberately plucked a chunk of his muffin loose and held it aloft, at the ready to launch at Draco. Draco, naturally, flickered his gaze to Harry's missile, eyes narrowing. "Don't."

"Don't what?" Harry asked innocently.

"I know a throwing arm when I see one. Don't throw that at me."

"Why not?"

Draco nudged Harry's leg again with a jostle of his own. "Because I don't want muffin in my face, that's why."

Harry grinned. Then he lowered his handful and popped it in his mouth. "Exactly," he said. "And it's the same with magic."

Draco blinked. "What?"

"You told me you didn't want me to do it, so I didn't. If you'd said it was alright, even if the act itself was trivial, I probably would have thrown my muffin at you."

Draco blinked again. He opened his mouth, paused for a moment, then frowned. "That... is a shit analogy."
Harry chuckled into another bite of muffin. "Seems pretty valid to me."

"So magic talks to you?"

"Sort of."

"And it tells you what it doesn't like?"

"Pretty much."

"I don't even…"

He continued on that train of thought, and Harry listened with only half an ear. He didn't try too hard to explain it; to do so would be like attempting to teach a fish how to breathe air – largely unnecessary and limited by more than comprehensive barriers. Draco didn't need to know, hadn't the proper ears to hear his own magic – or at least not yet – so Harry didn't push too hard. Not yet.

He'll get it in time, Harry thought to himself. Especially if he keeps asking. He might actually understand it a little bit and get the chance to hear his own magic. A thrum of appreciation, of Harry's magic in his core, swelled like a living creature. Harry smiled quietly. And the professors considered magic inanimate… The utter dolts.

It was their last breakfast before school resumed. Classes would start the following day, and Harry found himself regretting that fact. He quite liked the break, liked the freedom to do what he wanted without inane classes and clamouring classmates who couldn't decide whether they hated or worshipped him. It was a relief to get away from Ron and Hermione's awkward tap-dancing, both around one another and Harry himself. The struggle they seemed to be putting themselves through was so unnecessary. Why did they cling so hard to something that no longer existed? Harry didn't know, and he wasn't sure he even wanted to know.

Not that he'd had much time to consider it over the past few days. Being with Draco was a change, and that change amounted to more distraction of a purely pleasurable kind than Harry had ever experienced before. He'd never fucked nor been fucked quite so vigorously in his entire life, and it was probably a good thing that most of the school wasn't in residence. Unexpected bouts of arousal seemed to blossom at the most unexpected of times – which was practically all the time. Funnily enough, Harry's magic didn't have much of an issue with ensuring mess left on desks in a rather horrifying fashion was wiped clean. If magic could be amused, Harry considered his own was practically laughing.

He enjoyed every minute of it. Harry had always been partial to sex; since Jackson had opened that particular door of him, he couldn't get enough. And, luckily for him, Draco was more than obliging. There was nothing quite like the pleasure pain of aching hips and protesting thigh muscles to greet one of a morning.

Harry was still only half listening to Draco's mutterings about 'anthropomorphising magic' and plucking at the remains of his muffin while thoroughly appreciating Draco's own thighs when the crack of a house elf bespoke its sudden arrival. Draco flinched. He always did. It had almost become tiresome teasing him for it.

Not that Harry didn't still smirk at him, of course, to Draco's immediate scowling response. Harry turned to the house elf a moment later.

Short. Floppy-eared. Wearing a tea towel smeared in flour and all but identical to countless other house elves that attended to the school and kitchens. Even its colour was fairly similar. Harry
though he remembered this one, though; not many house elves had a thin crop of grass-green hair atop their heads.

The elf trotted the short distance between them and, rifling in a disturbingly groping fashion into his tea towel, extracted a letter. He presented it to Harry with a flourish. "Master Potter must be reading this letter and responding appropriately post-haste," the elf squeaked, bobbing his head.

Harry accepted the letter reluctantly. "Do I need to write back to someone?"

The house elf shook his head, his ears all but slapping him in the face. "No, sir. It is not being that kind of reply, sir."

Harry frowned curiously as the house elf bowed his head before taking a step back, turning and trotting away into the kitchen once more. Or at least it was a curious frown until Harry flipped it over and saw the writing cursively decorating the envelope front and centre. Then it was just a frown.

"Oh, bugger," he muttered.

Draco leant forward, craning his neck to regard the letter almost upside down. "Who's it from?"

"Dumbledore," Harry said. Shaking his head, he peeled the envelope open and tugged the letter out. "Which means it's about one of two things and... yep, it's about both of them. Joy."

"Let me see?" Draco said, holding out a hand that was more of a demand than a question. Harry handed it over readily enough; what did he care if Draco saw? Or read it aloud, as the case may be. "Harry," he began, then paused and frowned. "That's a little presumptuous calling you by name, isn't it? A little overly familiar?"

"He's always called me that," Harry said. "I don't think it's ever been 'Mr Potter' with him."

"Seedy old man," Draco muttered. Then he turned back to the letter. "It would be my greatest pleasure – see? Seedy – if you could attend me in my office at your earliest convenience. I very much wish to discuss with you the matter we have recently left incomplete - I'm guessing that's the soul pieces thing? – and in addition, you have a familiar visitor. Padfoot would be similarly delighted to see you again, I can assure you."

Draco lowered the letter as his eyebrow rose. "Padfoot?"

"My godfather," Harry said, dropping his chin onto Draco's knee this time and slinging his arm casually around Draco's calf. "He's trying that same 'reconnection' shit that Ron and Hermione seem intent upon pursuing."

Draco glared at the letter as though it were Sirius himself. He hadn't overcome his resentment towards Sirius since Harry's first encounter with him and it only seemed to have intensified over the weeks. "You mean your criminal godfather and my second cousin?"

"The one and only. And he's not a criminal anymore. Did you read that he'd been tried and cleared about a month ago?"

"I remember because you got a letter from him that very day," Draco said distractedly, his gaze still intent upon the letter.

Harry blinked. He felt his eyebrows climb his forehead. That... was unexpected. For whatever reason, Harry hadn't anticipated Draco would remember such things. He'd made a habit of looking
over Harry's shoulder and reading his mail should he be in the vicinity when it arrived, as presumptuously as ever, but to actually remember it? That was surprising.

Or caring. Surprisingly caring. Maybe Draco had actually cared for some time?

With a mental shake of his head, Harry took a final bite of his muffin. "I'll have to go, I think."

Draco glanced up at him. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"You rarely do what people tell you to. Why now?"

Harry shrugged a shoulder. That much was true, and he didn't like doing what he was told simply because his tellers were usually bloody idiots. But Dumbledore was different; he wasn't necessarily less of an idiot, but he was more quietly persistent than the rest of them. "He'll nag me until I go, otherwise. And he kind of controls the school, in case you hadn't noticed, so there's not really any escaping from him."

Draco clicked his tongue in resounding distaste. "Wonderful," he said. Then he paused before clicking his tongue again. "Alright. I'll go with you."

"You'll what?"

"I'll come. It'll make it more bearable, at least."

Harry could only stare at him for a moment in a momentary stupor before smirking a little incredulously. "Got tickets on yourself, have you?" he asked.

"Of course," Draco replied. "I always make the room more bearable."

"I think some people might object to that assumption."

"Well, those people would be wrong. You like having me around." As if to prove a point, he leant towards Harry and pressed their lips together in a brief, chaste kiss.

Harry smiled against his lips. "Yeah. Funnily enough, I actually do."

Draco grinned back. "Splendid. Now, let me do your hair. Something relatively time consuming, I think; we can't have us getting to the headmaster's office with too much punctuality."

Harry let Draco do what he would. It had become a strange and unexpected kind of tradition in a very short time; every morning since that first, Draco had taken to weaving his hair into braids, or tails, or loops and coils, with remarkably practiced fingers. He spent far more time on Harry than he did on himself, to which Harry's comment on the fact provoked only a disregarding reply. "Well, I don't really give a shit what I look like. And I like playing with hair, so…"

And that was that. Harry let him. And if he grew to increasingly like the experience – because Draco really did have ridiculously dextrous hands – he didn't have to comment on the fact. Draco was happy, and Harry was content, so it worked.

Which was how, nearly half an hour later, Harry was playing with the curl of his fringe that always denied being tucked into a braid as he walked alongside Draco to the headmaster's office. Draco strode with swagger, comfortable in his carelessly sloppy shirt and trousers, his own hair messy and occasionally brush of his shirt to dislodge remaining breakfast crumbs. He seemed to leave a
few for the sake of an unnecessary statement.

"You keep tugging on it like that and it'll all come out," Draco said with less reprimand than simple observation.

Harry shrugged, glancing at him sidelong. The throbbing silver of Draco’s magic glowed just as brightly as it had taken to in the past days, and even more so when Draco eyed him sidelong in turn. Harry quite liked that fact, and not only because he liked the colour of Draco's magic. That is was so pretty was a bonus, but…

"It's a half-crown braid, you said?" Harry asked as they turned into the corridor leading to Dumbledore's office.

"Yes," Draco replied.

"Only a half-crown?" Harry pursed his lips with petulant indignation. "Why do I only get to be half-royalty?"

Draco snorted, and though he rolled his eyes, the slight brightening of his magic bespoke a less than ridiculing opinion on the subject. "You're an idiot."

"It's a serious question."

"Do you want to be considered royalty?"

Harry released his fringe and blew in a failed attempt to cast it aside. "Well, a prince is surely warranted particular rights."

"More than a hero?" Draco asked.

"You mean a hero that I'm not?"

"Yes. That."

"Surely. The plebians would have to abide by my every command."

Draco scoffed as they drew to a stop before the gargoyle leading to Dumbledore's office. "As if they don't already jump when you tell them to."

Harry arched an eyebrow. "Oh, because everyone so wonderfully leaves me the fuck alone when I ask for it?"

"Well, except that." Draco smirked, raising a hand to curl a finger through the lock of Harry's fringe. He liked touching, Harry had found. Simple touches, and as often casually non-sexual as lustful. Harry found he liked those kind of touches, too – or at least he did when they came from Draco. "Alright, then. I'll give you a full crown tomorrow, you snooty princess."

"I resent your tone," Harry said, scowling without truly feeling it.

Draco only grinned in response. "You are. Petulant, much?"

"Says you."

"Says me."

"You're the one raised as a stuck-up brat."
"A prince in my own right, actually."

"Bullshit."

"Bullshit." Draco pulled a face. "That's you. That's what you sound like."

Harry cuffed Draco on the back of his head, simply because he could. Draco laughed and slung an arm around Harry's neck to pin him in a headlock as gentle as a one could possibly be. Then it became not quite gentle. Then a scuffle. Then Harry found himself twisting and writhing and somehow wrapped around Draco with their lips locked and entirely too many layers of clothing between them. It didn't matter that they stood in the corridor outside of Dumbledore's office, or that the animated griffin regarded them with shrewd stone eyes. Harry didn't care. Fuck them all.

It was only when he caught a glimpse of a flare of ruddy pink washing through the griffin, so reminiscent of Dumbledore's magic that he could have been standing in the gargoyle's place, that he forced himself to pull away from Draco. Having Dumbledore watching was kind of creepy.

"What?" Draco muttered, lips still pressed to the side of Harry's neck. He did that a lot, Harry had noticed. Hickeys had become almost decoration around Harry's neck in a way that was both a little gross and a little arousing.

It took Harry a moment to catch his breath before speaking. "Maybe we should stop making out in front of the headmaster's office."

"Why?"

"Why? Because Sirius and Dumbledore are literally a staircase away."

"And?" Draco sounded faintly petulant. Harry could feel his lips pursing against his skin.

"And," Harry said, drawing out the word as he took a step backwards, "I'm pretty sure Dumbledore's watching through the gargoyle."

"What?" Draco straightened, casting a glance over his shoulder to the stone guardian. "How do you know that?"

Harry gestured vaguely at the gargoyle. "It practically vomiting Dumbledore's magic all over the place."

Draco glanced back towards him. His lips twisted in distaste. "You paint an image."

"I'm good at that."

"It's a disgusting one. Almost as disgusting as having a seedy, vicarious headmaster watching."

Harry scrunched his nose. "You just took that in a direction I didn't want to contemplate."

"I do that."

"I know. Often, actually."

"It's part of my charm."

"Yes," Harry agreed. "Unfortunately."

For all of his words and all of Harry's precautions, Draco still slung his arm around Harry's
shoulders as they stepped the remaining distance towards the gargoyle-guarded entrance. So 
*casually presumptuous*, Harry thought with a roll of his eyes, which pretty much encompassed 
Draco entirely. Some things never changed, even if his image as a picture-perfect Slytherin had 
faded.

"Move out of the way," Draco said, tipping his head to the gargoyle with that same entitlement. 

Harry snorted as the griffin blinked at him. "Yeah, 'cause that'll surely get him to move."

Draco drew his gaze towards him. "Alright then, smartass. How do you open it?"

"You love my smartass."

"Sometimes," Draco admitted, knocking his hip sideways into Harry's. "Well?"

Harry couldn't help but smile a little. *He* did that. *He* was the one that Draco touched, and spoke to, 
and acknowledged and – if only for his function as a witty distraction – a little bit loved. Harry had 
ever had anyone like that before. He was sure that, had he been able to see himself fully, his own 
magic would be radiating a glowing heat of its own.

Tightening his arm where it had hooked unconsciously around Draco's waist, he plucked 
Dumbledore's letter from where he'd stashed it in his pocket. "See here, at the bottom," he said, 
tapping his thumb upon the post-script. "Where it talks about flying saucers?"

Draco frowned. "I've a mind to discuss flying saucers, *if you would,*" he read, then eyed Harry 
sidelong. Then his gaze darted back to the griffin as it leapt dutifully aside. "What the fuck?"

"They're Muggle sweets," Harry explained.

"What… the fuck?"

"He uses them as a password."

"What the actual fuck is a flying saucer?"

Harry shrugged beneath his arm, stuffing the letter back into his jeans pocket and tugging Draco 
up the stairs. "It's like a, ah… I think it's rice paper stuff with sherbet in it? Or something?"

Draco pulled a face, silver magic leaping around his twisting features, that was dampened only 
slightly by his slightly judgmental glance towards the gargoyle. "That's so weird."

"I know. They sound disgusting, but they're actually –"

"I meant the password being a sweets, you idiot," Draco sighed, turning back to Harry and shaking 
his head as he followed him in step. "You'd think as an upstanding wizard he'd use something a 
little more prestigious. Imagine bringing the Minister for Magic up to his office or something and 
have to use a password like… I don't know –"

"Pop tarts?" Harry suggested.

"What the bloody hell is that?"

"It's a sickly sweet toaster-thingy. And it's delicious. I seriously need to educate you."

"Sounds heinous," Draco said, shaking his head again as his gaze dropped to the steps beneath his 
feet. "But honestly, think of the reputation."
"Would that hold you back?" Harry asked curiously. "I was under the impression that disconcerting people by acting erratically was kind of your thing now."

"It is," Draco replied with deliberate slowness. "But it shouldn't be Dumbledore's, too."

Harry only shrugged in reply. If anything, he thought that reason was all the more support for why Dumbledore would choose such a password. He was, strangely enough, vaguely similar to Harry in that regard; neither of them liked to fit their moulds.

Harry wasn't sure if he was particularly content with that realisation but shelved the thought for later.

They didn't pause outside Dumbledore's door, though Harry made a passing attempt at introduction with a double knock before opening it. The expanse of the headmaster's round office, a spread of ordered chaos, stretched before them, and seated behind his giant of a desk and in his grand chair, Dumbledore smiled benignly.

Sirius, in one of three straight-backed chairs before the desk, twisted in his seat until he was practically hanging over the arm. His eyes were wide and sparkling in greeting, mouth opening in what was undoubtedly the beginnings of a welcome, but it died as soon as Harry crossed the threshold. "What?" was all he managed.

Harry paused alongside Draco long enough for Draco to pose. It was necessary, he felt. Not so much a pose in the traditional sense, but Draco adopted a swaggering stance even in stillness nonetheless. It might be of a different fashion, but he still mimicked the intentions of his younger self years after disregarding Baby Malfoy. It had simply taken Harry some time to fully appreciate that echoing symmetry.

"Harry," Dumbledore said, his tone as warm and bubbling with pink magic as always. "And unexpected company, I see."

"Well, you didn't say I couldn't bring anyone along," Harry said.

"Indeed I didn't," Dumbledore replied. His eyes danced brightly with the magic that rippled throughout him. Despite being a bit of an asshole in Harry's opinion – as most people were – it was undeniable that his magic loved him. That fondness warranted begrudging recognition on Harry's part.

"Welcome, Mr Malfoy," Dumbledore continued, "although I fear you stay shall be short."

"Never fear," Draco said, and, with a likely imperceptible nudge of his elbow into Harry's side, he urged them across the room towards the remaining chairs. He waited until Harry had taken his seat before adopting his own – on the arm of Harry's chair. "I don't think it will be a short stay, actually. Unless Harry wants it to be."

"What…?" Sirius attempted again, but Harry spared him only the briefest of glances. Draco and Dumbledore didn't even bother with that much.

"I don't believe you would appreciate nor even wish to be a part of this meeting, Mr Malfoy," Dumbledore said.

"On the contrary, actually," Draco replied, "I could think of no place I'd rather be."

"Really? And why is that?"
"Because Harry's here, of course."

"Ah," Dumbledore sighed. "Yes, I've noticed you have both become close. Perhaps I underestimated the degree of your familiarity?"

That was enough for Sirius. He overcame his stupor in a rush, and in doing so overwhelmed the conversation instantly. "What the fuck? Malfoy? What the fuck are you doing here? And Dumbledore, I thought this was supposed to be a secret meeting with my godson –"

"Questionably godson," Draco muttered, likely too quietly to be heard by any but Harry. Harry bit the inside of his cheek to withhold a snort.

" – not to mention that the nature of our conversation will be delicate," Sirius continued. He snapped his gaze between Dumbledore and Harry, with only a passing glare spared for Draco. "You told me, Dumbledore. You said that, given I was disallowed access onto the school grounds unless Harry invited me, that we could have this at least. Hell, the only reason Remus isn't here is because you said that only one of us would –"

"Hold on a second," Harry interrupted, raising a hand in Sirius' direction. Sirius stuttered to a stop, but Harry hardly noticed him. His attention was all for Dumbledore. "You stopped anyone from coming onto school grounds?"

Dumbledore cocked his head slightly. "Of course. All students at Hogwarts are guaranteed their privacy. From everyone."

"Everyone including…?"

"Their godfathers that should be allowed to see them," Sirius said, glaring at Dumbledore as though in accusation. Which it likely was.

Dumbledore nodded again. "Precisely. And Ministry representatives who would wish to discuss further with you, Harry. And the reporters that have taken up residence in Hogsmeade of late."

"They're still there, are they?" Draco said, and a glance his way found his eyebrow raising as he leant backwards on his perch, arms folding.

Harry blinked, glancing between the two of them. "There're reporters at Hogsmeade?" he asked.

Dumbledore smiled once more as Draco patted his head fondly. "Of course there is, my ignorant child."

"Belittle me again, Draco, and I'll cut your balls off," Harry said casually.

Draco snorted in a laugh, which served to wipe aside the brief smirk that had arisen on Sirius' face. "Like you would. You like my balls too much."

"That's an inappropriate discussion topic to bring up in the headmaster's office," Harry said, leaning back into his chair as comfortably as Draco himself sat. "Even if it is accurate."

"What?" Sirius said, tone monotonously flat.

"Oh please, there's never a bad time to discuss it," Draco said. "You like my butt, too."

Harry shrugged. "It's a good arse."

"Thank you. I've worked hard at obtaining it."
"What a load of bullshit. You do nothing for it."

"True," Draco sighed dramatically. "I'm simply naturally gifted."

"What?" Sirius repeated, his tone exactly the same.

"A gift from your beloved parents?" Harry said, entirely ignoring Sirius and mostly Dumbledore, too. He knew what Draco was doing in raising the subject, and he was more than happy to oblige. It was true that he didn't hate Sirius; he just didn't want anything to do with him, and found his incessant, enthusiastic letters that spoke nothing but superficialities while disregarding the years between them nothing short of tiresome. He didn't hate Dumbledore, either, and even thought he might like him a little more after the whole prohibition thing – even if he was kind of a seedy old man.

Harry didn't want to attend the meeting. He didn't want to talk about the soul pieces – or Horcruxes, or whatever they were called– and he didn't want to mend a broken relationship with Sirius as Sirius so clearly wanted to. Why did people try? Why did Sirius and Remus, and Ron and Hermione, and every other member of Gryffindor house for that matter, seem so longing to try? Was it the fame? The fact that Harry had supposedly 'defeated' Voldemort by locking his magic away inside of him until he learnt to use it properly? It was an unlikely eventuality, but it could happen.

And Harry wouldn't know if it ever would happen, because he wanted nothing more to do with the creature who had once been Tom Riddle. Nothing at all. Voldemort was the Ministry's problem now, and Harry wanted no part of fixing him, or bringing him to justice, or executing him, if such was the eventual decision. Hell, Harry had never really wanted anything but for Voldemort to get off his bloody back.

Like everyone else, for that matter. Why were people so incessant? The only person Harry wanted on his back was Draco, in every sense of the term. Which… probably wasn't a good thing to be thinking in the headmaster's office barely minutes after making out in the hallway before said headmaster's eyes. Harry could still feel Draco on his lips.

For himself, Draco was only smiling smugly. He hadn't flinched at the mention of his parents, a fact that Harry noted and silently congratulated himself for. He'd raised the topic enough of late that Draco's automatic flattening of tone and hooded-eyed response had lifted somewhat. Harry almost believed Draco to now be as disregarding of his parents as he claimed he was.

"My parents were very kind in gifting me this, at least," Draco said, sweeping his arm along the length of himself indicatively. "I believe it's because they didn't have a direct choice in the matter."

"The wonders of the gene pool," Harry said, tapping Draco's leg idly.

"I am a wonder, aren't I?"

"What the hell is this?" Sirius said, finally managing to speak in more than repetition of a broad question. "Are you two -? Don't tell me you two are -?"

"Dating, I believe is the socially correct term," Dumbledore said, a merry hint to his words and a brief, amused swell of his magic. If his gaze wasn't so trained, Harry might have even shared his amusement. Was he seedy, or was that simply how his stare always was? It was hard to tell.

"Oh, we're not dating," Harry said, ignoring – once more – Sirius' relieved sigh.

"Of course not," Draco agreed. "Such would surely entail going on at least one date. I believe
fucking in every broom cupboard we come across is a more accurate description, is it not, Harry?"

"Just about," Harry said. At Sirius' choking stutter, he spared him a glance. "You alright, Sirius?"

"What…?" Sirius managed.

_Oh, are we back to monosyllabic questions again?_ Harry thought absently. "What what?"

"You -?"

"Yes?" Draco asked.

"You're not – you can't –"

"Is your objection that it's _me_ or that it's in every broom cupboard?" Draco asked. "Because either one, I have an objection to myself; we're related, for one, which means that it shouldn't be a problem with _me_, and two, I'm sure you fucked in every other broom cupboard too."

"Was it with Remus or my father?" Harry asked, tipping his head and widening his eyes with as much innocence as he could manage. It was tough.

Sirius' own eyes bulged. The violet waves of his magic flared briefly in his cheeks before fading and shrinking into itself. "What – the hell is going on here?" Sirius asked in a stutter. "Harry, what're you -?"

"Asking all the important questions," Harry replied.

"Was your father gay?" Draco asked, dropping his gaze to Harry.

Harry shrugged. "As far as I know, he loved my mother –"

"He _did_," Sirius ground out.

"- but you never can tell," Harry continued. "What do I know about who he experimented with in school?"

"There was no – no _experimenting_ –"

"Of course not," Draco said. The way he smiled at Sirius was lupine. "Because throwing a hoard of sexually charged teenagers into a boarding school together _surely_ wouldn't end up with a couple of hasty fucks against a wall here and there."

Sirius choked again. His eyes seemed fit to pop from their sockets, which Harry found interesting. He'd always thought that Sirius was attempting to be the 'cool' uncle; weren't cool uncles the people that struggling teens were supposed to turn to for consolation?

Not that Harry really knew anything about cool uncles. Vernon certainly wasn't any form of the definition, and Petunia equally lacked the 'cool aunt' tag. Remus was too quietly resigned, Arthur and Molly had barely managed the trust of parental figures before that trust had been vanquished forever, and to say that anyone else was –

"… don't even hear sometimes, do you?"

Harry blinked, brought back to the moment by a finger poking his cheek. He glanced at Draco. "What?"
Draco was smirking with such animated amusement that his lips quivered. "I'm talking to you, Black's practically having an aneurism, and you're zoning out?" He shook his head, gaze rolling upwards. "Do you see what I have to put up with?" he asked the ceiling.

"You love it," Harry said, twisting so he leaned into Draco.

"Actually, I don't. I believe I've told you several times."

"I know. You don't like being ignored."

"And yet you frequently ignore me."

"Well, you can't occupy all of my thoughts all the time," Harry said.

"Wrong," Draco replied, poking Harry's cheek once more. He snatched his fingers away just in time to evade Harry's swatting hand. "I should be on your mind all the time."

"You are," Harry said. "Just sometimes on the sidelines."

"That's not good enough."

"God, you're so demanding."

"Of course I am. You've always know this about me."

Harry was only detachedly away of Sirius slumped in his seat, cheeks a washed out, pale violet and head turned to watch Harry and Draco in open-mouthed horror. He was slightly more aware of Dumbledore watching with his head still cocked and eyes still bright. Seedy? Yes, Draco was probably right, and he likely was seedy. Harry decided he didn't warrant being disliked any less, even with the reporter thing.

Maybe it was Harry's passing glance that shook Dumbledore from his staring. Harry wasn't sure, but as Draco propped an elbow on Harry's shoulder and half-reclined in a way that couldn't possibly be comfortable but Draco made seem as much anyway, Dumbledore straightened slightly.

"Well, this has certainly been an enlightening discussion," he said.

"Enlightening…" Sirius echoed faintly before stuttering off a little.

Dumbledore continued as though he hadn't spoken. "But perhaps we can get back to the matter at hand?"

"Yes, please do," Draco said, speaking before Harry could even think of a reply. "We have places to be, of course. Broom cupboards and all, you know."

Sirius choked slightly again, and a brief glance in his direction found he'd paled further. Draco must have been doing it on purpose, Harry thought. Which, to be fair, was fairly characteristic of what Harry knew of him.

Dumbledore didn't reply to Draco's words but to smile merrily. And a little creepily, all things considered. "Of course. I'm sure you'll appreciate your final day of holidays before NEWT studies resume once more."

"A delightful reminder, that," Draco said.

"If you don't want to hear it, fuck off," Sirius snapped.
"No, I don't think I will," Draco replied, the picture of cool consideration. "No. No, I don't think so."

Dumbledore ignored the both of them, gaze fixing upon Harry. "I believe you read my letter. Have you considered my proposal further?"

Harry stared at him. Proposal? Which one, exactly? That he would help Dumbledore find the Horcruxes? That he would bow his head and turn into Sirius' persistently offered embrace? That he all but turn back into the boy he'd been at fourteen and disregard the running, the fear that grew less fearful over time, the independence, and change, and everything that made Harry himself that he'd developed over the years?

Of course not. Of course he bloody well wouldn't. Not the Horcruxes, or Sirius, or the regression. Harry was content with who he was and who he was with, if not so much what he was doing at the present time. He wasn't about to change that, except to maybe finally flip the education system off and escape abroad to who knew where as he planned to.

No more Horcruxes.

No more fighting.

No more people from his past who wanted the past Harry rather than who he'd become. He didn't want them, and he didn't need them. Not anymore.

"That's his thinking face," Draco said, cutting into Harry's thoughts. "It's very similar to his zoning out face, so it's hard to tell sometimes, but I know."

Harry rolled his eyes as he drew himself back to the present. "Shut the fuck up, Draco."

"What? I'm just proving how well I know you."

Harry doubted anyone in the room missed the lascivious connotations of his words, especially not because of Sirius' strange, hiccupping choke that he seemed to have taken to making that day. Prude. "That's entirely unnecessarily, I can assure you," Harry said. Then he turned back to Dumbledore and replied with finality. "No."

"No?" Dumbledore echoed.

"No?" Sirius said a heartbeat later. "No to what? What are you referring to, Harry?"

"To all of it," Harry said with a shrug. "No hunting down soul pieces. No turning back into a good little Gryffindor – which is a complete menace, by the way." He raised an eyebrow at Dumbledore and wondered briefly what the twitch to Dumbledore's lips meant. Amused, or dissatisfied? The unremarkable swirl of his magic could have been either.

He turned instead to Sirius. "No more of this, too," he said, gesturing to Sirius in what was admittedly only vaguely meaningful. "Stop with the letters, please. It's a little sad how many ways you've managed out to say exactly the same thing."

"How are you?" Draco quoted with perfect timing. "How are your studies going? Killing it, I'm sure. I hope you're giving your professors hell. How are Ron and Hermione? Have you patched things up yet? I don't suppose you've moved back up to Gryffindor house again, re-joined the quidditch team, plopped your arse back on the Gryffindor throne of the exalted', etcetera, etcetera."

"Hey," Harry said, shooting a frown Draco's way. "I thought you said just before that I wasn't..."
"Exalted," Draco repeated. "Not royalty. Use your listening ears, Harry."

"You're a prat."

"Git."

"Tosser."

"Wanker."

If Sirius had no reply to that, Harry couldn't really blame him. Silence was what he'd intended to induce, anyway. Dumbledore seemed at a momentary loss for that matter, too.

It didn't last long, but it was the final stance that Harry held. What proceeded after that didn't budge him even slightly. There was debate, of course. "You're needed, Harry," Dumbledore said countless times, right alongside cryptic phrases like, "You hold power the Dark Lord knows not," and "We shall never know that Voldemort has truly been defeated without erasing all possible forms of him."

"How will we know we've gotten all of them?" Harry asked when he'd been told as much one too many times. Draco followed right alongside him with the words, "And you naturally need Harry's help for this. Harry, who can do fuck all with magic because of his weird morals and shit."

"Hey, I'm competent," Harry said with a frown.

"You asked me to make you a pair of glasses."

"I'm competent in the right areas."

"Of course. Just not useful charms, or transfigurations, or –"

"We're not having this conversation again," Harry interrupted him before he could get taken away with himself. Draco only grinned in triumphant reply.

Sirius was almost as bad. "I don't understand, Harry," he said redundantly, because he clearly didn't and hadn't truly tried to. He was, after all, blinded to exactly what Harry had a problem with.

"Why? You don't want me to write you anymore? Can I at least visit you? Will you come to Grimmauld Place at the end of the school year?"

"Grimmauld Place is a hovel," Draco said with a sniff. "Filthy dirty."

"Says the one who still has breadcrumbs on his shirt from breakfast," Harry said.

"They're specifically placed. With purpose."

"I call bullshit to that."

"I'm ordered chaos. It's a thing."

"No, you're lazy. That's a thing, too."

For whatever reason, Sirius always seemed to fall into a state of shock whenever Harry and Draco shared such exchanges. Harry was entirely fine with that fact. He was, after all, growing just a little tired of Sirius' stuttering non-attempts at understanding.
To say it was a victorious meeting would have been a bit of an exaggeration, he thought, though not much. Dumbledore finally seemed to reach an end in his attempts, and Sirius' stupors begun to last significantly longer than those preceding it. With a glance between the two of them, Dumbledore's resounding, "So you won't… help? That's final?" ringing in the air between them, Harry nodded. He tapped Draco's leg with a finger before rising.

"I think we're just about done here," he said. Skirting around his chair, he spared a final glance for Sirius as Sirius seemed to claw his way from his shocked silence to heave himself to his feet. "Sorry to be such a little shit and all, Sirius –"

"But he's not really sorry," Draco said.

"Shut up, Draco," Harry threw towards him absently. "I mean it. I'm a bit of a shit godson, so you might want to look further afield. I'm not what you're looking for anymore. And you too, Headmaster," he added, sparing a glance for Dumbledore. "I'm not really the soul-searching type."

Draco snorted at his side before hooking an arm around Harry's shoulder. "Was that a pun?"

"A double meaning, so… yes, I suppose so."

"It was pathetic."

"I know. I just couldn't help myself."

Sirius took a tentative step towards him. The violet of his magic was so thin and washed out that it was more white than coloured. "But… Harry, I don't… I don't understand."

"I know," Harry said simply, looping an arm around Draco's waist. He smiled slightly at how easily it rested there. It had never been so comfortable before; not even with Les. "That's the problem, I think." Then he allowed Draco to turn him towards the door.

"I'd suggest you remain behind, but you're more than welcome to follow us," Draco called over his shoulder as Sirius took another step after them. "We've still got a fair few broom cupboards to explore."

"Are you still going on with that?" Harry asked as Sirius jerked to a stop behind them.

"I'm thinking of using it as a permanent euphemism," Draco replied with a leering grin.

"I'm pretty sure it already is one."

"Yes. Most likely. I have been using it for some time."

"You can't take credit for that."

"Actually, I can."

Harry didn't glance over his shoulder again as they passed through the headmaster's door. He didn't turn to catch a final glimpse of what would likely still be Sirius' pale face, faded almost into obscurity to Harry's Sight, or Dumbledore regarding him with a faint, shrewd frown, his own magic twisting in thoughtful contemplation. He very deliberately ignored the griffin with its pinkly-swirling eyes as they passed into the corridor, too.

"Well," Draco said, as they started down the hallway. His upbeat sigh resounded off the stone walls. "That went well."

Harry chortled; he couldn't help himself. "I guess."

"I can't imagine Dumbledore will nag you again any time soon."

"Maybe not," Harry said with a nod. "But I doubt that's the end of it."

"Most likely," Draco agreed. "Although, when we get out of Hogwarts, it'll be easier for us to avoid him."

Harry jerked to a halt. His grasp around Draco's waist drew him to a similar stop. Draco's eyebrow quirked as he turned towards him. "What?"

"Us," Harry said.

"What?"

"You said us."

It could have just been in reference to finishing school. Or it could have been a slip of the tongue. Or, just as likely, it could have been a deliberate slip as some means of Draco expressing his possessiveness in a way that practically breathed his arousal. Harry wasn't sure which one he preferred; maybe a mixture of all three?

Draco shrugged slightly, and though he feigned casualness, Harry wasn't fooled. His magic contracted slightly, the silver dimming but for at his core as though embarrassed. "Unless you act like a complete prat and ditch me after school, I expect I'll be sticking around for some time."

Harry blinked. He felt his mouth flop open and couldn't for the life of him think of how to close it again. "You… what?"

Sighing expansively, Draco turned on the spot, twisting until only his hand remained on Harry's shoulder, and raised his other to fiddle with a lock of Harry's hair. "Merlin, you're a pain the arse," he said.

"I can be," Harry said with a hint of his own lascivious insinuation. Only a hint, however; he was somewhat distracted.

Draco shook his head, tugging a little harder on Harry's hair. "You're a bit of a bastard to your godfather – let's call a spade a spade, here – and though I approve of it because he's a bastard too, most people would have a problem with that. But not me."

Harry stared some more before nodding slowly. He knew that; of course he did. Most people would likely consider his disregard for Sirius' attempts cruel. Those same people would likely think the same of his dismissal of Ron and Hermione's attempts, and those of the professors, and the few letters he'd received from Molly and Arthur Weasley, or Remus.

But Harry didn't care. Over the past weeks, the past months, he'd grown only more firmly grounded in his decision to leave the past behind him. He didn't think his old friends, those who had once been his family, were bad people, but he wasn't going to accept their apologies and welcome them with open arms once more. They were good people, but the fact of the matter was that they'd abandoned him at the end of fourth year when he'd needed them. And, just as confronting, they hadn't looked for him when he'd 'disappeared'.

That fact had been slower in realising since Harry had returned to Hogwarts. Since he'd spoken to Ministry representative, since he'd started receiving letters, and since words of 'custody' and
'guardianship' had been thrown around unnecessarily, because Harry was a legal-fucking-adult, dammit. But the more they talked and the more letters claiming "we're so happy you're alright" and "we can't wait to see you again" he received, the more he wondered.

They hadn't abandoned him so much as not cared enough. A little, but not enough. That much was evident in the fact that Harry hadn't been found since he'd run away from the Durleys. Why hadn't he been found? Death Eaters had no such trouble with it – why not his old friends?

Harry had cared, briefly. For a moment or two, he'd cared. And then he'd shrugged the thought aside. He didn't need to consider it. He didn't need those people who hadn't searched hard enough for someone they apparently loved and cherished, someone who was on the run from a mass-murderer while worn by confusion and resentment. Harry wasn't a fool; he knew how he'd been, how he'd felt.

Those feelings had been flung into sharp relief when greater things of importance had been dealt with. Like surviving Death Eater attacks. Like saving Voldemort's magic from him. Priorities.

Pursing his lips, Harry regarded Draco with a frown. For once, Draco hadn't interrupted his thoughts but simply waited for his reply. He continued to play absently with Harry's hair, and he must have some sort of fetish, because surely not even Draco could be so distracted by it. Or maybe he was; he had taken to his morning rituals with surprising dedication.

"You're weird," Harry said. "I am, as you say, a bastard, and yet you still want to stick around me."

Draco shrugged. "Surprisingly, yes."

"Even though I've ditched practically everyone else in my life?"

"Try because you've ditched them. Granger and Weasley were bad enough, but Black as well?" Draco shuddered in what was likely not wholly feigned disgust. "I don't like you that much."

"But you do like me," Harry murmured. He felt a smile touch his lips.

Draco stared at him. He was embarrassed again, and likely for his accidental admission. Harry could see it in the further contraction of his magic that, while shrinking, shone with an almost blindingly bright silver. Harry loved that colour. It made teasing Draco that much more fun.

"I believe we've been over this," Draco said in little more than a grunt.

Harry's smile widened to a grin. In an instant, he all but forgot about Dumbledore and Horcruxes. He shrugged aside thoughts of Sirius and repetitive letters, and of how much of a 'bastard' he was for dismissing them. Stepping towards Draco, he wrapped his arms around his waist; Draco was slim, but not bony. Soft, but a little hard as well. Harry found such contradictions somehow loveable.

"We have," he said finally, though even for his words it felt just a little different this time. "And I like you too." Then he reached for Draco and drew him into a gentle kiss.

Not that it stayed gentle for long. Not at all. Harry was decidedly grateful that no pink, peering eyes watched them as he crowded Draco against the wall and lost himself in his mouth. It was probably a good thing that classes hadn't resumed just yet; Harry wondered briefly what the student body would think of him cupping a feel up Draco's shirt should they be stumbled upon in the corridor.

And wasn't that a thought. He'd likely find out soon enough, Harry supposed, and found he didn't
really care what the other students thought at all.

When they finally drew apart, Harry was panting. It was with satisfaction that he noticed Draco as short of breath as himself. "Broom cupboard?" Draco asked between gasps.

Harry scoffed. "You need to get over that," he said.

"Never," Draco replied, and then Harry didn't really care much what he called it. What followed wasn't quite a broom cupboard but left Harry decidedly approving of the euphemism.
The Beauty of Shock Horror

There was nothing quite like seeing the horrified shock on the face of a Gryffindor.

Or any classmate for that matter, Draco decided. He'd realised that fact several years before at about the same time he'd reached the conclusion that bringing an expression of affront to Snape's face rather than thin-lipped satisfaction was far more gratifying. Or how, instead of McGonagall's begrudging approval, causing her eyebrows to snap to her hairline and her lips to pucker in distaste was more entertaining. It was what drove Draco to speak loudly to Pansy at the house table in the Great Hall – that he no longer really ate at – or to kick his feet up onto the nearest desk, or to throw himself onto the rug in the Common Room when there was a perfectly good couch available.

Draco did what he wanted, which was the primary reason that he'd taken to sprawling on the floor rug more often than the couches. He'd decided after his parents had left him, after he'd been given an unexpected gift of autonomy in the absence of a glaring guardian, he would do exactly what he wanted. Still, it was convenient when Draco's wants aligned with other peoples' dislike.

He wasn't alone in that matter, something that would have caused objection as recently as the previous year had it been camaraderie with anyone but Pansy or Blaise. Except that the particular someone was Harry. Rather than aggravate, Draco found himself delighted for that fact.

"So you dress like a slob because you never used to?" Harry asked one day shortly after Easter in an exchange that hadn't been a Truth but effectively equivalent. They were sharing more of those lately, and Draco quite liked that happenstance.

Stretched out on their balcony's marble floor, bathing in the evening sunlight, Draco nodded. "Partially. That, and the fact that I'm lazy."

"I never would have guessed…"

"Shut up. You essentially do the same."

"Really? How so?"

Reaching up to play with Harry's foot where it hung from his perch on the balustrade – like always, because Harry was like a bloody cat for how he sat – Draco raised an eyebrow. "You always wear the same thing, and don't pretend its not to be objectionable. You're like a baby Goth."

"Because of the black? That's hardly what makes a Goth. And wait, baby?"

"Yes. And the glasses."

"You chose and made the glasses for me."

"And the hair."

"Well, that one I'll admit."


Harry swung his leg slightly in Draco's grasp. He blinked lazily before dropping an arm down to stroke the top of Draco's head. Draco withheld the urge to purr. "Some bitch told me boy's weren't supposed to wear their hair long."
Draco snorted through his purring urge. "So, naturally, you grew it longer."

"I did."

"Don't ever cut it."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Harry muttered, and Draco didn't even pretend to hide the fact that, when Harry called him such, he got more than a little turned on. Harry seemed to realise most of the time anyway. It was a little uncanny, really; Draco suspected it had something to do with his weird magic senses.

In short, what Draco had learned from their exchange – and multiple exchanges since – was that Harry was as deliberately rebellious as Draco was. Could they fit together any more perfectly? Had it always been that? Draco had to wonder: if Harry hadn't left, would he have ever realised? He wasn't sure.

Whether he would have or not, however, Draco hardly cared. What mattered was that Harry was like him, and he was his. Just as, with surprising delight, Draco realised that he was just as much Harry's. It was an unexpectedly wonderful moment of understand.

And Draco wanted people to know it, preferably in the most blatant manner possible. Harry was his, and he was Harry's.

So he sat next to Harry in their first class back from the Easter Break. Without a word to Pansy or Blaise – the latter of which had openly declared to Draco that he'd informed Pansy that Draco and Harry were 'a thing now' – he dropped down into the chair at the back table alongside Harry's.

Harry didn't blink. Or he didn't visibly blink from what Draco saw; he still persisted in wearing the black-lensed glasses at every opportunity for a student confrontation. Blaise leered at Draco over his shoulder and Pansy rolled her eyes, but they otherwise ignored Draco's abandonment of them.

The Gryffindors noticed, of course. And the Ravenclaws. And the Hufflepuffs, though they out of everyone seemed the least concerned. Hufflepuffs were, by and large, strange like that, and though Draco was gradually growing to accept Harry's frequent reminders that 'not all kids sorted into houses fit the exact mould, you narrow-minded dolt', some things were undeniably the same.

Granger stared wide-eyed. Weasley's face became a startling shade of red. Mutters erupted throughout the room at a surprising pace, and Draco bathed in it like music to his ears. He did still enjoy being the centre of attention when it was by his choice.

"You're a flamboyant dickhead," Harry informed him fondly that afternoon when they retired to the chaos of the kitchen for dinner.

"I am," Draco said as he slouched across the table, watching Harry at the sink. Why Harry still insisted upon washing his own dishes rather than letting a house elf do it, Draco still couldn't understand, but he'd accepted it. They all had their quirks. Some of Harry's were just stupid. And strangely endearing. "You've always known this about me, and you love me for it."

Harry somehow managed to flick soapsuds across the impressive distance between them. Draco let them splatter his face without flinching. "You know everyone already knows that you hang out with me."

"Unfortunately," Draco said with a nod.

"Why is that unfortunate?"
"Why? Because that means I can't be the one to break it to them and leave them all stunned."

Harry snorted before shooting a frown towards the house elf at his side that was wringing its hands in distress. That such creatures actually *wanted* to clean was something that Draco still couldn't comprehend, even after a lifetime of living alongside them. The elf scurried away with a mutter at Harry's stare, if with many a backwards glance over its shoulder. Harry glanced back at Draco a moment later.

"You poor thing," he said, "that you won't get to cause a scene."

"Don't worry about that," Draco said, dropping his chin into a raised palm as he watched Harry turn back to the sink. The sight from behind was... well, Harry did wear somewhat tight jeans, a fact that Draco was more than happy to appreciate. "I haven't exhausted my trunk of wonders."

"Trunk of wonders," Harry laughed, shaking his head.

Draco grinned. When had he realised that Harry's laugh was so infectious? Or, more correctly, how hadn't he realised it in the past? Likely because Harry hadn't ever truly laughed in his vicinity before, but even so, Draco felt like he should have noticed. If he had, surely he would have acted on that 'sexual tension' Blaise was always going on about.

"I have a few more ideas," Draco said cryptically. It said something about Harry that he didn't question further.

And that he let Draco enact his ideas. Like shuffling unnecessarily close in their seats at their desks until Flitwick sighed and resignedly asked if such proximity was truly necessary. Like slinging an arm around Harry's shoulders – which was, he'd discovered only recently, where it most comfortably sat – and leaving a decidedly silenced Sprout in his wake. Or pressing a kiss on Harry's cheek that had the delightful impact of making Snape all but snarl in a remarkably similar display to the growl that sounded from a smattering of the Gryffindors.

It was fun. If Draco was to be honest, he was enjoying himself, which might not be in keeping with the commitment he, Pansy, and Blaise had declared at the beginning of the year but was too good to pass. Draco liked making a show and drawing attention, and Harry didn't seem to mind. If anything, Draco had caught him smiling on several occasions. He kissed Draco right back, too.

But the most important parts? The parts where Draco shared little touches as well as the most intimate of them, where he talked to Harry when it was demanded by a Truth, or willingly did what he was asked without the urging of a Dare – those, Draco kept solely between them. He liked the limelight when he chose it, but he also favoured his privacy, too. Such wasn't for the eyes of others.

Especially not that he was utterly smitten. When had that happened, exactly? Draco didn't know, but he found he didn't much care of the 'when'. He didn't truly care about a lot of things, but Harry? *About* Harry and *for* Harry and for what they *shared*…

Draco was invested in what was perhaps the first thing he'd chosen for himself – and he was loving every moment of it.

"Yeah, no, we're not going to get away with this."

Draco smirked, pressing his lips against Harry's neck. "Are you objecting or just stating a fact?"

"Did I say I was objecting?"
"You didn't," Draco ceded. "Which you usually do if you have a problem with it."

Harry nodded decisively. "Good. You're learning."

"Is that patronisation I hear?"

"Only always."

"Stop it."

"I'll stop when you stop."

"I'm only patronising when it's deserved."

"And I'm only patronising when you're a --"

"Oh, dear Morgana, I should have guessed. Really, you two? Really?"

At the sound of Pansy's voice, Draco glanced over his shoulder. Standing in the doorway to their Defence classroom, Pansy was rolling her eyes so repetitively that she must have been on the verge of a headache.

"You know," Draco said, turning back to rest his chin on Harry's shoulder, "I can see you rolling your eyes even though it's a cave in here."

"I still think Snape's half-vampire," Blaise said, wandering into the classroom behind Pansy. "He probably shrivels in the sunlight and that's why he needs such thick curtains.

"Blaise, that's been my hypothesis for years," Harry said.

"Oh, really?"

"Like you didn't know," Draco muttered. Then he forgot all about Blaise and Pansy, which wasn't particularly hard to do when Harry was comfortably straddling him.

Harry was right, and Draco knew they wouldn't get away with it. If the Gryffindors – particularly Weasley, who still seemed to be the most defensive of Harry despite Harry all but disregarding their every interaction – didn't all but drag them off one another, Snape would certainly have something to say about it. But Draco didn't care. That was all part of the plan, after all. Or the Dare, he supposed.

Not that Draco wouldn't have quite happily pulled Harry into his lap even without the Dare or the inclination towards provoking a violent outburst from every classmate who saw. He congratulated himself once more on suggesting they head straight to class halfway through lunch rather than waiting for the bell to sound.

"Potter, if he's being a demanding git, punch him in the nose," Pansy said as she passed him on the way to the desk right in front of them. "He's overly conscious of his nose; it's been a life-long phobia of his that he'll get punched and it'll wind up crooked."

"I'll bear that in mind, Pansy," Harry said. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it. I'd pay to see him punched in the face."

"You know," Draco said, raising his voice as he tightened his arms around Harry's waist, "I don't think I like you two being partners in crime. Stop it. Go back to hating each other."
"I never hated Pansy," Harry said at the same moment that Pansy said, "Actually, I think not. Potter's alright."

Draco pursed his lips. That didn't sound good at all. "Pansy, fuck off," he said. "Stop ruining my fun."

"She's just jealous that she's not sitting in anyone's lap," Blaise said as he draped himself into his seat, kicking his legs onto the desk before him. He raised an eyebrow at Pansy as she shot him a glare. "Right, Pans?"

"Don't call me that," Pansy said flatly. "And if either of us at sitting in anyone's lap, I'm the one in charge. You'd be sitting on me."

"Kinky," Blaise snickered, and only just ducked in time to avoid the smack she sent his way. "It's true! It's the same with Draco."

"I had thought that," Harry said, shifting slightly to settle more comfortably in Draco's lap in a way that surely couldn't have missed the fact that Draco was more than a little turned on. "Why exactly am I the one sitting on you?"

"Because you're a skinny bastard that I'd squash if I sat on," Draco said, then slid his hands into Harry's waistband. "That, and I like you on top."

"Too much information," Pansy said, wrinkling her nose as she finally took her own seat.

"Or is it not enough?" Blaise said with a leer.

"No, definitely too much."

"First of all," Harry said, ignoring them entirely as he raised a finger. "You're not that much taller than me."

"I've got a couple of inches," Draco said.

"Sex pun?"

"Shut up, Blaise."

"And two," Harry continued, ignoring Blaise's interruption again, "why didn't you tell me you like being on your back. Fucking hell, Draco, we need communication."

"Please stop," Pansy said, lowering her head to the desk before her. "My ears."

"No, no, keep going," Blaise said, practically hanging over the back of his chair. "Do you, Drake?"

Draco took it as a sign of their heightened mental synchrony that both he and Harry entirely ignored him again without question. He slid an arm up the back of Harry's jumper, trailing his fingers over warm skin. "Of course I like it, but then, I'm pretty sure I'd like just about every position."

"Please stop," Pansy moaned.

"It's a preference though, is it?" Harry said. "You've got to tell me this shit, 'cause otherwise I won't know and I'll just assume you like being on top."

"Please –"
"But then, when I think about it, you didn't last so long last night when I rode you, and –"

"Nope, enough." Pansy abruptly straightened. "Potter, I take it back. I don't like you."

Harry glanced over his shoulder towards her, and Draco could all but see the expression he wore: false innocence, eyes a little widened and eyebrows raised. "Sorry?"

"Bullshit you're sorry."

"Stopper your prudish ears for a second, Pans," Blaise said, waving a hand in her direction as he wiggled his eyebrows at Harry and Draco in turn. "I'm enjoying myself."

"You're disgusting," Pansy said, shooting him another glare. "And I'm never going to fuck you for this."

"What? Why am I the one in trouble?"

"Because you're just as bad as them. Worse."

"That's unfair. I'm only caught in the crossfire."

"You're the one who –"

Draco tuned them out after that. He couldn't quite help it, didn't want to help it, when Harry turned back to him and shifted in what could only be a deliberate manner. It was all Draco could do not to buck against him. "Are you intending to ravish me in the middle of the classroom?" he asked lowly.

Harry snorted. It shouldn't have been so hot, but somehow, the sound went straight to Draco's groin. "I mean it, you know," Harry said.

"Mean what?"

"About telling me."

"Honestly, Harry, I like pretty much everything."

Harry hooked his arms around Draco's neck, leaning into him until their noses nearly touched. "Still, I want to know, yeah? Maybe we can have a talk about this?"

"You want to talk about what I like?"

"And me," Harry added. "You self-centred prat."

Draco swallowed thickly. Maybe he really was too easily turned on, because being called a prat had never sounded so good. "Sounds good to me," he murmured, leaning further towards Harry until their lips nearly touched. "How about we skip class and remedy that fact, then?"

"No," Harry said, pressing a brief kiss upon his lips. "We have a Dare."

Draco almost groaned in frustration. He only didn't because their Dare? It was a good one. A really good one. Tempting, even. He settled for burying his head into Harry's shoulder and muttering promises that only Harry would hear. Harry only snickered and did things with his hips that shouldn't have been conducted in a classroom but Draco was eternally grateful he had the chance to experience.

Unfortunately, it mostly ended when the bell rang. When the rest of their classmates entered the
room. When first Granger almost tripped over herself when crossing the threshold and then Weasley similarly fell nearly flat on his face. Finnegan stared, mouth flopping open. Brown squeaked like a dying baby mooncalf. It was all easy enough to ignore – or pretend to ignore – even when the rest of their classmates arrived – until they exploded into torrents of horrified demands.

"What the hell is this?"

"Ew, stop! Stop it, you two!"

"Potter and Malfoy – bloody hell, I thought you were joking with the kisses."

"That's really not appropriate behaviour in a classroom."

Draco couldn't miss the words, but he pretended not to hear them anyway. To their credit, Pansy and Blaise dropped their respective disgruntlement and avid attention respectively to adopt similar nonchalance. Draco loved them both a little for that at that moment.

By the time the bell sounded again for class to resume, Weasley looked about to pop a blood vessel. At his side, Granger was blinking too rapidly and repositioning her glasses with unnecessary twitches. Glares and wide-eyes, mutters and scowls, all rippled through the room, and Draco… he kind of liked it. This was the type of behaviour that no one could overlook, not even the now-ogling Hufflepuffs.

Not even Snape, though he was unlikely to 'overlook' in the first place.

Draco hardly noticed when Snape entered the room. He was doing such a good job of disregarding his classmates' words that he barely noticed anything else in the room. Or, probably more correctly, he was entirely focused on Harry. How could he not be, when Harry sat atop him as though it were the easiest and most comfortable seat in the world? When he flopped his legs around the sides of Draco's chair and slumped into him more heavily. When he shot a blank glance at the muttering students across the room before deliberately turning back to Draco and planting a kiss upon his lips.

Draco had always been aware of Harry. When he'd 'hated' him, he'd been aware. When Harry had returned, he'd certainly been aware too, even if he'd pretended not to be. When they spent so much time together that they were practically joined at the hip – and in more ways than one – of course Draco was aware of him. Acutely so. And when Harry was right before him, so close he could smell his warmth and feel his breath upon his lips…

Draco liked sex. He loved sex, and with Harry it was mind blowing. But even when he wasn't as horny as a peacock flaring its tail feathers, Draco could appreciate what was before him. And that was that Harry was sort of beautiful.

He wasn't outstandingly so. Maybe he wouldn't stop passers-by in the street, or if he did it would be for other reasons. He was short, a little too skinny, and despite Draco's best attempts, his mass of hair consistently refused to cooperate with any kind of instruction. He slouched most of the time – which Draco couldn't really comment upon because he did so himself – and the hands-in-the-pockets and permanently bored expression when talking to just about everyone but Draco bespoke nothing but the angst-ridden mindset of the objectionable ex-teenager he was.

That was what a passing eye saw, anyway. Draco saw beyond that – like the way Harry's eyes sometimes glowed with his magic. Or how the scarring around his eyes seemed detailed and almost beautifully intricate, despite the cold fury it provoked from Draco for where it had come from. Like how his bottom lip was just a little thicker than his top that made his deliberate, provocative pouts
even more impressive, or that he had remarkably expressive eyebrows.

Or that his waist just demanded to be held.

Or that he had surprisingly impressive thigh muscles that afforded him a wondrous degree of stamina where it counted.

Or that his fingers seemed to have learned more from wand-waving than their disregard for the art suggested, because his grip was –

*Or maybe I am just horny,* Draco thought, smirking to himself as he returned one of Harry's kisses and nipped briefly at his bottom lip. *Not that Harry seems to care. Hell, I'm sure he's even happy for it, especially given that I'm likely the best he's ever had. Of course I am. Better than fucking-Leigh with his fucking name and stupid –*

"You look like an idiot," Harry murmured against his lips.

Draco arched an eyebrow. "What?"

"When you get that look in your eye. I can practically see you flexing your lack of muscles in an intimidation attempt to absolutely no one."

Slipping his hands beneath Harry's waistband once more just because he could, because he was *allowed* to, Draco grinned. The condescending criticism dribbled off him like water beneath sunlight. "Alright, then. Tell me what I'm thinking."

Harry raised his eyebrow, those expressive eyebrows that were so often hidden by his fringe and redundant glasses. Draco liked the glasses, if for no other reason than that *he* was the one who'd made them, but that it barred his own sight of Harry? That was regrettable.

"You're being a wanker," Harry said. "That's what."

"I'm always a wanker," Draco said dismissively.

"Got that right," Blaise said, glancing up from his discussion with a decidedly dismissive Pansy.

"No one asked for your opinion, Blaise."

"No one needed to. My opinion is always appreciated."

"I think you have an overinflated sense of your own importance," Pansy said with a sniff.

"I'm narcissistic," Blaise replied, smiling lazily. "It's part of my charm."

Draco ignored both of his friends as Pansy set about tearing down Blaise's ego. It was a thing of beauty to watch, but Draco had more important things on his hands. Literally. "You were saying?" he asked Harry.

Harry leant backwards slightly, fingers playing with the collar of Draco's shirt as he settled against Draco's hands. And if Draco maybe drew his hands down to his arse more than his back, the desk was in place to shield the delicately innocent eyes of their onlookers. Such fragile souls.

"You've got that possessive thing going again," Harry finally said.

"The possessive thing?" Draco asked, feigning ignorance.
Harry rolled his eyes. "I'm not a piece of meat, Draco."

"Yes, you are. We're all just sacks of meat with brains. Which are actually meat too, for that matter."

"I didn't mean in the literal sense."

Draco arched his own eyebrow again. "Are you suggesting that I only see you as a possession and not as a real person? That just because I have an undeniable inability to keep my hands to my self, to fuck in every corner and make sure everyone knows even if they don't see, and I'm still pretty sure that it would be the best idea ever concocted for you to sleep in my bed in the Slytherin dormitory, that I don't have restraint?" Draco clicked his tongue. "For shame, Harry. How could you think such a thing of me?"

"The fact that you have that entire little speech practically rehearsed is concerning," Harry said.

"I could go on, if you'd like."

"Please do," Blaise said, glancing over his shoulder again to grin wolfishly. What the hell was wrong with him? Pansy blessedly cuffed the back of his head, and Draco and Harry ignored him.

"I'm sure you could," Harry said, "but I'd rather you speak with actions rather than words. You talk too much."

Smirking, and not quite able to ignore the spreading warmth that flooded his belly at the suggestiveness of Harry's words, Draco leant into him until he barely had to whisper to be certain he was heard. "So this Dare today. Why don't we just say fuck it and leave already."

"You'd forgo a mutual Dare?" Harry replied just as quietly. The glaring mutters of their classmates almost swallowed his words. "It's not like it'll take long."

"I'm never one to shirk my responsibilities," Draco said, "but I have to admit I'm sorely tempted." Then he flicked his tongue out just briefly to touch Harry's lips.

Which was, naturally, the moment Snape walked through the door. Draco was only made aware of his entrance by the hissing sigh that pervaded the room, even through the natters of conversation. "Students will take their seats immediately. I care not for the misguided belief of seventh year superiority and leniency."

That was it. Those simple words, in the same bored, flat monotone that he always spoke in, had voices silenced and chairs scraping as students tucked themselves into their seats. Eyes turned towards the front of the room, quills and parchments were set onto desks, and expectant wait gripped the entire class.

Or most of the class, anyway.

Harry didn't move. He didn't climb off of Draco, nor even flinch at the similarly expectant silence that followed the class's shuffling. Draco didn't either, for that matter, settling his arms more comfortably around Harry's waist and dropping his chin onto Harry's shoulder to peer over his shoulder as Harry did the same towards the back of the room.

Silence. More silence. The classroom seemed to thrum with it. At his desk, Snape didn't move. He hadn't since he'd met Draco's eyes and Draco had drawn a complacent smile across his lips. Try me, he silently dared, and the barest tick of Snape's eye said he heard the unspoken words.

"Yes, sir," Draco replied. He didn't move.

More silence followed, and Draco felt more than saw eyes dart sideways towards him. Harry tipped his head until he was all but twisted to face the front of the room. Draco wished he could see his face; Harry pulled off innocent indifference remarkably well.

Snape's eye ticked again. "Potter, you will get off Malfoy immediately."

"We're actually quite comfortable," Draco said as Harry turned a little further.

"I didn't ask if you're –"

"If it's all the same, Professor," Harry interrupted, glancing fully over his shoulder now, "I'd really rather remain as we are. I figure, if I'm not doing anything productive in class, I might as well enjoy myself."

A gasp sounded. It likely came from Granger, but Draco didn't glance her way to check. He bit back his urge to snort with laughter as Snape's hands balled into fists in his sleeves. It was a bit of a giveaway of his rage, and one Snape always unconsciously hid beneath his cuffs. Draco, unfortunately – or fortunately, in his opinion – knew Snape too well.

"You believe my class to be unproductive, Potter?" he all but hissed.

Harry shrugged a shoulder. "To me? Yes."

"Your arrogance is remarkable, idiot boy –"

"I'd appreciate if you didn't talk about my boyfriend like that," Draco drawled. "I'm a possessive and protective prick, apparently, so it kind of rubs me the wrong way."

Another gasp. Then another. Snape's eye twitched in rapid succession to the sounds of, "Boyfriend? He said boyfriend?" and "No way…"

Harry glanced at Draco briefly, and Draco could see the knowing spark in his eye. He knew. Of course he knew. How could he not that, while Draco wasn't exactly declaring falsely, he wouldn't have likely spoken as he had without the Dare.

Get Snape to kick us out of class? It's almost too easy to be a proper Dare.

"Malfoy," Snape ground out, and the seventh year murmurs immediately silenced. "I will not be spoken to in such a manner."

"You won't accept protective posturing?" Harry asked, turning back towards him. "I thought this was a Defence class."

"A different kind of Defence, love," Draco said, deliberately laying it on thick and biting back a grin once more as Pansy glanced gave another exaggerated roll of her eyes. "I think he's attempting to teach us the magical kind."

"With 'attempting' being the operative word?" Harry asked, sparing the barest glance across the room when a choked stutter sounded from someone.

"Potter," Snape began, voice like ice.
"Exactly," Draco said, overriding him. "I find it entertaining to think that any educator thinks they can teach you anything, or that they should, given you've already defeated a Dark Lord."

"Malfroy, you will –"

"They try," Harry said. "It's just the wrong approach. And the wrong magic. And a bit of a jerk off."

"Harry," Granger called from across the room. Her voice was so alarmed that Draco almost glanced towards her to see if she was being abruptly confronted by a boggart. "Please, you shouldn't be saying things like that. Especially not to a professor who's –"

"Shut it, Granger," Draco said instead.

"Oi, you bastard!" Weasley spluttered, half rising from his seat. "Try saying that again over here. Just try it."

"Must I? That would require getting up, and as I've said, I'm quite comfortable with –"

"Harry," Granger said pitifully, "please, you should really just do what Professor Snape says –"

"Shut the hell up, Malfroy," Weasley snarled, rising further.

"Ron, don't be an arsehole," Harry said, shooting Weasley a disapproving frown.

"Harry," Granger reattempted.

"He can't help it, Harry," Draco said. "It's in his nature."

"Draco, must you?"

"I've a mind to hex you, Malfroy, just for being a tosser!"

"Resorting to violence so readily, Weasley? Your parents must be so proud."

Weasley blustered. Around him, his fellow Gryffindors seemed to realise his inability to speak through his distress and leapt to his aid. Finnegan blurted out a phrase so thickly accented that Draco couldn't understand a word of it. Patil glared towards Draco – and, unsurprisingly, the rest of the few Slytherins in the room – and spat barbs like, "Trust a Slytherin," and "You're all the same."

The Ravenclaw boy, Boot, raised his voice in unnecessary indignation of, "Class disruption is a crime!"

A Hufflepuff girl that Draco was fairly certain was named Bones twisted in her seat toward the Gryffindors behind her, frowning but speaking lowly in what was likely an attempt to soothe. It clearly didn't work.

Voices were flung. Weasley almost charged from his seat, a fact that Draco saw only from his periphery as he deliberately turned his attention back to Harry. Harry rolled his eyes and shook his head. Behind him, Pansy did the same with a surprisingly similar expression. Blaise – naturally – leered.

Was it chaotic? Maybe a little bit. Draco wasn't sure, but he didn't really care, because they were getting there. Soon, surely, he and Harry would be –

"Enough," Snape finally snapped.
Immediately, every speaker in the room fell silent. Seventh years and adults they may be, but Snape still held a degree of power over them. Why he hadn't spoken sooner, Draco didn't know – until he turned his attention towards Snape to behold his pale, unblinking countenance, lip curled severely.

"Thank you, Professor," Draco couldn't help but say. "It was getting a little rowdy."

Snape's lip curled further. He swept a silencing glance around the room before settling his gaze upon Draco and Harry. Draco tightened his hold around Harry a little more, just in case he felt tempted to move – which he wouldn't. For all that he feigned before Pansy and Blaise, it had been Harry's idea to sit on him in the first place.

Draco should definitely encourage that kind of thinking more often. Definitely.


Another wave of silence rippled through the room. Draco could feel the fierce attentiveness of his audience. It was almost impossible to withhold an unrepentant grin, but somehow he managed. "Unsightly?" he said, glancing back at Harry. "Now that's just rude."

Snape's tick was so pronounced that Draco could practically feel that, too. "Malfoy –"

"It's not that bad," Harry agreed. "I haven't even kissed you since class started."

"How positively tame of you, Harry."

"Just a peck, then? Or is that considered unsightly too?"

Weasley blustered without words. Someone gasped again – probably Granger. Hisses that weren't quite murmurs erupted and then silenced as Snape all but hissed himself. "Potter, you will be silent –"

"Oh, so now speaking is unsightly too?" Harry twisted in Draco's lap until he almost faced Snape directly. "Come on, Professor, it's not so bad. We're not all of us a bunch of prudes, you know. And it could be worse; Draco and I haven't even fucked on a single table for the benefit of our class's nosiness yet."

That triggered the gasps. And the widening eyes. And an admiring glance from Blaise, a smirk from Pansy's, and the shell-shocked horror that blanketed everyone else. For Draco, those few words hit him like an epiphany as Harry glanced back towards him with a smile.

I think I might just be a little bit in love, he thought. Who else would possibly to entertaining as to make such an announcement before the world? Who else would dare? And who else would care as little for propriety as Draco did himself? Harry was his perfect match.

Which meant Draco had to keep up the play. "We could if it was requested," he said with faux-pensiveness. "I mean, I'm up for it if you are, Harry. Professor?"

For a moment, Draco blinked at Snape through the complete silence. If the classroom had been shell-shocked before, it was practically the site of a frozen warzone after his words. And all of it centred around Snape, drawing into him like a retreating tide welling to crash forth in a wave.

A vein throbbed in Snape's forehead. It was thick, dark enough to be seen. His face paled further, and then –
"Out," he barked, his words like a lash. One fisted hand rose to jab to the door. "Get out. I have
withstood enough until this moment, but no longer. You lack of decorum in disregarding the school
uniform, your blatant egotism in shirking your studies and not even bothering to feign class
participation, but this kind of behaviour –"

"Would it be better if we just didn't ask?" Draco asked before he could help himself. "Just offer a
free performance?"

To Draco's eyes, Snape all but exploded. His face flattened to stone, though the tick in his eye
seemed to contort the entire left side of his face. When he continued, it was through lips thinned
and voice a growl. "You will get out of my sight. Now."

Draco didn't need telling twice. Neither did Harry, for that matter. In a split second, a scramble that
was as much a flight to freedom as flight from expulsion, Draco threw himself from his seat and
dragged Harry after him. As he lurched from the classroom, not even bothering to withhold his
spreading grin, he heard Harry's murmured, "Dare successful."

Was Draco in love? Maybe just a little bit. And they would likely be in trouble, but he simply didn't
care. What would even become of 'trouble'? If Draco had learned anything with Harry over the past
weeks, it was that there was little to be gained from following the rules.

Finishing school. Getting out the other side. Surviving. What was the point if he didn't live while
he did so?

They stumbled from the room to the sound of more gasps, more yawning, stunned wordlessness,
and Draco didn't look back. With Harry grasping onto his arm, he allowed himself to be tugged
away from the bomb site they'd left behind them. Barely a corridor away, their feet slapping on the
stone floor, Draco couldn't suppress a bark of laughter. Even less so when Harry flashed a laughing
grin towards him.

"Freedom!" Draco cried as they ran.

Harry's laughter joined his own. "And escape!"

Draco tipped his head back as he ran. He felt like a child in the throughs of mindless joy. Where it
had come from, he didn't quite know, but he suspected it had a lot to do with Harry. A lot.

"To where do we go this liberated afternoon, then?" Draco asked as they hooked and nearly
skidded around a corner for their speed. Why were they even running? Draco didn't know. He
didn't think he cared to know.

Harry, grasping Draco's wrist, twisted in step until he was all but running backwards. His grin was
infectious; had Draco not already been sharing it, it would have a inspired purely blissful one of its
own.

"Just follow me," he said. "I've got an idea."

Follow you? Draco thought, shaking his head as they ran. As if I'm not doing that already. Or
maybe I just always have been?
"You can't be serious."

Harry glanced at Draco sidelong. He was a bright flare of swirling silver, the magic rippling across his shoulders and plucking at the tufts of his unruly hair. Even more brightly, Harry suspected, for the dimness of the magic that drifted around them. The Muggle world was always less thickly draped in colour, after all.

"Are you chickening out?" Harry asked.

Draco didn't turn towards him. He stared unblinkingly at the store before them, one of countless in the yawning expanse of the shopping centre. It was a little darker than those around it, the windows shaded even to Harry's eyes as though to offer privacy to those within. If Harry hazarded a guess, he would suspect that Draco might even be intimidated by the sight of dubiously welcoming windows.

Or it could have been the name. Or what the store specifically was. Most likely, it was a bit of both.

"I'm not 'chickening out'," Draco replied. "I'm just saying, you can't be serious."

"Oh, I'm deadly serious."

"Deadly? Should I be concerned?"

Harry smirked. "You are. You're chickening out."

Finally, after what had been nearly a solid five minutes of staring, Draco turned towards Harry. He regarded him with a flat, hooded gaze, the kind Harry recalled him using years ago but that he'd certainly mastered over the years. "I. Am. Not."

"Chicken shit."

"I'm not –"

"Are you scared? You are, aren't you? You're scared."

Draco's eyes narrowed. "You know," he said, his tone dangerously conversational, "I never saw you as a bully, even if I did used to think you were an asshole. Where has this come from?"

Harry only grinned. "I'm not bullying you into anything, Draco. An eye for an eye, no?" And, with a gesture, he pointed to his own eyes indicatively where they'd been absented of his glasses all afternoon.

Draco silenced at that. Slowly, slowly, he turned back to the parlour before them. "Any store that announces itself with the name 'A Passing Stab' should be regarded with contempt. And caution."

"It's a tattoo parlour," Harry replied. "I think it's referring to the needles. And the piercings."

Draco swallowed, and Harry couldn't help himself. His grin widened; this was payback, and much
deserved, in his opinion.

They'd fled Hogwarts. Or, more correctly, left in an enthusiastic fashion, because 'flight' entailed running away in fear. Ecstasy and liberation was a different thing entirely. Barely feet outside of the school wards, Harry grabbed Draco's arm, dragged him to a stop, and ordered him to stop. Then he Apparated them away.

Draco staggered a little when they landed. Tucked in an alley in the middle of London, the sounds of traffic – horns tooting, buses sighing, doors forcibly slammed – thrumming nearby, he turned to Harry with widening eyes. "You can Apparate?"

Harry, already making for the end of the alley, paused in step. He blinked over his shoulder towards Draco; though his excitement hadn't quite dimmed, the bubble of enthusiasm still swirling in his chest, he frowned. "Huh?"

"You. I didn't know you can Apparate."

"Of course I can. It's not exactly hard."

"But you…" Draco trailed off, frowning himself as he stepped to Harry's side.

"What?" Harry asked.

"You suck at pretty much any conventional magic. Maybe my scepticism is warranted?"

Harry snorted, waving a hand at Draco's face. "Conventional? Really? Do you even know how long Apparation has been around for?"

"A long time, I'll wager, from your condescending tone."

"It's old magic," Harry said, turning back to the mouth of the alleyway. "And it's big magic, too. And helpful. And good. Of course I can do it."

He poked his head out onto the street, glancing both ways at the thick channel of pedestrians and the thicker lines of congested cars idling bumper-to-bumper. The magic was thinner than it was in the Wizarding world, but it was still visible. It still coiled around the hoods of cars, touching briefly and faintly upon the passers-by, filming the buildings in a gauze so light it seemed to be nothing if not solidified sunlight. It wasn't quite as beautiful, not as noticeable, not as helpful as Harry preferred, but it would do.

He was about to step out onto the street when Draco made a snatching grab for his hand. Harry glanced over his shoulder again to find Draco's vibrant, silver-white glow standing just behind him. He was happy, Harry saw. Excited. Thrilled, even, and surprisingly so, because for a moment after the Apparation, his magic had frozen and muted in shock. Now, though…

"You surprise me," Draco said, as though the realisation was an epiphany.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "O… kay?"

"I like it."

"You like me, as I seem to recall you saying," Harry reminded him.

Draco's smile grew crooked. In a surprising act of his own, he raised Harry's hand to his lips and kissed his knuckles. Harry felt his other eyebrow rise to join his first. "I really like it," Draco said.
"Show me more?"

There was a lot to Draco's words. A lot that went unsaid. It meant something, those three words, because Draco was Draco. Even if he'd practically renounced his name, he'd still been raised a pureblood. He still had his prejudices, though they were tucked beneath the objectionable surface. He still, Harry knew, disliked the Muggle world as one would dislike a rather offensive smell; he couldn't do much about its presence, but he accepted it was there.

Harry intended to do something about that. After all, he would be leaving for the Muggle world just as soon as the ministry ceased breathing down his neck. And if he had his way, that would mean that Draco… well, hopefully, it meant things.

That Draco insinuated he wanted to 'know more' was a step in the right direction. Harry hadn't realised he'd even been vaguely concerned for the matter until then. But when Draco spoke, he couldn't help but grin widely. Tucking their linked hands to his own lips – and didn't that feel nice? Harry had never really held hands with anyone before – he nodded. "It would be my pleasure."

So he did. They did. And Harry found himself seeing Muggle London with new eyes – metaphorically speaking.

There was no plan. Harry hadn't even considered the possibility of visiting when he'd posed the Dare to Draco the previous day. They were to get out of class, and after that was anyone's guess. But it had simply clicked, the idea seeming so tempting, and Harry made use of his capacity for Apparition to drag Draco to all the places he should have seen but pureblood upbringing had denied him. Not the big things, though. The big things were boring.

Harry took him to the hidden gems.

They drift down the canals of Little Venice, and Harry made sure Draco experienced the true adventure by taking a dunk, much to the horror of their of narrow boat's pseudo-captain.

"It's warm enough," Harry assured the man between choking laughter as he dragged a spitting Draco back into the boat. "He's not going to freeze to death, so don't worry." Draco was pissed, demanding recompense in the form of a luxurious drying experience by Harry's own magic, but it was worth it. And he wasn't really that pissed.

Besides, he got Harry back by demanding a trip down High Street, weaving through Kensington and taking what must have been deliberately slow steps down the entire length of the road. He didn't even buy anything from the overpriced shops that he looked at, either.

"I'm not a materialistic sod, Harry," Draco said when Harry stopped at the very end of the street and stared at him flatly. He didn't need to speak; Draco knew. "Besides, I'm hardly one to bother with dressing myself up. Surely you know me better than that."

Sadly enough – or happily? – Harry did. He definitely knew him well enough for that.

In retaliation once more, Harry dragged Draco through Shoreditch, bypassing its streets of mural-streaked walls. Draco complained, not to mention repeatedly pointing out that it was a pointless venture because Harry couldn't bloody-well see any of the paintings, but Harry ignored him. He simply loved the way the magic clung to the wealth of street art on display. Even better was when Draco – because he was a shit – charmed it all to gradually shift colour into negatives over the course of the afternoon.

"That's peoples' hard work, you fucking tosser," Harry said, even if he did delight in the swelling
spread of magic.

"It'll change itself back in a few hours," Draco replied, smirking and flourishing his wand. He seemed entirely too proud of himself.

They bypassed Buckingham Palace – via Apparation and a brief stop – and Harry regretfully declined Draco's suggestion that they take a peek inside. "Because we can," wasn't a good enough argument, in his opinion. Dennis Severs' house, however, Harry did allow. Apparently, the display house wasn't to be opened to the public for another whole year, but...

"He's been recreating history from the early seventeen hundreds in the form of rebuilt rooms for something like twenty years," Harry whispered as, avoiding the owner of the house himself, they ducked into a cupboard. It was a tight fit.

"So he doesn't actually live here?" Draco whispered back, pressed against him and smelling far too clean for the dusty, polished innards of the cupboard. "Fuck this, it's hardly even trespassing, then."

Harry nearly blew their cover by snickering, though it likely didn't matter. The crack of their departing Apparition probably indicated their presence as much itself.

Down Camden Passage – “They have a market on today?” Draco asked – and skirting briefly around the blossoming greens of a supposedly 'secret garden' in Regent's Park, Harry barely slowed for Draco to catch a glimpse of any of it. It was the thought that counted, after all. That they were doing something. Together. And skipping school, which was one of the best parts of it.

And then –

"Of all the places in London to eat," Draco said as, with the sunlight dying at their backs, Harry led him into one of his favourite cafés in the city, "you choose a dingy little shithole like this?"

"Just wait," Harry said, opening the glass door to the tinkle of a bell.

"It's so small," Draco said, following in step behind him despite his complaints. "And dark."

"Is it?" Harry said innocently, glancing over his shoulder. "I hadn't realised."

Draco missed his sarcasm – or deliberately overlooked it, Harry wasn't entirely sure which. "How do you even know this place?" he said. "Have you been everywhere in London?"

"In the past half a year or so? Yes."

"And of all the places you've surely eaten at, you chose –"

"Draco," Harry said, pausing in step again at a second door barely three steps after the first. "Shut up. You'll enjoy it."

Draco protested. Of course he did, because he protested to just about everything. But as soon as Harry opened the second door and led him into the depths of 'Whiskers and Nibbles', he knew he had Draco sold.

Which he did. Of course he did. It wasn't the food – too much chocolate in the sundae that Draco denied was a problem because 'there can never be too much chocolate' – and the seating arrangement was 'as dingy as the shop looks', according to Draco's expert opinion. He had far too many opinions, Harry thought. Even when they were good ones.
"This is genius," Draco declared, barely seconds after they'd taken their seat. He positively glowed as one of the café's resident cats leapt up into his lap, another coiling around the legs of his chair and butting his ankle, while a third reclined along the back of their booth. "Why has no one ever considered having cats as a source of entertainment in a café before?"

Harry couldn't help but laugh. It was fun teasing Draco, fun teasing other people with Draco, but seeing him happy? Making him smile and knowing it was Harry who had put the smile there? That trumped it all by far.

He shrugged. "Dunno. Give it ten years though, I reckon, maybe twenty, and cafés like this will be all over the place."

"I approve," Draco said, stroking the back of the cat in his lap like an evil villain from one of Dudley's old films. He left trails of delighted silver magic in his wake.

"Good to hear," Harry said, grinning. They stayed until nightfall, and Harry didn't think it had all that much to do with the sickly sweet sundae that Draco only just finished.

How they wound up in a fluorescently lit shopping centre, Harry didn't quite know. It was huge. Huge. And packed with so many shops that Draco, in all of his denials for being materialistic, flourished in. There was still some of his old tastes evidenced, such as how he abruptly decided he wanted to buy a pair of boots.

And aviators.

And more sweets that he surely felt inclined to eat after his earlier sundae.

And a veritable store of kitschy jewellery from a shop that looked to be owned by vampires.

And the cosmetics store next door, too, despite Harry's protests.

"You don't even wear make-up," Harry sighed, ignoring the frowning stare of the shop assistant. He was used to that stare; it was the kind of attention garnered from those who thought Harry was wrong for wearing worn clothes, or his hair long, or smoking when he'd gone through the phase before quitting because someone said he looked 'cool' and 'rebellious' when he did so. Who the fuck chose to smoke because it looked 'cool'?

Draco paused in accepting the bag from the assistant. He similarly ignored the young woman but to shoot her a glare that caused her to flinch and recoil. The swelling brightness of satisfaction in Draco's magic was very telling as he turned back to Harry.

"It's not for me," he said, then eyed Harry pointedly.

Which was how Harry found himself dragging Draco to a tattoo and piercing parlour. If he was going to be pinned down and drawn on with eyeliner, Draco was going to be made to do something just as objectionable. It didn't help that Harry couldn't even bloody well see himself, the sodding prat.

As Draco eyed the parlour in front of them, Harry smiled brightly. The payback was highly deserved, in his opinion. Draco should have known what he was getting himself into. "Are you just going to wait outside, then?" Harry asked, taking a step towards the doors. "Chicken shit."

Draco pouted, eyes narrowing. His magic, still a little warily muted, pulsed slightly as if in affront. "You know," he said almost conversationally, "I have an issue with tattoos."
Harry cocked his head. "Tattoos in general?"

"Tattoos on me," Draco clarified.

"And the reason for that is…?"

Sighing emphatically, Draco patted his forearm indicatively. "My parents instilled the fear of Merlin in me for the Dark Mark from a young age. Call it instinctive nowadays."

Harry stared. *Oh yeah, I'd almost forgotten his parents were Death Eaters...* Pausing as a shopper passed through the space between them, Harry stepped towards Draco. Without ceremony, he grabbed Draco's hand and shoved his sleeve up to his elbow.

"Oi, what're you -?"

"You don't have one, though," Harry said, grazing his fingers over Draco's arm. The trail of his green magic mingled with and clung to Draco's in a quietly glorious smattering of colours and sparkles. "You never got Marked yourself?"

Instead of replying, Draco captured Harry's hand and laced their fingers. It was funny how he did that; Harry almost would have expected him to grow indignant for the question, or the touching, or the topic itself. But then, Draco had changed, too. In many ways he'd changed just as much as Harry had over the years.

"I'm not going to get a tattoo," Draco said.

"You know," Harry replied slowly, "facing your fears and all practically spits them in the face."

Draco sighed. "I didn't mean *ever*. One day I might not be so averse to it –"

"One day?"

"- but not now," Draco continued over him. "Besides, how do people even decide what to get for something like that? It's a lifetime commitment, getting a tattoo. Sticks with you for –"

"Oh, I don't know about that," Harry said, interrupting him in return. "Firstly, there are ways, magical and otherwise, to get rid of them if you really want to. And secondly, they don't necessarily have to be anything important so long as you like them. *Mine* certainly isn't."

Draco's hand, fiddling absently at Harry's captured fingers, stilled. Harry saw his magic pulse once more as his eyebrows rose. "You've got one?"

"I do."

"How have I not seen it?"

"Maybe because I'm deliberately keeping it hidden from you?" Harry said, tipping his chin with feigned defiance. He couldn't help but smirk.

"Show me," Draco immediately – and predictably – demanded. "You have to show me."

"Maybe," Harry said.

"Harry, you –"

"Draco, I believe I just gave you a Dare," Harry interrupted him again. "Are you going to back out
Draco paused and stared at Harry. His surprise faded into consideration, then a smile tugged at his lips. Harry liked that smile. He liked it a lot, in fact, and if for no other reason, he was satisfied that they'd left Hogwarts that day just to see it so often. Maybe Dumbledore would have something to say about the matter, but it was unlikely; Dumbledore was weird like that. Maybe other professors would, alongside complaining about the 'horror' Harry and Draco had inflicted upon their classmates in Defence, but Harry didn't really care about them. He didn't care that the ministry had cautioned him to be wary and cause no fuss until he 'finished school', or that the reporters that had allegedly been clamouring for an interview for months would leap upon their rule-breaking like a frog on a cricket.

Harry didn't care. It was worth it. He knew it was, because his magic felt warmer than usual, tingling in his fingertips and murmuring its appreciation as it nestled around his shoulders like a comfortable embrace. Harry had learnt that, when his magic was content, his actions couldn't possibly be bad.

The feeling drew a satisfied smile onto Harry's own lips. As if in response, Draco's widened, and any wariness faded to a mere shadow. Kissing the back of Harry's hand and ignoring the wide-eyed stare of a passing cluster of older women, he stepped to Harry's side. "Alright, then. I'll come with you and let strange people in a dark parlour stab me."

Harry couldn't help but laugh. "You make it sound so sinister," he said.

"There's a reason for that," Draco muttered.

Harry didn't reply but simply tugged Draco towards the store. It bespoke a lot that, despite barely minutes before showing intense distaste for the thought, Draco followed him. He'd followed him all day, for that matter, and Harry would remember that.

The echoing crack of their Apparition sounded around them as Harry dumped them both in the middle of Hogsmeade. Draco staggered slightly. It was next to impossible not to when Side-Along travelling; he'd accepted that fact long ago.

Hogsmeade itself was dark but for the Three Broomsticks thumping with chatter half a street away. The night air had a chill to it, a sharp edge that nibbled at Draco's fingers and slipped up the cuffs of his sleeves. It wasn't cold, exactly, but not warm enough to warrant dawdling outside.

But Draco would. He would in a heartbeat if it meant remaining with Harry – and only Harry – for just a little longer.

It had been fun. More fun that Draco would have anticipated had they made concrete plans, and he still thrummed with the thrill of it, even as weariness began to set in. He'd never spent a day – or even just an afternoon – in Muggle London before. While the dunk in the river of Little Venice hadn't been appreciated because Harry could be a fucking asshole at times, and squeezing themselves into a cupboard at Denny Severs' was an experience both confronting and arousing, Draco had enjoyed it. He'd enjoyed almost every moment of it. And he'd made some startling revelations, too.

He'd decided he would request sickly sweet sundaes from the house elves at every mealtime thenceforth.

He'd decided he wanted a cat.
He'd decided he thought aviators suited him quite well, and felt even more satisfied for the fact that he'd be wearing his own objectionable and anti-dress-code eyewear right alongside Harry.

And he'd decided after a brief stop in the public toilets – toilets that stank, were grimy, and had been as much an experience as the rest of the afternoon – that he quite liked his piercings despite his original dubiousness. His ears still stung slightly, despite the Analgesic Charm he'd cast upon himself, but he liked them. His eyebrow felt strangely heavy, his attention hyper focused upon it, but he liked it.

He liked Harry's, too. Turning towards Harry as he straightened in the middle of Hogsmeade, Draco couldn't help but stare a little. Harry had gotten more than himself, because apparently he had something of a masochistic streak and hardly felt the pain of piercings. His own ears were repeatedly punctured, and the stud in his nose had effectively captured most of Draco's attention for the last hour.

It suited him. Like the eyeliner Draco had all but insisted upon drawing upon him. And the messy mermaid braid hanging over his shoulder. It said something that, when an idea tickled Draco's fancy, Harry let him have it. He acted like he didn't care, which was an incredible falsehood given how much Harry clearly did care how he looked, and how people thought of him. Draco understood that; he might act like he didn't care, and to a degree, Draco wouldn't make the effort for anyone, but that very lack of effort was an act itself. Some days, Draco didn't want to be as messy as he was; he just had a reputation to uphold, if one a little different to how it had once been.

Harry was the same, but he'd let Draco do what he'd wanted. And it looked incredible; even through the darkness of night swathing Hogsmeade, Draco could see it. He could hardly look away.

When Harry straightened, he glanced Draco's way and grinned at him. It was gorgeous. It was... captivating, even. Draco was so suddenly aware of that fact that he was surprised it hadn't hit him before. It had only taken a manic afternoon of countless Apparitions and multiple piercings to discover it.

"What?" Harry asked, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jeans as he turned towards Draco. The clatter of the door to the Three Broomsticks sounded behind them, but neither Draco nor Harry spared it a moment of their attention. "You're staring at me funny."

"I'm just admiring," Draco said honestly, because there was no point in beating around the bush.

Harry snorted, and Draco absently wondered if it hurt with the piercing through his nose. "Flattery won't get you anywhere," he said.

"Won't it?" Draco asked, stepping towards him. Because he could, because he was allowed to do so as Harry had let him, and because he wanted to, he looped his arms around Harry's waist and tugged him towards himself. "I'm pretty good a wooing, you know."

"Claiming you're good at wooing isn't actually a means of flirting," Harry said, chuckling as he tugged his hands from his pockets and wrapped them around Draco in turn. He was warm, Draco noticed. Always warm. It had to be a product of his magic's attentive care, and Draco kind of loved that fact.

"It's not working for you?" Draco asked.

Harry shook his head. "You sound like a prat."
"I am a prat. Or so you always tell me."

"True." Rolling his eyes, Harry rose on his toes slightly and kissed Draco with a brief touch of warm lips. "Lucky I like you anyway."

"You just think I'm pretty," Draco murmured against his lips.

"That's true too."

"I feel so objectified."

"You love being objectified."

"Not by everyone."

"So just by me?" Harry tipped his head to the side, fluttering his eyelashes temptingly. Or at least it was tempting to Draco. "Should I feel flattered by that?"

Another clatter of a slamming door sounded from the Three Broomsticks, but Draco ignored it just as he had the first. "Of course," he said. "You're special. That means that –"

"Merlin's beard! It's Harry Potter!"

The voice snapped through the night. Through the darkness, the chill, it slapped Draco like a blow to the back of his head and he immediately swung his gaze over his shoulder. As he did, he saw them, and a wave of infuriated regret immediately welled within him.

Are you fucking kidding me? What a way to spoil a perfect day.

They were clearly reporters. Draco had never seen them before, but he knew that much. They had an aura to them, a brightness to their eyes that Draco could see even across the distance between them that was rapidly being chewed up by quick steps. Three of them, moving in a dreaded horde, and as they hastened towards Draco and Harry, he saw one pull quill and parchment from their pocket.

Fucking reporters, Draco thought, glaring at their approach with growing frustration. Only to have that frustration die as he felt Harry tense in his hold.

He wouldn't have noticed it if they weren't all but wrapped around one another. Harry's face didn't change – or, more correctly, it grew blank but for a touch of boredom. His shoulders didn't hunch, and he didn't withdraw, but Draco felt it nonetheless. It was as though every muscle seized for a moment, bunching, repelling… and then it left him and he sagged just slightly.

Glancing at him sidelong as he remained turned to the rapidly approaching reporters, Draco prodded his hip unobtrusively. "What?" he murmured.

Harry drew his own gaze sidelong in turn. "What what?"

"What's wrong?"

"Other than that I hate reporters? And people getting in my face?"

"Ah."

"Yes. 'Ah'." Harry shifted, and this time he did draw away just a little bit. His chin rose with a touch of defiance. "No one knows how to leave well enough alone."
Far be it from releasing Harry from his hold, Draco tightened his grasp. He ignored the exasperated question in Harry's gaze. "Shall I scare them away for you?"

"For me?"

"As a gift. I'm a giving soul."

Harry scoffed under his breath and Draco silently congratulated himself on stirring his amusement. "Bullshit. And you're not that scary."

"Actually, I think you'll find I'm a terrifying person. Just ask any first year —"

"Harry Potter," one of the reporters, a woman with excessively tall hair, exclaimed as she all but skidded to a stop before them. "By God, what a surprise it is to see you!"

"A wonderful surprise," one of the men at her side said. He grinned far too widely for Draco's taste. It looked like it must hurt his cheeks. "We've been waiting here for days to try and get an interview."

"Did the headmaster indicate that we were waiting?" the woman asked. She waved a hand at the second man, and Draco frowned as he saw him extract a camera from the folds of his robes. "It's a little bit of an unconventional hour, but we'll take it!"

"Anything you have to say, Mr Potter," the smiley man said. "Anything at all, we'll take it."

"You haven't spoken to any of the other crews here yet, have you?" the woman with the hair hastened to add. "Not Ygraine's, I hope; Merlin, she's such a bitch —"

"If we could trouble you to answer a few questions —"

"Just a few."

"- and pose for a few shots —"

"Only a few shots."

"- we would be so grateful." Smiley beamed. Surely it must be hurting for how wide it was. People shouldn't have so much mouth in Draco's opinion. It was disconcerting.

He watched them as they spoke – and continued to speak – back and forth, almost without pausing for breath. The cameraman shifted from foot to foot, watching and nearly twitching with the seemingly irrepressible urge to raise his camera and snap a shot. When he spared Draco a glance, the barest second away from Harry and his colleague, Draco glared at him so fiercely he flinched. A niggle of delight blossomed in Draco's chest for that cowing; it almost, almost left a mark on the frustrating impact of the questions the reporters erupted into.

"You're out of school at such an hour?" The Hair asked. She stared at Harry like he was a pot of gold. "Is this permissible? As a seventh year, liberties are understandably afforded, but Headmaster Dumbledore has been adamant that you remain behind the wards."

"What made you decide to return to Hogwarts, Mr Potter?" Smiley asked a second later. "After fighting and defeating the You-Know-Who, what drove you to resume your studies?"

"How did you defeat the You-Know-Who?"

"And showing such mercy! What urged you to spare him for imprisonment rather than execution?"
“When did you face him, exactly?”

“Where have you been?”

“What have you done?”

Faster and faster, the reporters gushed as though they had a crowd of contestants clamouring to be heard alongside them. As though every question might be their last and they needed to be answered now, right now, immediately. Draco didn't recognise them, didn't know who they interviewed for, who had directed them to be stationed at Hogsmeade, but it hardly mattered. The clatter of the Three Broomsticks' door opening released a torrent of renewed noise as more people – reporters? Diners? – stepped out. The noise of the two nattering their demands drew watchful eyes, and…

That wasn't good.

For Draco, he wouldn't have minded. It would have been annoying, but he wouldn't have cared. He was used to being stared at, both for good and bad reasons, and he knew how to drive irritating nobodys away. He knew what to say to tick them off, to stun them, to leave them reeling in surprise, because he'd had practice. Not so much with reporters themselves, though a number had plagued his house after the accusations against his parents' had arisen years ago, but with his classmates. With his housemates. With the professors that drilled him with their own questioning.

Harry, though. Surely Harry had been pelted with his own wealth of questions in the past. Surely he'd faced seas of reporters before, if not after defeating Voldemort then prior to that. Draco remembered the stories about him in the papers, just as he remembered sneering at those papers for those very stories.

But even with that knowledge, that Harry had most definitely been exposed to his fair share of nagging reporters in fourth year especially, Draco hadn't expected the resignation. Harry was a snarky asshole, that was for sure. Draco loved that about him, loved that their conversations were as stimulating as an absence of discussion and pursuit of more physical pleasures could be. He'd seen Harry bite and quip, muttering snide comments and dancing rings around professors and classmates alike.

He knew Harry could bite hard, too, and yet before the questioning reporters – and bloody hell, there looked to be more hastening in their direction, reporters or audience – Harry sagged. Not visibly, and without a weary sigh, but Draco felt it. And as he did, a flicker of… something welled within him.

Harry was strong, Draco knew. He could protect himself, and had already protected the rest of the Wizarding world. He was a little bitch, as spiteful as a spitting kitten at times, and he didn't need protection. He would likely have spat in Draco's face had Draco suggested he needed it with any sincerity.

But Harry was his. Draco had already decided that. He was his, and that meant that, even simply resigned and weary, when he was being hurt, Draco wouldn't stand for that. Not at all.

"– so many questions," The Hair was saying, sparing a glance over her shoulder for the approaching intruders. She turned back sharply and took a step forwards that put her in far too much proximity. "Can we perhaps organise an interview time, Mr Potter?"

"So many questions," Smiley agreed with a fervent nod.

"Will you be able to come out of Hogwarts wards again? Would the headmaster allow it?"
"Do you need an escort? Is that why Mr, ah… Mr Malfoy is accompanying you?"

_Not bloody likely_, Draco said. Then he snapped to attention, because three things happened in quick succession.

The Hair took another step forwards, and was suddenly far too close

Harry opened his mouth to speak with the beginnings of an actual resigned sigh.

And, down the road, a figure raised a hand to wave as they shouted, "Harry Potter! Bloody hell, it really is, isn't it?"

It wasn't going to end well. Draco knew that instinctively. They probably shouldn't have Apparated directly to Hogsmeade for that very reason, but they had, and now Draco was going to fix it. He was going to drag the attention back to where it _should_ be.

Reacting instinctively, Draco turned into Harry, raised his hand to grasp the back of Harry's head, and dragged him into a kiss.

There was no finesse. Too much tongue. A hell of a lot of spit, and teeth, and Harry's indrawn breath. It wasn't a particularly long kiss, either, and Draco was drawing away from Harry within seconds to hook an arm around his shoulders. He turned resolutely back to the reporters, raised an eyebrow at the sudden silence, the wide eyes, the open mouths.

"Actually, no," he said, loud and clear and resounding. "You can't ask questions. You are, rather rudely, interrupting our date. Now, fuck off."

Then Draco turned. He dropped his arm from Harry's shoulders. He grabbed his hand instead, took a striding step – and then leapt into sudden flight.

For a heartbeat, Harry seemed too surprised to be more than dragged in his wake. Then, with a bark of surprised laughter that drew an instant smile to Draco's lips, he picked up pace and fell into step alongside him.

And they ran.

Down the length of the central road in Hogsmeade, their shoes crunched on the cement, and they fled into the night. For another heartbeat, two beats, there was no sound of pursuit. Not response followed them. Until –

"Wait!"

"What the -? Was that -?"

"Mr Potter! Mr Malfoy! Are you both -?"

Draco didn't slow. He didn't glance over his shoulder through the night stretching behind them. He didn't spare a glance behind them, even when the sounds of steps not his own, not Harry’s, abruptly sounded in fast pursuit. Cries snapped into the night air, but Draco didn't spare a moment for them.

Because they were running. It was liberating, thrilling, felt _good_. Even better because Harry was laughing.

Quite suddenly, matching Draco step for step, he'd tipped his head back and loosed a peal of laughter that wasn't surprised at all. When Draco glanced briefly towards him, it was to see his
bright eyes – so bright, magic glowing within them – already staring at him. "You're such a fucking idiot," he all but shouted, his voice lost in their wake within seconds.

Draco grinned back. He wasn't a runner, didn't like running, but it was worth it. Worth it to escape the reporters and the attention, and worth it to hear Harry laugh. His hand squeezed Harry's as they fled. "It'll give them something more interesting to talk about than Voldemort," he managed before he lost his breath.

Harry laughed again. "There is that! But –" He glanced over his shoulder, and Draco couldn't help but awkwardly do the same. The reporters were definitely running. Some of them might even have been gaining; that cameraman had an impressive stride on him.

"I got this!" Harry announced.

Draco didn't know what he meant by that. He didn't get the chance to ask either, because a second later, Harry was twisting in step, throwing up his free hand, and Draco felt his magic.

It swelled. It roiled. It thickened in the air, and Draco had never felt anything like it before. He stumbled in step, but it hardly mattered. He barely even noticed, because he was staring at Harry. Draco stared, and he felt the magic that smelled like warmth, sweat, and a hint of soap, that tasted sweet and thick, and sounded like a soft voice, a sharp voice, a huff of laughter. It was exactly like Harry.

And then it exploded around them.

Draco didn't know exactly what happened. He heard a surprised shout from the reporters that only a half-glance indicated was a rather spectacular and sudden collapse of their pursuers to the ground, falling as though a rug had been torn from beneath them. But then they were gone, and it wasn't because Harry Apparated them. It wasn't because Draco was blinded either.

Harry's hand tightened its grasp. It tightened, and pulled, and Draco's feet were swept out from beneath him. He was tugged, dragged, and the world blurred at a speed so great it stung his eyes. Everything moved, everything roiled, and then, in a rush of roaring wind in his ears, they suddenly jerked to a stop.

The world spun. It twisted. Draco staggered again – and then he straightened. Peering through the darkness around them, his eyebrows rose as he saw just what the hell had happened.

"Did you just…?" Draco trailed off, turning on the spot. He squinted into the nearly unperceivable blackness that surrounded them, drew his wand, and cast an absentminded Lumos. Then his eyebrows rose further and he swung his attention towards Harry. "How did you do that?"

Harry grinned. Standing on the side of the hill inside Hogwarts' grounds, a solid carriage ride from where they'd been moments before, he shrugged. "Magic."

"You didn't… Did you Apparate us?"

"Fuck no. Even I wouldn't be able to break through Hogwarts' wards to Apparate us. Do you have any idea how old they are?"

Draco shook his head slowly, though with more incredulity than denial. "How did you just…?"

Harry's grin widened. "I just moved really, really fast."

"You dragged me –?"
"And dragged you really, really fast."

Draco stared. He was detachedly aware that his mouth hung open, his eyes as wide as the reporters' had been when he'd kissed Harry, but he didn't care. He was just… he was… how had Harry…?

"What the hell kind of a spell does that?"

Harry's grin grew mischievous. His pale face seemed to glow in the darkness as he took a step towards Draco, tugging on his hand as he went. "It's not a spell," he said. "It's just magic."

"Just magic?"

"Just magic."

It was a non-answer, but Draco supposed it was probably as much of one that he was likely to get. Magic. Magic was what Harry did, and there was no explanation for it – or at least no reasonable explanation. Draco couldn't understand it, even if Harry tried to explain. He didn't… he couldn't…

_I want to know how to do that_, he thought, and there was a touch of wonder, of envy, and something distinctly longing that rose with the acknowledgement. _I want to know how._

The magic. The reality of that magic. And Harry. Draco wanted it all. After nearly two whole years of nonchalance, it was a strange feeling to want. To care.

Crossing the last of the distance between them, Draco wrapped himself around Harry once more. The warmth that pulsed of his skin felt like magic radiating itself. "Show me more," he said, leaning in to brush his lips against Harry's.

Harry huffed out a breath of laughter that curled between Draco's lips. It tasted like him, tasted like his magic. "Then I'll show you," he said simply.

"Marvellous," Draco murmured, touching their lips just briefly.

"You did that on purpose," Harry replied, humming against Draco's mouth.

"Did what?"

"With the reporters. Did you want to be in the papers that badly?"

Draco had almost forgotten about them. Who the fuck cared about the _reporters_? They were gone, tripped by Harry's magic and left in their dust. "I honestly don't give a shit about them," he said. "And it was true, anyway. We were on a date."

"Were we, now?" Harry said, his teeth flashing with a smile. "Good to know."

"And," Draco continued, "in the spirit of a date, I think we should end the night just the same." Another kiss, and Harry opened his mouth to Draco's tongue in delicious want. Draco didn't care that they stood out in the relative cold on a hillside below Hogwarts school. He didn't care that they might get into trouble for being out. Hell, the trouble was part of the appeal. He wanted Harry right then.

"Come to bed with me," he said.

Harry didn't reply. He only pulled away from Draco a little, smiled up at him slowly, and then grabbed Draco's hand once more. Without a word, Draco found himself dragged into a whirlwind of magical motion for the second time in barely minutes.
It was the perfect end to a date.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you to all of my beloved commenters! You don't know how much your kindness and support means. Bless each and every one of you, and each and every reader. You make writing and posting worth it!
"I feel like I'm here too often of late."

"You're telling me that? This is only your second time in – what, a few weeks?"

"Exactly. Too often."

Harry rolled his eyes. He couldn't help himself; Draco often – or almost always – induced such a response from him. Just as he always drew a smile to Harry's lips seemingly without even trying.

Turning away from Draco, Harry drew his attention to the room at large. He wondered if the headmaster ever changed his decor. He wondered if he ever got bored of the order of metallic, floating, and sparking implements on the shelves, or if after a few years a fanciful change would find Fawkes' perch abruptly on the other side of the room.

It certainly hadn't changed that Harry had witnessed. Or noticed. Probably noticed, given how oblivious his younger self had been most of the time. Why had he been so oblivious? Hindsight was such a wonderful thing, given that with his more aware self, he could observe the past –

"Are you doing it again?"

- and realise that he noticed so very little. Like that Snape was simply an overgrown bully rather than an all-powerful professor that needed to be navigated with caution. Or that Draco had been attractive even when he was even more of a prat then he was now. Or that Dumbledore was a creepy fucker who smiled far too much.

"You are, aren't you? You're doing it again. How you can just drop out mid conversation…"

Even at that moment, Dumbledore smiled at Harry from across the room. Only at Harry, though he'd spared a glance for Draco when they'd entered following McGonagall's direction. Harry had expected it, though he'd still been a little surprised when McGonagall had shown up in the kitchen doorway with an expression confusingly but firmly planted between exasperation and resignation.

"Mr Potter," she said. "Mr Malfoy. You will follow me. The headmaster wishes to speak to you."
Harry shared a glance with Draco before turning back to McGonagall. "I wasn't aware the school knew we spent our mornings here."

"There is very little the school doesn't know, Potter," McGonagall replied.

"I bet she just found out herself," Draco muttered, though loud enough that every person in the room would likely have been able to hear him.

"No bet. It's pretty obvious."

"You're no fun."

McGonagall sighed. Her resignation seemed to be growing, just as it had all term. The olive green of her magic seemed somehow wan. Thinner. A little subdued, perhaps. "Potter. Malfoy. Now."

"Can she do that?" Draco said, picking at his teeth with a nail. "We're technically adults now."

"But also technically still pupils," Harry replied.

"Bullshit. When was the last time you did any work?"

"When was the last time you did work?"

"Irrelevant. I'm a natural genius, I don't need to –"

"Now."

Harry didn't often abide by orders, and especially when they were given so demanding. Still, he only delayed further to bypass the sink – and avoid the house elves and their snatching hands that begged to grab his plate from him – to wash up before following McGonagall from the room.

His old Head of House didn't remain for the meeting. Or the scolding, or whatever it was to be. She paused before the gargoyle and only gestured them ahead of her. "Professor Dumbledore is waiting for you," she said, then took a step backwards.

Draco grasped Harry's hand. It wasn't a desperate or concerned gesture, nor nervous, because Harry doubted that Draco truly got nervous about anything anymore besides house elves. But they'd barely released their handhold all morning. Not since the previous night. Not since…

Something's changed, Harry thought, just as he'd been thinking all morning. He didn't know what it was, and didn't truly care to label it, but he knew. Something – something potentially wonderful and more than a little confusing – was different. Draco still prodded him with jibes and teases, sarcasm flowing from his tongue as easily as breath. They still took their breakfast in the kitchens every morning, and still unanimously and silently agreed that they would disregard the manic need to study that appeared to have gripped the seventh years around them. But it had changed.

Like that Draco held Harry's hand and seemed nothing if not disinclined to let go.

Like that Harry had woken to find himself wrapped around and similarly wrapped in Draco's embrace, a leg slung over his own, and felt nothing if not entirely comfortable to be in such constricting confines. And he'd liked it.

Or that Draco looked at him differently somehow. That his smile was just a little different. That when Harry had unconsciously charmed his hair dry – his magic had a thing about damp hair that he'd never understood – he'd spoken almost to himself when he'd said, "You know, I'd really like to
try to understand your magic, I think. It's… fascinating.

Those words, likely said in passing and as more of an idle curiosity than with any real weight, meant more to Harry than anything. Draco wanted to know him. He wanted to understand his magic. Few enough people had wanted to know anything of him that it was special to Harry.

He was used to being alone, but when Draco said that, he couldn't quite remember what loneliness felt like. When Draco said –

"Do you see what I have to deal with all the time? I should be awarded a medal."

- things like that, it felt warm. Comfortable. Better than comfortable, even, because Harry felt no inclination to leave it at all. Ever.

In the middle of Dumbledore's office, Harry turned to Draco and smiled. Draco was full of hot air and complaints, did what he wanted and said just the same, and Harry loved him for it. He didn't know if he was in love – what did that even feel like? – but he knew he loved parts of Draco. Like how he loved treacle tart. Or his old Firebolt. No, that wasn't right. It was more than that. It was like how he'd loved Hermione and Ron, how he'd loved Sirius so abruptly, until betrayal, time, and distance had dwindled it to something more.

But no, that wasn't right, either. It was more than that. Harry didn't know how he knew that, but he did. And it felt… just a little bit perfect.

Draco couldn't have known Harry's thoughts. He wasn't a Leglimens, and even if he had an inkling of the skill, Harry had faith that his magic's overprotectiveness would repel any intrusion. His magic was like that. Still, Draco's questioning, slightly irate stare faded into something softer as Harry stared at him. He smiled a little, and only seemed to smother the urge with a struggle as he turned back to Dumbledore.

"Do you see what I have to deal with on a daily basis?" he asked

For himself, far be it from growing vexed for their delay, Dumbledore seemed to be quietly enjoying himself. What a weirdo. He was still smiling at Harry when Harry glanced back towards him, a hand stroking absently at his beard and leaving trails of rosy pink magic with each grazing caress. A twinkle of brighter magic sparkled upon his lips with his smile and in his eyes as he met Harry's.

"I can," Dumbledore said, nodding slightly at Draco's words. "How fascinating. I've always loved people-watching."

"People-watching?" Draco asked. "Well, that sounds intrusive."

Dumbledore chuckled. "It is a most amusing pastime, I can assure you."

"You listen to other people's conversations and watch them like a stalker?"

Dumbledore didn't seem concerned in the least by Draco's words. If anything, his smile brightened. He really was a strange one. "Quite. Or similarly."

Draco shook his head. "You're a disturbing old man. How you managed to make it to being appointed the headmaster of a school of children is a mystery to me."

"Draco," Harry said warningly, because Dumbledore finally shifted his gaze towards him. His magic didn't change in its pulsing intensity, but for all Harry knew, he was almost as in tune with
his magic as Harry was with his own. "Be nice to the old man. He could have you kicked out of the school."

"Oh, because that would be the worst thing in the world," Draco said, snorting.

"Maybe it would be, because I have to stay." Harry raised a pointed eyebrow, even as the words 'why? Why do you have to stay again?' niggled in his head. "Are you going to go off and leave me because you can't show some respect to a crazy senior? For shame, Draco."

Even if his words were spoken teasingly, when Draco turned towards Harry, there was a hint of seriousness that shadowed his expression. He frowned slightly, lips pursing, then raised their linked hands to kiss the back of Harry's knuckles as he'd developed the habit of doing. "That would be a tragedy indeed," he murmured. Then, slumping back in his seat and stretching his legs out before him, Draco turned his attention back to Dumbledore. "Alright, then. Shall we get this over with?"

Dumbledore stared at him for a moment. Then he glanced to Harry. Then back to Draco again. "Fascinating," he said. "How truly astounding."

"Please don't," Harry said before he could help himself. "You're making me feel like a statue on display."

"What, because you're so statuesque?" Draco said. The return of his smirk bespoke the departure of solemnity. "You're, what, five foot seven?"

"You're focusing on the wrong part of my statement," Harry said. "It's the objectification I have a problem with."

"I objectify you all the time."

"Do you? Prat. I hate you, and I'm never talking to you again."

"Like hell. You can't escape that easily." Draco arched an eyebrow. "Besides, I have questions."

"Questions?" Dumbledore asked.

"I don't like it when you where that face," Harry said, ignoring Dumbledore just as Draco did. He liked it even less when Draco's silvery magic – it was always silver nowadays – pulsed a little brighter. "It's disconcerting."

Draco only smiled. "Your tattoo," he said deliberately

"Oh, bollocks." Harry sighed. "I should have known you'd latch onto something so trivial."

"Where is it? Why haven't I see it?"

"Maybe you're just not looking hard enough?"

Draco snorted again. "You're the unobservant one out of the two of us."

"Actually, I'm not. My obliviousness is deliberate and carefully invoked at chosen intervals."

For a moment, Draco stared at him. His mouth opened slightly and his eyebrows rose. "I knew it," he said after a long pause. "I fucking knew you did that on purpose."

Harry grinned.
And Dumbledore watched. Like a bit of a creeper – how had Harry not noticed that as a kid? – he watched them both with a benign little smile of his own playing across his lips. Then he seemed to shake himself from his thoughts and straightened just slightly. "Well, this has been an enlightening introduction to our meeting."

"Because of Harry's propensity for scarring his body?" Draco said.

"Because you've realised Draco's as much of an idiot as the rest of the school already knew?" Harry retaliated.

"Hey."

"You started it."

Dumbledore still smiled. He even chuckled slightly. "Very enlightening," he murmured, before raising his voice to continue. "But while I would be more than happy to allow you to continue your exchange indefinitely, I must insist that we get to the matter at hand."

"Reprimand?" Draco asked. "Punishment for yesterday, is it? Kinky."

"Shut up, Draco," Harry said, swallowing a grin and deliberately ignoring when Draco turned to stare at him. He blinked at Dumbledore innocently. "What are you referring to, Professor?"

"Mr Malfoy is right in that regard, at least," Dumbledore said, and for a moment Harry's brain short-circuited as the word 'kinky' rose to the fore. It vanished a moment later, however, as Dumbledore continued. "As headmaster of Hogwarts, issues that arise involving multiple students from multiple houses are to be taken up with myself or Professor McGonagall rather than the Head of House. Professor McGonagall considered that I might be the more appropriate choice for this discussion given that I am more... detached from class behavioural situations."

"Is she scared of us?" Draco asked curiously.

Harry rolled his eyes. "She wouldn't be scared of you. You're a marshmallow."

"I am not."

"You cry at the thought of kittens in the rain."

"Of course I do." Draco sniffed. "Anyone who doesn't is heartless."

Dumbledore only chuckled again. "Fascinating," he repeated, and Harry noticed that Draco frowned almost in synchrony with himself. "I feel it best that we jump to the meat of the matter, yes? The situation that arose yesterday?"

"What situation?" Harry asked.

"With Snape?" Draco said.

"Real subtle, Draco. Why don't you just confess to everything while you're at it. Traitor."

"Everything?" Draco leered like an idiot, and Harry almost smiled again.

"With Professor Snape," Dumbledore confirmed, ignoring the rest of their exchange. "Now, I am aware that seventh year students are to be afforded greater liberties. You are adults in your own right and thus being treated as children is both condescending and undermining."
Harry blinked. He could never quite decide if he liked Dumbledore or not. The old man was strangely perceptive and not as much of an asshole as the ministry and every other commanding adult seemed to be. Apart from his disconcerting attentiveness that morning, he'd almost seemed amiable. It threw Harry off.

And Draco too, it seemed, for he only frowned and stared at Dumbledore without reply. That in itself was a wonder; Draco Malfoy rendered speechless was a sight to behold.

"That being said," Dumbledore continued, "you are still students of Hogwarts, and minimal respect must be strived for between students and pupils. Harry, I recall our discussion earlier in the year, and I understand your reluctance for class participation. I can only speculate that Mr Malfoy's own commitment has waned in recent months."

"You could say that," Draco said a little faintly.

"Nevertheless, such is not an excuse for disrespectful behaviour. If it is not too much trouble, my dear young men, reigning in the questionable behaviour for these remaining weeks of your schooling career would be most appreciated. Do you think it would be possible?"

Harry stared. Draco stared. And within another five minutes, they'd left Dumbledore's office with barely a further word uttered between the three of them. The grinding sound of stone on stone as the stairwell closed behind them was only noted on the edges of Harry's awareness.

"That was… unexpected," Draco said as they turned towards on another in the corridor.

"He's an odd one," Harry agreed.

"That wasn't even really a scolding."

"No, it wasn't."

"Were we scolded?"

"I think… gently chided might be a better description?" Harry said, more in askance than as clarification.

Draco shook his head. "Weird. I blame this on you, you know."

Harry snorted. "And just what am I taking the blame for now?"

Draco grinned. Squeezing Harry's hand, he tugged them into motion and they began their striding way from the likely magically watching griffin that would similarly likely translate any overheard words up to the headmaster. "Everything," Draco said, his voice echoing off the walls with his satisfaction. "For warping the professors. And disrupting classes. And setting a precedent for future wayward students to disregard school rules."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Is that a problem?" he asked. "I thought you didn't like the rules anyway."

"By and large, I don't," Draco replied. "And it's not a problem. Call it respect."

"Respect?"

"Indeed. I respect you and the changes you've wrought."

Harry shook his head slowly. "The day Draco Malfoy admitted he holds respect for anything…"
what a wonder."

Surprisingly, Draco didn't rebut him. He only grinned widely, his smile so bright it was almost blindingly white, and kissed the back of Harry's knuckles once more. Harry could only follow with a touch of disbelief as Draco all but hummed in merriment, leading him down the corridor to wherever took his fancy.

They'd escaped a punishment that Harry hadn't truly been worried about but was surprised for nonetheless. They'd uncovered a side to Dumbledore – a remarkably tolerant and slightly disconcerting side – that Harry hadn't anticipated. There was no scolding for nearly giving Snape an aneurism. There was no ordering for better behaviour, or chiding for the fact that neither of them had really been studying at all for weeks. No demands that they remove their piercings, or start wearing their school robes, or acting as seventh year role models should.

And Draco respected him. The world truly had become a strange place – and Harry thought he quite liked what it had become.

Seventh Year students are to be reminded that two weeks remain before the final examination period begins. From this point onwards, students will be engaged in self-directed study with the accessible support of professors. Use your time wisely.

Deputy Headmistress McGonagall.

Studying. That was the intention. It was the life of most NEWT students in their final year, and it should have been Draco's and Harry's, too.

As such, the library was a sanctuary of sorts for those very students. It was vast enough that, should a harried seventh year need to seek the solace only isolation could provide, they would most certainly find it if they searched deeply enough. Between the dust. And the cobwebs. And the shadows that made seeing without a Luminos Charm all but impossible.

In the final weeks – the final days – before their exams, when classes faded into independent study and students rarely attended when the need for professor intervention wasn't required, the library was dotted with students.

Studying. Mostly studying. Or pursuing… other activities to ease the mind of stress. Like Truth of Dare.

Draco liked the library, and not so much for the books it contained. They were precious to him once upon a time, when he'd wanted to study as fiercely as he could – to rise to the top of the class, to beat one particular Muggleborn girl who was so annoying. He had a wealth of memories of the towering columns and dark nooks. It was those shadowed corners that demanded he learn the Luminos Charm as efficiently as he did.

Now he made new memories. Memories that didn't require a Luminos Charm and, rather, were better without. Memories that rode on the suggestion of a particular Dare:

"Do something that would give Pince a heart attack if she ever saw it."

Draco posed the Dare to Harry, so Harry fucked him against a wall.

There was dust in places that dust shouldn't be, slipping into cracks and beneath folds of skin, but Draco didn't care. He likely had cobwebs in his hair that even the most dutiful of house elves
couldn’t vanquish, but he didn’t care about that, either. More than a few books had fallen to the floor, torn by scrambling hands grasping for purchase, but that didn’t matter. Draco was entirely lost in the moment. Who would have thought sex in an old, dusty library would have been such a turn-on?

Draco could feel Harry’s gasps on the back of his neck as he pounded him. He felt the grasp of Harry's fingers on his hips, the solid weight of his thrusting, and with each thrust, a volt of pleasure thrummed all the way down to his toes.

Draco usually topped. He liked topping, and liked it even more when he was with Harry. But the fact that Harry had unerringly precise aim in finding his sweet spot… it made the whole temporary change entirely worthwhile. He must have been using some kind of magic. Had Draco the presence of mind, he might have even called Harry out on it for using it with hypocritical redundancy.

Except it wasn't redundant. Draco thought it might just be the best use of magic he'd ever encountered.

It hurt a little. That was the part that Draco didn't liked – or hadn't. Maybe he just hadn't been doing it right, because despite hurting just a bit, that it felt so damned good certainly made up for the fact. He certainly wasn't about to take a pause, nor tell Harry to stop.

The slap of skin on skin sounded overloud in their secluded nook. The coupled groans, the little moans and pants that Harry uttered, muffled against Draco's shoulder and hitching with every thrust, seemed to drag Draco closer and closer towards fulfilment. Jerked at his arousal rapidly with his own, the duel points of pleasure tipping him closer. Each spasm that thrummed through him seemed to demand a more immediate response.

Fucking.

In a library.

Under the suggestion of a Dare.

Why hadn't Draco thought of it before?

His head was a thick flurry of colours and sparks when the heat in his groin built to an irrepressible degree. Leaning back into Harry, his thrusts into his hand stuttered haphazardly in synchrony with Harry's. "Harry, you – I'm gonna –"

"Fuck, don't talk about it," Harry gasped back. "You talk way too much."

"Fuck, don't talk about it," Harry gasped back. "You talk way too much."

Draco couldn't help but grin, even as his eyes closed to savour the taste that ignited every sense. It was maybe even a little manic, distracted, feverish for the blood pumping through him and pooling in his belly all but begging release. He felt Harry pull away, just a little, just briefly. A final thrust, a tense grasp on his hips, and Harry used his glorious magic.

Pleasure flooded through him along every limb, towards every extremity, and despite the shadows shrouding them, Draco saw white. It was breathtaking. It was, he considered, probably how Harry saw magic. Surely only something magical could finish with such overpowering completion.

Harry's gasps sounded through the thundering in Draco's ears as he road out his climax, and then his own groan as Harry thrust firmly into him once more, crying out as he found his own release. Draco couldn't repress his own groan, fingers tightening around his fading arousal to draw out the pleasure coursing through him.
It felt good. Impossibly good. Everything with Harry felt almost too good.

Sagging, Draco slumped against the wall before him. Heavy and sated, his trousers and pants were still shucked down, but Draco hardly cared. He didn't care that anyone could walk past – even Pince, who would certainly have a heart attack – and simply leant against the wall. Harry's slowing pants, breathed like a delicious summer wind upon his skin, caressed Draco's nape.

Twisting with only the slightest wobble, Draco wrapped himself around Harry in an attempt to touch all of him. He hurt just a little in the aftermath, stung, but it was negligible in the face of touching Harry. The sucking, almost desperate kiss could have been initiated by either of them; Draco wasn't sure whom. He didn't really care.

"Did I do it?" Harry murmured against his lips when they finally managed to resurface for air.

Draco drew away from him slightly. Through the darkness, blinking down at where Harry pressed against him in a discomfortingly sticky mess, he was sure he saw Harry's eyes glowing as lambently as they always did on the balcony. "Do what?"

Harry smiled, slow and wide, before pressing himself more firmly against Draco. His chin propped against Draco's shoulder, his murmured words tickling as a whisper in Draco's ear. "My Dare. Hm?"

Draco could only blink incomprehensively for a moment. In the aftermath of heady release, the throbbing in his groin oversensitive and achingly satisfied, he'd almost forgotten what Harry referred to.

Then he snorted before tugging Harry back into a kiss of wet lips and probably a little too much tongue. "Shut the fuck up," he somehow managed to say – or Draco thought that was what he said. It was a little difficult to interpret even his own words.

Not that it mattered. Draco felt good. He felt high. He was happy and content, satisfied as few other seventh year students surely did at that moment, and he couldn't give less of a fuck about his NEWTs. As Draco lost himself in Harry, hands grasping and stroking and touching every reachable portion of skin, he shrugged such thoughts aside.

The library was, he decided, one of his favourite places in Hogwarts. Funny, how that list seemed to have grown substantially over the past weeks. Very funny indeed.

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*Five schooling days remain before the exam period begins. Seventh year students are encouraged to make best use of their coming weekend to immerse themselves in their studies before initiating this final week. Should queries be needed of professors, please be aware that your support endures through this weekend.*

*Deputy Headmistress McGonagall*

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How McGonagall seemed to know when Harry and Draco weren't together was a mystery to Harry. It was a skilled interception, too, for over the past weeks, Harry had barely left Draco's side, and Draco was just as disinclined to leave his.

They had breakfast together. They drifted to the library together, or into the grounds, or spent hours up on the balcony. They lost themselves in one another in shadowed corners or empty classrooms or, on frequent occasion when Draco introduced Harry to it, the 'Come and Go Room' that had apparently become a school-wide site of covert operations in the past two years. Harry
hadn't heard of it before he'd left Hogwarts, but he was grateful for the discovery. It was a very convenient room.

On weekends, often both Saturdays and Sundays, they took the liberty of abusing seventh year rights to attend Hogsmeade by holidaying. Not to Hogsmeade, of course, but to Apparate to London, or to Cambridge, where Harry showed Draco where he'd stayed on multiple occasions, or to Birmingham where he'd stopped briefly, or Cardiff, where he'd met Les. That particular trip had been especially brief, and Harry had to forcibly remove Draco from the city to avoid the possibility of him tracking down Les and "just talking to him, I just want to talk".

And they slept together. Each night since their first 'date', Harry joined Draco in his bed in the Slytherin dormitory, and no one uttered a word about it. Not Blaise, who could have taken the opportunity, nor Theodore Nott, who seemed to ignore Harry's existence entirely. The situation suited Harry just fine.

That they were together so much didn't bother Harry. He liked it. It might have been new, and strange, and different to anything else he'd ever known. It might garner persistently wide-eyed stares from every other student, frowns from the people who had once been his friends, and worried glances from the professors, but Harry didn't care. He was with Draco, and that was exactly how he liked it.

That day, however, Draco had left Harry only briefly, and McGonagall found him. Draco had barely disappeared around the end of the corridor leading from the kitchen, a thrown, "I'll be right back," over his shoulder and practically running in his need for speed.

Harry only shrugged, even if Draco no longer looked to him to see it. He enjoyed Draco's company – loved it, even – but though it felt strange to have him no longer at his side, Harry wasn't that dependent. He'd always been a solitary person. It wasn't like such company was needed.

It wasn't.

Shoving his hands into his pockets, Harry started his wandering way down the corridor in the opposite direction. He wouldn't have minded had Draco suggested he come with him, but something about discussing finances via Floo with the Malfoy family lawyer didn't sound particularly fascinating. It was mildly interesting, though. Maybe. More interesting to discover that many Slytherins families similarly often held such formal meetings with their solicitors. It was a pureblood thing, apparently.

It was also a tedious process that Draco resented. That much Harry could see. It said something, given how utterly Draco detested such discussions and longed to remove himself from such family-related operations, that he'd spared Harry from accompanying him. Harry might have thought he would have asked for his company to relieve the boredom, but…

"It's fine," Draco had said. "I'll handle it. Quickly. You bugger off and do something interesting. It'll give me incentive to finish up quickly."

The way Draco said it was strangely touching. Not the 'bugger off' or the 'I'll handle it," but the unspoken words that accompanied it. The 'I'm not enjoying this, so I won't inflict it upon you either' that both of them heard but neither commented upon. So Harry agreed. He smiled slightly, nodded, and he watched Draco leave.

Which was how he found himself wandering through the school in the vague direction of the Clock Tower, strolling deliberately slowly for the possibility that Draco would finish up quickly and catch up to him, when McGonagall stumbled upon him. Or, more correctly, rounded a corner and
almost crashed into him.

"Potter," she said. It was little overloud, but wasn't startled. A single word that wasn't quite surprised, and Harry knew instantly what he'd walked into. The tightening swirls of her olive green magic that quickly dimmed from brightening in triumph was something of a giveaway.

Harry took a short step backwards. "Professor," he said with as much politeness as he could muster. Granted, it wasn't much, but he didn't dislike McGonagall. He certainly didn't hate her, nor even disapprove of her teaching methods like he did of Snape's. She was misguided, as many witches and wizards were in their understanding of magic, but she wasn't a bad person.

She was simply exasperated. And resigned, too; that much was apparent. That resigned exasperation had been a constant aura surrounding her whenever Harry caught her glancing his way. He didn't have to stretch his imagination to discern just why she felt as such.

"Were you looking for me?" he continued.

McGonagall blinked. She drew back slightly herself, as though wary, but then her lips thinned, the magic painting them deepening as she pressed them together, her expression and magic hardening. "As a matter of fact, Potter, I was. Have you a moment?"

"I have a moment," Harry said.

"Then perhaps you would accompany me to -?"

"But I don't really want to come to your office," Harry cut in. Making a stand, imposing some sense of entitlement, was a necessity when interacting with overwhelming authorities. He'd discovered that much over the years, whether it was with policemen, ministry Aurors and Inquisitors, professors, or the passing stranger who offered him a bed.

McGonagall's lips thinned further. Then, with that magical pulse of resignation that seemed to constantly well near the surface of late, she sighed and accepted defeat. "Very well, then. If I could discuss with you… here?"

Harry glanced briefly around them. A window stood to his right, peering out across the grounds blossoming with spring that drifted towards a mild summer, their splashes of colour like a roiling mass of glaringly bright rainbows. The corridor itself was empty, the deep brown of the castle's magic slugging past like a sludgy river, comfortably steady and sedate. Turning back to McGonagall, Harry shrugged; he didn't really care if they held whatever discussion she wished in the middle of the castle's open corridors. A nudge with his magic sent feelers in every direction that would pick up the moment a potential eavesdropper drew near.

McGonagall sighed quietly, as though she hadn't quite believed that Harry would 'allow' their conversation. Then she nodded and launched herself into an assault. "It has come to my attention that, since you have returned to Hogwarts, you have been somewhat neglectful of your studies."

Harry blinked. He felt an eyebrow inch its way upwards. "You're just realising that now?"

"I am not realising just now," McGonagall said with another sigh. "I simply bring it to attention now."

"Now? A week before exams start?"

If possible, McGonagall's lips thinned further. "I am well aware that my bringing this subject to your attention will make little difference -"
"Quite right."

"- but I feel it is my obligation as your professor and Head of House to so speak to you."

McGonagall continued over him without batting an eyelid. "You are still a student of Hogwarts, Potter, regardless of your detachment from your year cohort and the student body at large."

"My detachment?" Harry swallowed a grin. "I think you mean that I deliberately excluded myself."

"Excluded?"

"I think it's an appropriate turn-a-phrase."

McGonagall frowned. "Do you consider yourself a detriment to the student body, then? Or they to you?"

Harry shrugged, shoving his hands further into his jacket pockets. "I guess you could say that. We're hardly complimentary."

"But your friends –"

"Aren't really my friends anymore," Harry finished for her. "Two and a half years might not seem so long in theory, Professor, but it is. A lot's changed in that time."

"But…" McGonagall faltered briefly, and it was a strange sight. In Harry's memory, she'd always been strict to the point of bossy, was curt, blunt, and unyielding. It was odd to see her so disconcerted, but then…

*I tend to do that to people,* Harry thought, and it wasn't a bad feeling that arose alongside it. If anything, he felt a rather satisfied for the fact. *I guess I'm just constantly disregarding and disappointing people's expectations.*

"Nevertheless," McGonagall said, shaking herself from her thoughts before dragging their conversation back on track. Or back to wherever it had been headed, anyway; Harry wasn't entirely sure he knew where that was. "Your studies."

"What about them?"

"You won't pass your NEWTs at the rate you're going."

"And?"

McGonagall's frown lowered until the magic coating them all but melded into that flaring brightly in her eyes. "Potter, regardless of what you believe and what you've experienced over the past years, your education is important. The ministry wouldn't have enforced it if it wasn't."

Harry stared at her. He could only really stare. Regarding the woman that had once been his Head of House but wasn't any longer because he didn't really have a House, he fought the urge to roll his eyes, because the education system? *This* education system? It wasn't important, was skewed, was ultimately unhelpful and unnecessary to Harry even if he didn't know what he was going to make of himself in the coming years.

He bit back the urge to snort and shake his head because of course the ministry would have enforced it even if it wasn't necessary. It was all a power play to them, a means of confining Harry and plopping him back down on the train-tracks of their expectations rather than allowing him to build his own route.
Harry didn't tell McGonagall any of that, however, and not because he hadn't before. She wouldn't understand. She hadn't understood, not since he'd begun telling her such things weeks before. So instead, he only shrugged again. "Regardless of what the ministry wants, it doesn't matter. They sent me back to school, but they didn't say I had to pass anything."

McGonagall opened her mouth. Then she closed it. When she reattempted to speak, it was in something of a stutter. "You… you have no intention of committing yourself to anything, do you?"

Harry cocked his head. He frowned, thought for a moment, then pursed his lips. Committing himself to anything? Well, he certainly had no intention of doing so for school, but that didn't mean he wasn't resolved.

He'd committed himself to overcoming Voldemort to get him off his back, and that had worked.

He'd committed himself to leaving the Dursleys – and everyone else who'd abandoned him, shunned him, and shrugged aside his worries and fears as though they didn't matter – and that had been successful, too, despite the fact that Sirius still sent him an owl every other day.

And Harry had committed himself to disregarding the skewed schooling system in favour of sticking to what he knew, what he understood, what his magic had shown and taught him but what so few others seemed inclined to even attempt to understand.

McGonagall was wrong, simply because she didn't see just what Harry had committed himself to. Not that he would tell her that; it would likely entail as much explanation as that of the reality of magic would. McGonagall was a kind woman at heart, Harry suspected, but she was also narrow-minded when it came to thinking outside of the box.

So Harry replied simply. "No," he said. "I don't."

McGonagall sighed once more. It was a heavy sound, deep, and though it carried an edge of frustration to it, the resignation was paramount and nearly overwhelming. The olive glow of her magic dulled slightly, almost sadly. "I see," she said. "And there's nothing I could do to convince you otherwise?"

Harry shook his head. "No."

Another sigh. She was doing a lot of that. "That's a shame, Potter. It truly is. You would have been… you would have made a brilliant Auror, had you wished to pursue such a path. That was your intention in fourth year, was it not? Weasley and Granger had speculated as much."

For a moment, Harry was annoyed. Almost angry, even. It only lasted for a moment, however, before the feeling died. McGonagall was narrow-minded, and Ron and Hermione were stuck in the past. He couldn't really blame any of them for that, regardless of how vexing it was.

Instead of rebuking McGonagall for her presumption, Harry stepped around her and, with barely a sidelong glance, nodded. "Maybe. Once. But no longer. I couldn't think of anything I'd want to do less than chase Dark witches and wizards again. He shook his head as he passed his old professor and continued down the corridor. "Thanks anyway, Professor. No one can say you didn't try."

McGonagall didn't say another word to him, but Harry knew she continued to watch him, even when he turned a corner to continue on his way to the Clock Tower. There were some benefits to Seeing without really seeing. Magic was handy for that, and far less unidirectional.

Draco found him barely ten minutes later, idly swinging his legs off the edge of the balcony where he sat in his usual perch upon the balustrade. Harry didn't glance his way as he felt him enter their
hidden nook. "All done?" he asked.

Draco grunted as he stepped up to Harry's side and draped himself over the balustrade himself. "I think I'm going to have to murder my lawyer. He's a fool that can't read the context."

"Read the context?"

"He doesn't seem to understand that I don't give a shit."

"Ah."

For a moment, they sat in silence. Harry continued to swing his legs. Draco slumped even more heavily until his legs must have been doing next to nothing where they still stood upon the ground behind him. He looked comfortable, Harry noted, even if his magic did roil across his outline in a slightly darker shade of disgruntlement. That disgruntlement faded slightly when he turned a glance towards Harry.

"What happened with you?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"With you. What happened?"

Harry tipped his head, turning more fully towards him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," Draco said, propping himself up on his elbows slightly, "that you seem pissed off. So. What happened?"

Harry couldn't help himself. He smiled, and some of the weight he hadn't realised rested on his shoulders eased just a little. It made shrugged markedly easier. "Nothing in particular. And I'm not pissed off anymore. Just…"

"Just?"

"Just that I never, ever want to be an Auror."

Draco huffed a laugh. "An Auror? Like how the ministry wanted you to be?"

"Yeah."

Shaking his head, Draco edged a little closer to Harry so that, when he dropped his head, his brow rested on Harry's thigh. "What the fuck gave you a stupid idea like that? Honestly, an Auror? Why would you do that to yourself?"

"I know, right?" Harry said.

"Chasing Dark wizards and witches all day."

"Putting your life on the line on a regular basis by choice."

"Can you imagine all the paperwork? It would be ridiculous."

"And talking. To people. All the time."

"How ghastly," Draco said, and Harry felt his smile against his leg. "Don't do that."
"I don't plan to," Harry replied, and he didn't. Some things he bowed to for the ministry to get them off his back, but others? Certainly not. Harry didn't want to deal with that bullshit.

And why, he wondered silently, drawing his gaze out across the swirling scene of magically-draped grounds, should I have to? Why do I do anything they tell me to do?

He wondered that. He wondered and questioned just why the hell he was at Hogwarts at all. The only good thing that had really come of it was Draco, and…

I've already got him, right? I wonder what that means when Hogwarts is behind us? Harry wasn't sure, but that he dropped his hand absently to Draco's head and Draco didn't so much as twitch in objection – it felt like it meant something.

With only three days remaining until examinations begin, students are encouraged to engage in eight to ten hours of self-study a day for maximum benefit. While breaks are important to maintain stamina, dallying in distractions is not considered appropriate behaviour for a seventh year student. Please be aware of the importance of your NEWTs and seek assistance from your professors should such aid be necessary.

Deputy Headmistress McGonagall

"You know," Pansy said casually, "you're both disgusting."

Draco didn't glance her way. He rarely did when she was being a bitch. Harry didn't either, but he replied nonetheless. "Both of us? What am I doing that's disgusting, exactly?"

"Thank you for throwing me under the bus, Harry," Draco muttered distractedly.

"I think it's sweet," Blaise said, grinning around where he held his textbook barely a hand's breadth before his nose. Surely he couldn't read it like that, but he was making a feigned attempt.

Pansy grunted. "Yes, but you're weird. Keep your opinions to yourself, fag hag."

"Fag hag?" Draco could hear the widening of Blaise's grin even without glancing in his direction. "Can I even be a fag hag when I'm pretty much a fag myself?"

"Believe me, you can."

"Your sexuality is questionable, Blaise," Draco said absently. "Have you and Pansy fucked yet? I doubt it, given you're still at one another's throats."

"Says the one who spends as much time criticising his boyfriend as sucking face," Pansy drawled. "And doing… other things."

"Other things?" Once more, Draco could feel Blaise's leer radiating across the table. "Pray tell, Pansy, what would those other things be?"

"Other things like bloody painting each others toenails, for one."

Draco shot her a sidelong glare, but only for a moment. He had more important things to focus on – like painting Harry's toenails. When Harry unconsciously twitched a toe, he gave it a pointed flick. "Don't move or I'll smear it."

"Because that would be the absolute worst thing in the world," Harry said, not even bothering to
glance up from the magazine he was reading. Draco had found it fascinating when he'd first watched him read – Harry seemed to use his fingers and his magic rather than his actual eyes in a manner that Draco still didn't fully understand – but even if it was fascinating…

Painting toenails had become something of a fetish of Draco's. Like plaiting hair. Or applying eyeliner. It was a little piece of wonderful that Harry let him have at; Draco didn't like putting any of it on himself, but Harry wore it all like it was made for him.

"You know," Pansy began.

"Pansy, if you're going to criticise my colour choice again, I'll stab you in the eye," Draco said without affording her a glance.

"I'm just saying, Potter wears enough black without it drenching his toes as well."

"I thought we'd overcome the 'Potter' barrier," Harry said, shifting his feet slightly where they were propped on the edge of the desk before him. He completely ignored Draco's scowl. "And drenching? I hope you're not 'drenching', Draco."

"I have an artist's touch," Draco grumbled, dunking the brush once more. "Don't be so sceptical."

"Sorry. It's in my nature."

"I know, and I love you for it."

"Thank you. Much appreciated. And likewise."

"It concerns me how easily you can say you love him," Pansy said. "Most people wouldn't admit they loved Draco."

"You love me, too," Draco said.

Pansy sighed, flapping her quill. "I do. Unfortunately."

Draco smiled to himself. Here, in the library, surrounded by his friends and his lover, was about the best place he could think to ever be. True, the library could have been better spent engaged in other pursuits, but he would abide by the camaraderie and affable company rather than finding a conveniently dark corner. That could be reserved for later.

That Draco hadn't picked up a textbook to study in his many trips into the library over the past days was no longer noteworthy. Blaise had stopped questioning him like he vaguely cared, and Pansy's eyebrow had ceased its inquisitive twitches. Draco no longer needed to explain; he had agreed with his friends that he would survive the year, but that survival hadn't necessarily entailed studiousness.

After all, Draco found he didn't really care about that anymore. The more time he spent with Harry, the less inclined he became to committing any of the knowledge he'd supposedly gained from class to memory. It wasn't only because he found some pursuits in particular far more interesting and worthy of his time, too; rather, it was a little difficult to justify learning the bullshit spouted when Harry so vehemently denied its truth. That it was wrong, skewed, and twisted. That the professors knew practically nothing of magic, and what they did know was such a narrow-minded perspective that it was almost laughable.

Draco wasn't the only one swayed. He'd seen Blaise's dubiousness fade into thoughtful questioning, and Pansy's derisive comments on Harry's disregard shift towards curiosity. Even as
Draco continued to delicately paint Harry's toenails to the disregard of everything around him, she spoke up.

"Levitation Charms, then," she said after a pause for studious silence. Or at least Pansy had been studying; Draco suspected Blaise held his textbook as he did to nap behind it, and he and Harry didn't bother to feign their own academic attempts. "Potter. Levitation Charms."

"What about them?" Harry said, flicking the page of the magazine and dropping his finger back to the column once more.

"I'm revising the theory."

"Isn't that first-year work?"

Pansy clicked her tongue with a snap. "The practical is first-year. Theoretical is sixth."

"What bullshit…" Harry muttered beneath his breath, puffing an upward breath that fluttered his fringe. "Why would you separate them so far apart? It's illogical."

Draco happened to agree, but he didn't comment.

"Regardless," Pansy said, "you back-talked Flitwick in Charms about Self-Levitation, right?"

"I wouldn't say it was talking back," Harry said. "Call it constructive debate."

"Well, whatever you call it. Flitwick said it wouldn't work, but –"

"But Flitwick's ignorant, and it's an embarrassment to sit in his class," Harry overrode her. "It's a shame he's a nice bloke; it's harder to be annoyed at him for being a dolt like every other professor when he's actually a pretty decent person."

"You, calling a professor decent?" Blaise said from behind his textbook. There was definite sleepiness in his tone. "Will the wonders never cease?"

"Never," Harry said.

"Back on track, please," Pansy said, leaning across the table and snapping her fingers in front of Harry's eyes. Harry, naturally, didn't so much as blink, let alone glance in her direction. "How can they work?"

"Why do you want to know?" Harry asked, shifting his foot at Draco's unspoken request. "You'll get the answer wrong if you use it in the exam."

"Just for the hell of it, then," Pansy said. "Tell me."

"You're demanding."

"I am. Tell me, Potter."

Harry sighed heavily and finally raised his gaze from his magazine. It couldn't possibly have warranted as much attention as Harry was giving it; sure, the Muggle pop culture archives that Draco himself and Harry were picking through more and more often of late – for reasons; they had reasons – was a study in human behaviour, but it wasn't that interesting. Draco shook his head slightly as he swapped the black nail polish for silver and began detailing Harry's toes in tiny runes.
"The problem," Harry said, "is that all you people think that magic is yours, and comes from you. If it was, it would be essentially lifting yourself up, which is undeniably impossible."

"You people?" Pansy echoed. Her voice was so flat it sounded like it had been smoothed with sand paper.

Harry ignored her. "Magic is its own entity. If you ask someone else to pick you up, they're much more capable at doing it than you if you attempt it yourself."

"If they're strong enough," Blaise said, and a glance in his direction saw him peeking around the top of his textbook again.

"Magic is strong," Harry said simply. "And it's entirely its own person."

Pansy shook her head, less in denial and more thinly veiled confusion. "It always sounds so weird when you say shit like that."

"What? Anthropomorphising magic?"

"Yes."

Harry shrugged, turning back to his magazine. "Get used to it. It's reality."

Pansy didn't reply to that, but Draco caught her staring at Harry from the corner of his eye. She looked nothing if not baffled, and Draco quite liked that fact. Baffling Pansy was one of his favourite pastimes.

Her attention was momentarily distracted, however, and Draco's alongside it, when Granger abruptly appeared at the distant end of the nearest aisle of towering bookshelves. She didn't say anything, was likely just passing through the library, but that she stopped and stared was enough. Draco likely wouldn't have noticed her otherwise, but the slight, sharp inhalation she gave drew his attention.

Granger blinked owlishly. Her brow was wrinkled, her lips pursed, and the grasp she had around the book tucked in her arms visibly tightened with each second she stood staring. At Harry, for that matter; not so much Draco, Pansy, or Blaise, but Harry. She stared, and there was regret in her eyes. Regret, some resentment, and more than a little longing.

Fucking get over it, Draco couldn't help but think, eyes narrowing into a glare that Granger didn't even notice. He's not coming back to you and Weasley. He wasn't coming back even before he came to me.

As though hearing Draco's words, Harry spoke without looking up from the magazine he'd returned to. "Hermione, please don't stare. It's disconcerting, and I don't like it. If you wanted to join us, pull up a chair."

"Ew," Pansy said.

"That's the day," Blaise muttered.

Harry ignored them both, too, flicking another page. "I'll make sure Pansy won't kill you, so if you can get over your prejudice for purebloods and Slytherins and forgive that Draco was a pain in the arse bully as a kid, sit down. Otherwise, bugger off, please."

Draco smiled up at Harry. "You thought I was a pain in the arse?"
"Still are," Harry said.

"How sweet," Blaise snickered. "Please, don't let us hold you back if you want to –"

"Blaise, get you mind out of the bloody gutter for once," Pansy snapped.

Granger watched them. Draco registered it detachedly that she was still there, twitching slightly, and that she maybe even took a step towards them. Only a single step, however. Then she tucked her chin, shook her head, and disappeared around the corner of the aisle.

"Was it something I said?" Blaise asked.

"It's your very presence," Draco said, curling another silver rune on Harry's toenail. "You repel people."

"Good to know. I've always wondered…"

"What's up with that, anyway?" Pansy asked. She waved a quill in Harry's face that Harry – once more – deliberately ignored. Or maybe it wasn't deliberate; he still zoned out sometimes, which was funny to watch when it wasn't happening to Draco himself. "Have you fully broken up with Granger and Weasley, then?"

"Broken up would suggest that they were ever back together," Draco said, dunking his brush in its bottle and shooting Pansy a frown. "Harry's been more mine than Granger or Weasley's since they fucked him over three bloody years ago."

"Possessive bitch," Harry murmured.

"I am, and don't you forget it."

Harry flicked him a glance and a raised eyebrow before turning his attention towards Pansy. "If you mean are we friends anymore?" He shrugged. "I don't know. I don't think we ever became 'friends' again, really. I don't care much, to be honest. Besides, their mutual goal seems to have drawn them back together from whatever tiff they got themselves into years ago, so it's not like they need me."

"The mutual goal being you?" Blaise asked.

Harry shrugged again. "I guess. I really don't care anymore, though. Let them do them; I'm quite happy where I am right now."

Draco couldn't withhold the slow smile that spread across his lips. That was definite. The Granger-Weasley debacle was finally fading. The godfather situation was all but abandoned, too, almost before it had arisen, and Draco was equally happy for that fact. It just meant he had more of Harry to himself, something that he was growing to covet increasingly.

_He's mine_, Draco thought, and then, surprisingly, _and I'm his. And I quite like that exclusivity, for that matter._

"You know, Potter," Pansy said, a thoughtful ring in her tone. "I think I really do quite like you."

"Enough to call me Harry?" Harry asked.

Pansy snorted. "Keep dreaming, you fool. Merlin, what do you take me for?"

"Figures."
Draco grinned, shaking his head as he touched up another of Harry's toenails. It might not be as good as fucking in the dusty corners of a library, but spending the afternoon deliberately not studying with the three people he actually liked in the world? There were few things that beat that.

To all seventh year students: good luck on your exams tomorrow. Your dedication to your studies these past weeks has been most commendable. We, your professors, have every confidence in your abilities. You should be immensely proud of yourselves.

Deputy Headmistress McGonagall

Most of the dormitory was asleep.

That wasn't saying much given that, besides Draco, only Blaise and Theodore Nott still slept in the room. Theodore was an early sleeper, had always been, according to Draco, and for once, Blaise was following his lead. It was only to be expected, really; for most seventh years, the following days would be the most important of their lives to date.

Not for Harry, however. And, if his understanding of him held any truth, not for Draco either.

"Pop quiz," Harry said as he rolled onto his side, settling more comfortably on his pillow. It wasn't Draco's anymore but his; weeks of it being so had made that a fact.

Draco, lying at his back and staring at the curtained roof of the four-poster bed, grunted. "Really?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, were you otherwise occupied? I figured given that you'd stopped speaking for a whole half a minute that you were open to suggestions.

Harry felt more than saw Draco's gaze draw towards him sidelong. Just as he felt more than saw the beginnings of a smile touch his lips. "It's eleven o'clock at night."

"It is," Harry said.

"Most people are sleeping now."

"I know. But not you."

"I could be tired, you know."

Harry snorted, tucking an arm under his pillow. "You're not tired."

Draco turned his head to face him. "Am I not?"

"You've done jack-shit all day."

"You're a fine one to talk, you hypocrite."

"I'm not denying I'm a lazy sod who's all but forgotten how to hold a quill," Harry said, "and I'm not trying to claim tiredness for doing nothing but procrastinating, either."

"It's not procrastinating if you never intended to do the work in the first place," Draco replied with a wolfish grin. Then he rolled onto his side, too, similarly tucking an arm beneath his pillow. "Alright, then. If I participate in your quiz, what does it get me?"

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Is that even really a question?"
If possible, Draco's smile widened further. The silvery glow of his teeth breathed his delight. "I suppose not."

He was right, of course. There was no need to ask, especially given that their 'pop quizzes' were far from being a new thing, and had all but replaced their games of Truth or Dare in the past weeks. The 'reward' at the end wasn't any secret either. Harry certainly didn't need to specify.

"Hit me, then," Draco said, and his smile grew challenging. "The best you've got."

"You've got to get all five of the questions right," Harry reminded him.

"Please. What do you take me for?"

"Have you been studying?"

"I don't need to study. Knowledge of this calibre naturally sticks in my head."

Harry rolled his eyes, reaching a hand to poke Draco in the forehead. Draco only smirked, accepting the prod, and caught Harry's hand as he lowered it. Their fingers laced, and Harry couldn't bring himself to draw his hand away. The sap, rose as a thought on the edges of his awareness, and he wasn't even sure which one of them he unconsciously referred to.

"Okay, then, smartass," he said. "Who died at the end of August last year? It was famous, all over the Muggle news. A national icon, so you should know this."

Draco arched an eyebrow. Once, he'd complained about familiarising himself Muggle news and pop culture. Once – until Harry had informed him that the world was so much bigger than simply what was confined to witches and wizards, and that he personally would be stepping out of that shortly, most likely to never look back.

"You're really going to leave?" Draco had asked, seemingly more for clarification than in surprised inquiry.

"That's the plan," Harry had replied. "Makes sense to be up to date with the Muggle world, doesn't it?"

Draco hadn't said anything after that. He hadn't confirmed or denied the usefulness of Harry's actions, nor otherwise commented on them. But he did start reading the papers Harry ordered, and the magazines, and the books into Muggle history that were the closest thing he came to studying anything at all.

The fact of the matter was that Draco was right. This kind of knowledge was his area of expertise; as Pansy's closest friend and confidant, he'd often claimed he'd learnt his share of gossip-mongering skills simply from being in her vicinity.

The truth of that supposition was evidenced when Draco replied to Harry's first question immediately. "You just go straight for the balls, didn't you? Princess Diana's still a sore spot to most Muggles, Harry. She likely still will be for years to come."

"I don't believe in beating around the bush," Harry replied, otherwise leaving Draco's answer to his question unremarked upon. "What's the point in skirting around grief? It just festers and boils and becomes ugly."

Draco grunted again. Once, that might have worried Harry – or if he'd cared for Draco when it could have been worrying it might have. But Draco had moved past his own grief, however
confusing it might be. He no longer turned towards the past and those who'd been taken from him with resentment, grief, or misery. Forward facing: that was how Harry and Draco both progressed.

"Next one," Draco said prompts him, tugging on their linked hands.

"Hm," Harry hummed thoughtfully.

"Why're you thinking of something? When you start a pop quiz, you should already have the questions in mind."

"Shut up."

"I'm just saying."

"Well, stop." Harry grinned a moment later and Draco's expression became wary. "Alright, then. Where does the quote, "Oh my god, they killed Kenny," come from?"

Harry spread his questions across topics. Muggle news was one thing; cartoons and television shows were something else entirely. Harry, growing up with Dudley as a constant annoyance, was himself more attuned to such things. He had such questions in the bag.

Draco's brow furrowed and he pursed his lips. "This is from a TV show or something, isn't it?"

"I'm not telling," Harry replied.

"That's unfair. You know I've only ever watched television when we go out to the city or something."

Harry shrugged, an awkward motion for how he lay. "It's not my fault that you'll only accept going to hotels on the weekends."

"Technically we're only allowed to on the weekends," Draco pointed out.

"Oh, and you've always done what you're told so well?"

"I'm adhering to specific rules that suit me. Like fulfilling my academic term to actually graduate, even if I can't be fucked to study."

Harry laughed. That much, at least, was the truth. He didn't continue the line of thought, however, and raised their clasped hands to rap on Draco's forehead again. "You're stalling, Draco."

Draco clicked his tongue. His brow furrowed more deeply, then smoothed slightly. "Wait, this is that cartoon one, isn't it?"

Harry raised an eyebrow but otherwise remained quiet.

"That new one, right?"

No reply.

"The one with – wait, it's that one that's basically just pieces of cut out paper and voice-overs, isn't it? What's it called?"

"It's brilliant, and you know it," Harry said. "Trey Parker and Matt Stone are my idols."

Naturally, such an admission immediately flicked the switch in Draco's mind. He clicked his
fingers at Harry triumphantly. "South Park. Kenny's the one that always dies."


Draco rolled his eyes, but he was still smiling. Shuffling slightly closer to Harry, he huffed out a small laugh. "Next."

"Okay…"

"An easy one?" Draco suggested.

"Easy? Why would I make it easy?"

"I nearly got that last one wrong."

"You did not," Harry said, confident in his opinion as Draco never admitted to almost getting something wrong when he actually nearly erred. "But alright, how about this. To what do you reply when I ask: Where to, Miss?"

"Oh, come on, that's too easy," Draco drawled.

"You asked for it."

"We literally saw Titanic just last week."

"Then it should be easy for you. Stop skirting the issue."

Draco pursed his lips, opened his mouth, then paused for a second. Harry waited expectantly, nothing if not enjoying the memory of their most recent cinematic experience. They always saw more than one movie whenever they went, and he'd never get tired of Draco's barely concealed wonder as he watched. Draco similarly made a point of remembering almost every word of dialogue in each film, making his reply moments later only expected.

"I would say: 'To the stars'," he said.

"But of course, my dear," Harry replied teasingly.

Draco, close as he was, didn't have to lean far to stretch forwards and press a kiss upon Harry's lips. "Next," he murmured into Harry's mouth.

"Hm," Harry hummed again, breathing in Draco's scent – so close, so warm – before replying. "Who's Dolly?"

Draco blinked. Then he narrowed his gaze, even as the bright silver of the magic in his eyes flared slightly brighter. "I take it you're not speaking of the singer?"

Harry chuckled. "No. A more interesting Dolly."

"There is no more interesting Dolly than Dolly Parton."

"I beg to differ."

"You're wrong."

"A difference of opinions."
"Yes, and your opinion is wrong."

Harry pecked a quick kiss of his own. "And you're stalling. Again."

"No," Draco drew out, long and petulantly. "I'm thinking." And he thought. Harry could almost see those very thoughts ticking through his mind, tugging the corner of his lips slightly downwards. "Can I get a time period?"

"Last year," Harry said.

"Last year what?"

"You didn't specify the exact 'what'."

Draco sighed a little long-sufferingly, though any exasperation he might have felt vanished when he grazed his free hand through Harry's hair. "Well, then, take this as me specifying."

Harry grinned. "She was born last February."

"Oh," Draco said. He blinked again. Then understanding dawned. "Oh. You mean that Dolly? The sheep?"

"The one and only," Harry said. "She's a queen in her own right. A genetic miracle."

"You're exaggerating. She's not that remarkable. I certainly trump her in terms of impressiveness."

"Are you seriously getting in a huff over a cloned sheep?" Harry tsked. "For shame, Draco. How juvenile of you."

"Shut up."

"I'm truly saddened."

"Be quite, you mouthy bitch."

"That my boyfriend would even think such a thing –"

"Alright, get over yourself," Draco said, sliding across the minimal distance between them to all but press himself against Harry. "I'm done with this game now. Finish your questioning."

Harry smiled languidly. He could drag it out. He could tease Draco because he really did find it fun – and he could urge him towards vexation that was only dampened because of how much he knew Draco liked him. Really liked him, for that matter. Enough that they'd spent the past weeks – months, even – almost permanently in one another's company.

But Harry wasn't that cruel. Besides, having Draco so close always did things to him. He wasn't exactly a slave to pleasure, but he was more than used to accepting and fulfilling the needs of his body. Even more so when Draco was so ready to provide a helping hand.

"Alright, then," he said. "Last one. I'm a bitch, I'm a lover, I'm a child, I'm a mother. I'm a sinner, I'm a saint –"

"Really?" Draco interrupted him. "You're really going there?"

Harry grinned wider and continued in a sing-song lilt. "I'm you're hell, I'm your dream. I'm nothing in between. You know you wouldn't want me any other way."

He paused, tipped his head into the
pillow slightly. "Right?"

Draco stared at him for a second. A long second, and then it was over in a flash. In a sudden roll, Harry found himself on his back. Draco leant over him, nudging his legs apart to drape himself in between so that they were chest to chest, groin to groin. Harry instinctively wrapped his legs around him.

Draco stared down at him, a small smile playing on his lips. It was an intense smile, the likes of which Harry had only seen in recent weeks. A new smile, as if something had changed. As if something was different.

*Which it is*, Harry thought to himself, and for the life of him wouldn't be able to pinpoint just which part was the *most* different. Not that it mattered. He liked that difference, and that was all that mattered.

"Meredith Brooks is an artist of the music world," Draco said by way of answer to Harry's unspoken question. "You made an apt choice of song. It offers an accurate description."

"Are you calling me a bitch again?" Harry asked, raising a hand to curl around the back of Draco's head.

"Yes," Draco said.

"And a sinner? A saint?"

"Probably a bit of both, yes."

"Your hell and your dreams…" Harry murmured, raising his other hand to Draco's head. It was only a song, only a *Muggle* song, but it really did felt ridiculously accurate. "She's got it spot on, hasn't she?"

Draco didn't reply, but Harry didn't need him to. In the dark silence of the dormitory, he dropped heavily onto Harry, trapping all of the warmth between them, and Harry lost himself in his mouth, his hands, the rocking of his hips that quickly descended into more than that.

For most people, the night before their finals exams began was wrought with stress, nail-biting and worrying until they eventually fell to sleep. Not for Harry and Draco, however, and Harry thought that his own preparations were certainly a more enjoyable kind. *Far* more.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thanks for reading, and I hope you enjoyed it! If you've a second, I'd love to hear from you. Please let me know your thoughts on the chapter and/or story with a comment, and thank you so, so much to those who have done so already.

See you next time!
There was no alarm that woke the seventh year students – or at least none besides the personal charms affixed to their wands. No thrumming enchantment pervaded every seniors' mind as an alert on that day, the most important day of a student's life, the penultimate morning of their academic career.

And yet somehow, each woke with disturbing synchrony.

Draco groaned as he swam from his own sleep. It was dark in the dormitory, the depths of the dungeons not yet disturbed by artificial light, and yet he woke. Face scrunching, he squeezed his eyes tightly shut before blinking them open.

The deep green of his curtains. The dark wood of the frame. The plush pillow beneath his cheek that he'd long ago disregarded any embarrassment for drooling all over. Blaise still attempted to tease him on occasion, but those occasions were usually when he'd forgotten that Draco didn't give a shit about what he said.

Draco wasn't thinking about drool, however. Far from it, in fact, for when his blurred gaze cleared and focused, it settled upon Harry at his side. That sight was certainly worth being distracted by.

What existed between Draco and Harry was alive. It was fiery and constantly in motion, was a leap between banter one moment and passion the next. The Truths and Dares that had faded to joking tests and 'pop quizzes' were always interlaced with jibes, and it was enjoyable. For Draco, it was fun in a way that he'd never experienced before; not with Pansy or Blaise, and certainly not with Crabbe and Goyle before them.

Harry was fun. And warm. And bright, and smirking, or laughing, or rolling his eyes and rebuffing Draco's words with the kind of sarcastic, snide remarks that Draco thrived upon. And he loved it.

But at that moment, as he watched Harry to the background murmur of Blaise and Theo's barely discernible awakening, it was different.

Harry wasn't glowing. He wasn't pulling a face or throwing a verbal blow. He wasn't poking Draco's face as he was want to do, or deliberately ignoring him as he pretended – was it pretend? – to on frequent occasion when he 'zoned out'. Draco was still being ignored, but it was a little hard not to be when Harry was asleep.

He looked soft. Younger than he did when he was awake. Non-confrontational, which was remarkable given that it was Harry. Draco stared at him as he often did when they slept together and he happened to wake up first – which was a rare enough occasion. He stared at the flop of his fringe not quite covering his face, his pale cheeks, his hand curled on the pillow just in front of his chin. Draco's eyes traced along the spider's web of scars around his eyes that both infuriated and fascinated him, and wasn't surprised when the urge to touch them arose and overwhelmed him.

They were… curious. A little enchanting. And they always would be, even with what they stood for.

Draco was trailing his fingers along a thin line of them, curling just beneath an eyebrow, when Harry shifted in his sleep. He sighed, drew a deep breath, and grumbled something unintelligible
before peeling his eyes open. The usual glow of them, the familiar, ethereal green that Draco attributed to his magical Sight, seemed almost luminescent in the darkness of his confined four-poster.

When Harry drew his gaze to meet Draco's, it was to immediately smile. Draco loved that. He loved that he was the first thing Harry saw when he woke in the morning, and that simply by seeing him, Harry would smile.

"Hey," he murmured, his voice still hoarse from sleep.

"Hey," Harry replied just as quietly. "Have you just been lying there watching me?"

"Pretty much."

"For how long?"

"All night," Draco lied.

Harry huffed a sleepy little laugh. "Creeper. You should be sleeping at night like a normal person."

"I've never claimed to be normal."

"Oh, I know."

"And besides, there's no reason I have to sleep." Draco shifted, edging across the distance between them until they were nearly pressed against one another, chest to chest. The mingled morning breath wasn't particularly pleasant, but Draco withstood it out of necessity. Some things were worth it, after all. "It's not like I have any intention of actually passing my exams."

Far from smirking and teasing as Draco almost expected, Harry's smile died slightly. He stared at Draco with a solemn expression for a moment before seemingly absently biting his lip.

"What?" Draco asked, dropping his hand from Harry's face to his fist where it still curled on his pillow. He'd never really understood the interest some people had in hand holding until it was Harry's hand he held.

"Just thinking," Harry said.

"That's dangerous. Should I put up blast shield? Are we expecting a nuclear explosion from the energy required to –?"

"Shut up," Harry said, smiling, but his words were only quiet. It could have been from sleepiness, but for some reason, Draco didn't think it was. Even less so Harry sighed a little, twisting his hand in Draco's to lace their fingers. "You don't?"

"Don't what?" Draco asked, absently raising their locked hands to his lips to kiss the back of Harry's knuckles. He liked that it always caused Harry to smile; that reason would be good enough to do so if none other existed.

"You don't intend to pass your exams?" Harry clarified.

Draco met his eyes. He frowned. "I'm pretty sure we've already concluded that neither of us are actually going to be able to pass, right?"

"Right," Harry said slowly.
"So you're asking... why?"

"Just clarifying," Harry said with a slight shrug.

"Clarifying?"

"Just thinking."

"Again, dangerous."

Draco spoke less teasingly this time, however. For whatever reason, despite his persisting smile, Harry was oddly thoughtful. Though Draco might tease him that he was otherwise, he knew Harry was smart. Very smart, even, and not just because he was magically strong, or more in tune with that magic than likely most people in the world would even consider possible. When Harry grew thoughtful, it was worth attending to those thoughts. That much, at least, Draco had learnt in his seventh year.

"What about?" he prompted.

Harry shrugged a shoulder. "The usual."

"Meaning?"

"Pondering what the fuck we're doing." Harry sighed, less sleepily and more pensively. His smile faded into the beginnings of a frown as his gaze fell to their joined hands. "Honestly, Draco, what the fuck are we doing?"

"Well," Draco said, lips brushing the back of Harry's hand once more, "we're following societal expectations by completing school."

"And?"

"And sitting narrow-minded and pedantic exams that essentially prove nothing."

"And?"

"And ticking a box." For a moment, Draco paused. Then he quoted as he, Pansy and Blaise had countless times in the first months of their seventh year, before Harry had even been a possibility. "We're going to finish the year, avoid the unnecessary, and survive to escape out the other side."

"The other side," Harry echoed. The contemplation in his tone was almost concerning. "What then?"

"Then?"

"On the other side. What then?"

Draco shifted to prop an arm under his head. Where Harry's sudden change of heart had come from, the seriousness that demanded they discuss this right now, he didn't know. But that hardly mattered; Harry got like that sometimes. Retrospective. Thoughtful. Detached as he zoned out and his mind wandered to where Draco couldn't quite reach. Draco didn't like it when that happened, but he'd resigned himself to such occurrences. It didn't seem like something that Harry was likely to change.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "You're being awfully solemn for a day that should be celebratory."
"Celebratory?" A ghost of a smile crossed Harry's lips. "I think most of the seventh year would beg to differ, what with all the exam nerves and such."


With another sigh, Harry propped himself onto his own elbow. "I mean," Harry said, "what happens after?"

"After the exams?"

"Yes, genius. I'm glad you're capable of making connections in basic thought processing."

Draco ignored the jab, and mostly because his mind was turned decidedly elsewhere. "What do you mean after? What happens with what?"

"With us," Harry said simply.

Draco stared. He hadn't really thought about an 'after' and an 'us', and not because it didn't matter. He'd considered his family name and family fortune – both significantly stained by the war to the point where he was contemplating discarding them both entirely – and about how both would hound him. He had lawyers and businessmen that he should be dealing with but had no intention of pursuing to so deal. He had families to make connections with to ground the Malfoy name and his own prestige in pureblood society that was growing less and less appealing with each passing day to the point that it seemed entirely pointless.

There were things to consider, and the least of them Draco's exams. Even less, however, was what would become of himself and Harry, because… there really was no two routes. Draco had decided that long ago.

"Isn't it obvious?" he asked.

Harry blinked. "Huh?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "You sound like a mindless oaf when you do that, you know." Then he sighed himself as Harry only regarded him expectantly with his glowing gaze. "Isn't it obvious what's going to happen between us?"

"Not to me," Harry said. "You've never mentioned your intentions."

"Because it doesn't need mentioning. I'm going with you."

Harry seemed to still. Not that he'd been particularly in motion anyway, but he seemed to still further with something like rigid tension. "Huh?"

"Again with the –"

"You're coming with me?"

Draco stared at him again. For a long, long moment, he only stared, the sounds of the distant murmurs from his housemates just outside the curtains the only interruption to their silence. "Of course," he finally said. "I'm following wherever you go. Surely you knew that."

Harry's eyes widened slightly. Draco had never noticed how large his eyes really were before that year; it was with regret that he'd missed the fact years ago. "Really?" he said, incredulity pitching his tone.
"Surely you knew that."

"You're really going to -?"

"Harry," Draco interrupted him. "I haven't done anything in years because nothing is worth my time. Surely you understand that when I actually do find something worthy, I'm not going to let it go. Hm?"

It was Harry's turn to stare then. He stared, eyes widening further. And then he smiled. It was slow and wide, and though it didn't bubble with mirth, Draco didn't think he'd seen anything brighter in his life. When he leaned across the distance between them to press their lips together, Draco met his kiss, morning breath and all.

"Brilliant," he murmured.

Draco happened to agree.

"This… changes things."

Draco didn't agree to that part, but he didn't question Harry's contemplation.

They rolled out of bed after that, because they had to. Because it was the fifteenth of May, the first day of NEWT exams, and even if Draco knew next to nothing of the course content, he was still a Hogwarts student. It was still a necessity of sorts, thought Draco was questioning that necessity more and more often of late.

They took their breakfast down in the kitchen as always, leaving Blaise and Pansy to their own devices and touch of nervousness that wasn't quite effectively hidden. Draco glared at the house elves that drifted too close as he always did. Harry washed his bowel in the sink as usual, and then Draco spent an excessively long time weaving two-dozen braids into his hair, because he always did. It had become routine after what felt like so long.

And when the bell sounded for nine o'clock that morning, they made their way to the Entrance Hall. Because it was requested. Expected. Because they were still students of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, despite Harry not picking up his wand in months and Draco using his textbooks more as missiles for passing first years than reading material.

In the wide, echoing space, seventh year students mingled in a dance or welling and roiling anxiety. Blaise stood to the side with Pansy, both wearing expressions of aloof boredom that Draco saw through to the underlying agitation beneath. Longbottom looked about ready to hurl, and the feeble attempts of comfort from a wan-faced Hannah Abbott didn't seem to be helping him any. Theodore Nott appeared to be cramming final facts into his mind alongside the Ravenclaws, and most of those Ravenclaws were similarly engaged.

Granger and Weasley stood side by side as they often did of late, Weasley with cheeks nervously flushed and Granger seemingly talking to herself.

Daphne was feigning calm from across the room but the idly plucking of her cuffs bespoke chaos beneath her cool exterior.

Everywhere Draco looked, he could feel – see, smell, taste – the fear on the air. These exams – they meant a lot to the young men and women before him. He almost felt guilty that he felt none himself. Almost.

"They're practically shitting themselves," Harry murmured at his side as they descended the last of
"Pretty sure Longbottom already has," Draco replied.

"Yeah, I think he has an anxiety problem. He should probably see someone for that. It's been pretty debilitating for as long as I've known him."

Draco only grunted. Leaning against Harry, his arm slung around his shoulders, he felt nothing but calm. The thought of the test, what was to come, what it meant when he inevitably failed – surely there was something wrong with him that he felt nothing. Even Harry appeared to be in the throes of contemplation from his pervasive quietness that morning. Since they'd woken, he'd spoken surprisingly little but to utter a typical retort to Draco's wordplay that barely held a shine on their usual exchanges.

Was he worried? Surely not. Harry hadn't shown any interest in studying, in pleasing their professors, in doing what he was told and succeeding, in weeks. Months. No, years, more correctly. Even since he'd left the shithole that had been his home with the Muggles. As such, though Draco knew that something was there, he couldn't quite pinpoint what it was.

They didn't discuss it. They didn't have the time to for, with a creak of looming doors, the Great Hall opened briefly to admit a short, plump woman with yellow robes and a surprisingly kindly face for the examiner that she undoubtedly was. Draco didn't recognise her, which wasn't particularly surprising; he made a point of not recognising people that held no importance to him.

"Good morning, NEWT students," the woman said, her voice echoing easily through the Entrance Hall without the aid of an Amplifying Charm. She smiled across at the sea of gathered students, all wearing expressions of variable discomfort and paleness. Draco thought some even appeared to be trembling.

"Honestly, how is this a realistic method of education and assessment? he thought to himself. I'm happy I'm not caught up in this bullshit. It's utterly insane.

"I hope I find you all well this morning," the witch continued, smiling benignly. "Welcome to your first NEWT examination for Charms class. I encourage you to not be nervous –"

"Unlikely," Draco thought with a snort.

"- and to attempt to focus not upon the outcome but the process."

"What a load of trollop. From the slight shake of Harry's head at his side, Draco knew he wasn't alone in his thoughts. The rippling, awkward shifting of classmates around him as they were clearly not reassured indicated such further.

But the witch only continued to smile. "When you enter through the doors into the hall, there will be no speaking permitted. Students will bypass Examiner Holt just to the left of the door to undergo a wand-check and analysis for unregulated items." Persisting smiling with undue merriment. "The exam will endure for two and a half hours of theoretical assessment, after which a one hour break will be followed by your practical assessment. Should you have any inquiries, myself, Examiner Holt, and Examiners Brookstead and Merrywell are only a raised hand away."

More shifting quivered through the masses. Draco shook his own head this time; it was so ridiculously grounded in formalities. So stupid.

"If you will form two orderly lines, we can begin immediately," the witch said. With a sweep of her hand, she gestured the seventh years into motion.
They followed her direction. Like sheep herded by a Shepherding Charm, they scurried into place obediently. Draco made to follow, but Harry's immobility at his side drew him to a stop. He glanced at him sidelong, but Harry only shook his head slightly once more. He didn't look at Draco but seemed to be lost momentarily in his thoughts. A frown crinkled his brow, the kind of frown that meant something, so Draco waited.

He waited as the witch urged the first of the seventh years through the doors. He waited as the murmurs silenced and the sound of footsteps echoed from the Great Hall beyond. He waited until the last of those students tucked themselves away and the witch turned towards where he and Harry still stood the length of the Entrance Hall away.

"Mr Potter?" she called, because of course she knew his name. "Mr Malfoy?" she added, which was less expected but still unremarkable.

Draco turned towards Harry himself where he still frowned, his bottom lip caught between his teeth. "Harry?" he asked. "Are we going to -?"

"Fuck this."

It was a mutter, but the words surely must have reached the witch for the suspended silence around them. Her eyebrows rose slightly. "Mr Potter? Is there something -?"

"Fuck this," Harry repeated, shaking his head with increasing vigour. He glanced at Draco. "You know what? Fuck it all. Why the hell are we even doing this?"

Draco shrugged. "Because we're supposed to? Because we're essentially underage wizards and all, and –"

"Except that we're not," Harry said, speaking over him a little more loudly. "We're both seventeen, so what's the fucking problem?"

"Well," Draco said slowly, "as far as I'm aware, the Ministry all but forced you to return to Hogwarts, didn't they? To be honest, I'd just as happily leave if you weren't still here."

The truth of that fact was only then made apparent to Draco. Because he would leave. Even with what he shared with Pansy and Blaise, their commitment, their friendship, he'd leave if Harry left. That much was certain. He was growing increasingly aware of the fact that he would follow Harry pretty much anywhere. There were few things that Draco cared about, but one of them – one, and the most important one – was Harry. Examinations and the education system weren't even on the same plane of consideration.

"Really?" Harry said.

"Mr Potter," the examiner repeated, taking a step towards them. "Mr Malfoy, I really must insist that you –"

"You're really only sticking around because I'm here?" Harry continued over her.

Draco sighed. "Isn't that obvious? Especially after what I told you this morning. Honestly, Harry, are you addled?"

Harry stared up at him. Then he smiled. It was the same smile he'd given Draco earlier that morning but wider, and it was glorious. "For a while, I didn't know what to… I didn't think I should…” He trailed off, then sharply shook his head. "You know what? Let's say fuck it. Fuck this."
"What?"

"Mr Potter –"

"Fuck it all," Harry said. "What can the Ministry do, anyway? Why am I only just thinking this now. After being on my own for two and a half years, I'm only deciding this now?"

Draco similarly ignored the examiner as she started slowly across the Entrance Hall towards them in long strides. He didn't even know what she was saying, was only vaguely aware that she was continuing to say something. His attention was solely reserved for Harry.

"What are you suggesting?" he asked.

Harry's smile widened impossibly further. "You'll be with me, right? You'll stick with me?" He didn't even wait for Draco's immediate reply before continuing. "Let's get out of here. Hell, if the Ministry have a problem with it, we'll just leave Britain."

"Leave Britain?"

"Unless you have a problem with that?"

Draco thought. He thought very quickly, because there was really no need for thought at all. He shrugged, draping his arm around Harry's shoulders. "Sure. Why not? Where did you have in mind?"

"Well," Harry said, smile becoming a smirk. "I have wanted to visit Greece for some time now."

Draco grinned.

Across the room, the examiner hastened towards them with increasing speed. She spoke, but Draco didn't care. The doors to the Great Hall stood expectantly wide, but he didn't care about that, either. All Draco had the care for was Harry as he turned towards Draco and locked his arms around his waist. "Hold on, yeah?"

"What did you have in mind?" Draco asked.

"These wards around Hogwarts," Harry replied. "They're pretty old and pretty strong, but I think I've got it handled. If I ask nicely enough, you know?" Then, without further utterance, in a burst of impossible magic that Draco swore he could almost see – it was green, was bright, and it glowed – the world tore apart around him.

Hogwarts disappeared in a flash. Draco found he wasn't sorry to see it go.

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Tuesday, 19th May, 1998

THE BOY WHO LIVED DISAPPEARS…AGAIN?

Only recently has the Saviour of the Wizarding world resurfaced. Only months ago was his role in the defeat of He Who Must Not Be Named fully realised. In that time, Harry Potter has remained behind the wards of Hogwarts, hidden from consulting eyes and requests for interviews, to commit himself to his studies.

But no longer.

On Monday the 19th of May, NEWT examinations for seventh year students began. Harry Potter
was set to take his own alongside his beloved classmates for which he has already committed so much. 'An inspiration', sources claim. 'Mr Potter inspires his classmates with what he's done and his continued dedication to his studies.' The examinations should have started with a bang.

But Harry Potter disappeared. Again.

At present, members of the examination board and the Hogwarts staff have been close-lipped on the matter, but classmates step forward to offer their opinions and observations. "It's hard to tell with Harry," states Blaise Zabini. "He's always a little off with the fairies."

"From what I can gather, and from the obnoxiously loud crack in the Entrance Hall, he Apparated directly out of the school," Pansy Parkinson claims with a veiled attempt at hiding her concern. "How, no one knows, but then, he is Harry Potter."

Just where The Boy Who Lived has disappeared to – whether by intention or otherwise – remains unknown. Sources claim that he was last seen in the company of Draco Malfoy, though the nature of Potter and Malfoy's relationship remains uncertain. The real concern lies in Harry Potter's whereabouts: what possible cause could have driven him to take flight at such a pivotal moment of his education?

Members of the Ministry that have been accessed for interview have stated that...

"They have no idea," Ron muttered to himself, shaking his head as he flopped the Daily Prophet onto the table before him. The picture of Harry – one from his fourth year, as the Prophet was want to use – stared back at him. It was an image so vastly different to the Harry he'd grown to understand was the real Harry, the Harry of now, that Ron was slightly disconcerted. "They spout all of this, but they really don't know anything."

At his side, Hermione sighed. He glanced her way, as he often did, with a touch of disbelief. It still left him a little bemused that they were now friends again. After Harry had left the first time, they'd grown apart; Hermione had thrown herself into her studies while Ron had third-wheeled his brothers in their development of joke shop products. Or was it fourth-wheeled? Lee Jordan was probably a bit of a tag-along, too. The thought made Ron feel just a little better about his situation.

But Hermione… Ron hadn't realised how much he'd missed her over the years. They'd barely shared a word in their seventh year until Harry had reappeared. What was it about Harry that had changed them? Ron didn't know. He doubted he ever would.

Because Harry was gone. Again. Ron didn't know where, and he didn't think he ever would. Over the past weeks, he'd slowly and reluctantly resigned himself to the fact that Harry was different. That he'd changed. He would still be Ron's friend forever – Ron would make sure of that – but he was different.

It was probably because of his time away from school. His time alone. Or because of the Death Eaters. Or because of the fight with Voldemort that had surely, surely been brutal, and fierce, and left him on death's door, though Harry had never claimed as much. Ron never asked. It hadn't seemed right to.

Or it could have been because of Malfoy. Bloody hell, he hated Malfoy so much it almost hurt at times. At the end of the day, Malfoy was the one who'd taken Harry away from Ron. He'd taken Ron's place. They were, as far as Ron could discern, fucking one another, and he'd –

Not that Ron had ever thought of Harry that way, but –
Well, it wasn't like Malfoy had taken his place exactly, but –

He didn't –

He couldn't –

It was all very confusing, and Harry wasn't around to ask about it anymore. Not that Ron had really spoken to him in weeks anyway, but... it would have been nice to know.

"I don't think I really understand this Harry," Hermione murmured from his side. She leant into Ron's shoulder to peer at the front page of the *Daily Prophet* that had somehow gotten wind that Harry had disappeared from school. How had they known? For that matter, how had Harry even done that? Ron had no idea.

"Yeah." He sighed. "He's different."

"Is he still even our friend anymore?"

Ron shook his head. "I have no bloody idea. Does he even want to be?"

Hermione shook her own. "No idea."

At that was that. There was no knowing. And mulling over the matter wouldn't help any. With reluctance, Ron followed Hermione's example as she turned back to studying her notes. They had their Transfiguration exam that day, after all. Some things were more important, even to Ron.

Sirius fiddled idly with the letter clasped in his hands. He'd been tweaking its corner for so long that it had become soft, the edges slightly frayed, yet he hardly noticed.

Instead, Sirius' attention was turned out the window of his bedroom to the spread of London beyond. He'd never cared for Grimmauld Place, but its upper stories did provide an extensive view.

Not that Sirius even saw it. He paid little attention to the setting sun, or the flutter of pigeons that marred the sky, or the smog puffing from a distant chimney that shouldn't have been puffing at all for the warmth of the evening. Sirius stared and he pondered.

He was still pondering when he heard soft footfalls on the landing outside his room. The door creaked, the old hinges that were never quite right even with gallons of oil and Squeaky-Clean Charms poured onto them protesting quietly. He knew it was Remus from the sigh that followed, even before he spoke.

"No word yet?" Remus asked.

Sirius shook his head slightly. "No."

"That's the fourth owl since he disappeared, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"It's just like the first time, after his fourth year."

Sirius gritted his teeth. That had been horrible. When Harry had disappeared for the first time… Hearing that he was gone, that he was missing, had been one of the worst moments of Sirius' life. He felt like a failure. Like he'd failed James and Lily in caring for their son. Like he'd failed as a godfather, because apparently he'd done *something* wrong. What had he done? Why had Harry
abandoned him? And why, just like this time, did the owls sent his way seem incapable of reaching him? It was as though they'd been deflected and returned.

Sirius refused to believe the obvious answer: that Harry didn't want to talk to him. Just as he'd refused to believe Harry when he'd said he didn't want anything to do with him anymore, that he didn't want anymore letters sent, that he was fine by himself and to 'please leave him alone'. Sirius didn't believe it. Harry was clearly just confused.

It was probably the Malfoy brat's fault. Fucking Malfoys. They'd always been bad eggs.

So Sirius waited. He waited just as he'd waited years before, because he wasn't allowed to search. Because he was still under scrutiny from the ministry, but even if he wasn't, Dumbledore had sent him an owl the day Harry had disappeared and told him not to chase after him.

Sirius didn't like it. No, he hated it. But he did what Dumbledore told him to do. It had worked for them before, and loathe as Sirius was to follow such rigid orders, his childhood mischief-make worrying at the bit, he would do so. Dumbledore said it was for Harry's best, after all.

"Do you think he's…?"

As Remus trailed off, Sirius finally glanced over his shoulder. He scowled at the slightly guilty cast to Remus' tired face as he rested his head gently against the door frame. "No."

"Sirius, maybe he just –"

"No."

"Can you just consider that he might want to be on his own? Please?"

Sirius glared. He couldn't help himself, because to do anything other would be to admit defeat. Defeat and acceptance, just as Remus had done, because Remus thought this was what Harry wanted rather than knowing better. Why wouldn't Harry want to see them? After years apart, surely he would want to resume contact with his father's best friends.

Sirius wouldn't have it. He wouldn't believe it. So instead, he returned to staring out the window at pigeons and a darkening sunset, fiddling with a letter that wouldn't send, and waited. He would always wait. Hell, he'd done enough of it over the years. He was more than practiced at it by that point.

And tomorrow, Sirius would send another owl. Just like he always did.

"Albus."

Turning from the crystal ball before him – a gift from Sybil years ago, and one that she likely hadn't known the power of – Albus raised his gaze. His attention caught upon the figure standing just within the doorway to his office, shaking her head slowly.

"Minerva," he said, smiling. "I didn't hear you come in."

In a swish of bottle-green robes, Minerva crossed the room. She planted herself across the desk from him, hands curling around the back of the empty chair that stood before her. "Albus," she said slowly. "What are you doing?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean, my dear."
Her eyes rising briefly to the ceiling as though to question the heavens, Minerva sighed. She
gestured to the crystal ball. "Spying is a breach of privacy."

"It is indeed."

"It is, as I understand it, illegal to spy through scrying without the express permission of the
individual being observed."

"In most cases, you would be correct."

Minerva arched an eyebrow. "Most cases?"

Albus' smile widened. "I only do so in order to ensure his wellbeing, Minerva."

"You're spying –"

"He is still a prominent figure in our world, and as such, his location and circumstances should be
monitored."

"Albus, you can't just –"

"It is, one could say, my responsibility." Albus leant back slightly in his seat. The urge to chuckle
at the world-weary cast to Minerva's expression was almost irrepressible, but he somehow
contained himself. "Worry not, I understand boundaries."

"Do you?" Minerva said tiredly.

This time, Albus didn't bother withholding his chuckle. He leant into his desk, hands clasping on
the spread before him. "It is truly entertaining to observe, Minerva. Perhaps you would chance to
join me some time?"

Minerva's eyes narrowed. "I think not."

"Ah, but it is so fascinating. Why, to think, a Potter and a Malfoy… They were once such
opposites, you recall? And yet, to now fit together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle… Truly, only just
now I have seen –"

"As I understand it, Albus, the ministry only approved your keeping of the crystal ball for the
hunting of Dark Artefacts," Minerva said, cutting him off with a dry lash of her tongue. "Searching
for a certain Dark's Horcruxes I believe is a far better occupation of your time."

Albus chuckled again. *Such entertainment she gives me*, he thought, shaking his head. "All in good
time, Minerva. Now, from what I've just seen – truly, when considering what the papers know, I
wouldn't have guessed, but what I've seen just now..."

Minerva only sighed once more. Then she pulled out the chair before her with the motion of one
resigned to her fate and sat in wait as Albus spoke of his fascination.

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*Monday, June the 15th, 1998*

**THE QUESTION ENDURES: WHERE IS HE?**

*For a whole month, the whereabouts of Harry Potter have remained a mystery to the Wizarding
world. Disappearing from Hogwarts by what is now considered to be an impossible feat of magic
the likes previously unseen behind the school's wards, he and his accompaniment, Draco Malfoy,*
remain absent from the public’s scouring eye.

"No, he didn't tell us," states Ron Weasley, childhood and persisting friend of Harry Potter. "And I probably wouldn't tell you if he had."

"Harry didn't talk about himself all that much," adds Hermione Granger, similarly a friend. "I couldn't even speculate where he might be."

Ministry operatives and members of the Education Board that, sources claim, initially encouraged Potter to return to his schooling, are similarly baffled. That the only speculated sighting of Potter or Malfoy at all pertains to a seaside café just outside of Thessaloniki, Greece, raises more questions than it answers…

"Oh, bugger."

"What?"

"I knew it. You bloody twat, I knew we shouldn't have gone to Thessaloniki."

Draco lowered his iced tea onto the glass table at his side, flopping his book onto his chest as he seemed to recline only more completely onto his deck chair. He flicked his aviators a little further down his nose as he peered at Harry, squinting through the glaring sunlight, and arched his studded eyebrow. "What is it?"

Leaning across the arm of his own deck chair, Harry held the *Prophet* out for his inspection. Draco took it with a frown. "You still get this sent to you?"

Harry shrugged, then remembered he was pretending to be pissed off and scowled. "It keeps me up to date."

"With what?"

"With tails. I meant what I said last week, Draco. I don't like being followed."

"Understandably," Draco said absently as he scanned the page. "Being hounded by Death Eaters for more than two years of your life can do that to a person, as I understand it."

Harry pursed his lips, but his disgruntlement couldn't endure for long. It was impossible, what with Draco sitting beside him and all but glowing with his magic. The entire town of Omos seemed to glow, for that matter, even without a high population of witches and wizards, but not quite so vibrantly as Draco did. He seemed even more so since he'd started embracing his magic properly.

That fact left Harry more than a little satisfied, even as a passing consideration. They'd withdrawn to Mykonos only in the past three days, and their seaside stay was nothing short of extravagantly luxurious, from the warmth just bordering on hot to the pristinely cool pools that they'd spent most of their stay enjoying. Harry didn't particularly want it to end, even knowing it would. They had a schedule, after all; their next stop would be Draco's pick, but after that, Harry had every intention of taking them somewhere further afield. Maybe to America? That was pretty far away, and he'd never been before.

"Well," Draco said, breaking into his thoughts. He did so more through the nudge of his toe against Harry's leg than his words, as he often did; apparently touch was the fastest way to shake Harry out of his 'zone', or so Draco had discovered. "It's clear they know next to nothing."
Harry propped an elbow onto the arm of his chair. "I still don't think we should have gone."

"Your opinion was noted. The coffee was worth it."

"You don't even drink coffee."

"Yes, but you do. And you said it was worth it."

Harry sighed. "And I'm currently regretting my words."

Draco flashed him a grin that sparkled dazzlingly silver. Whether it was the heat of the Grecian summer or the constant beaming sunlight of the region, Harry didn't know, but he truly did appear brighter. He held out a hand and beckoned towards Harry. "Don't be such a worrywart."

"What are you, seventy?" Harry asked, climbing to his feet and padding over the distance between them. "Who says worrywart anymore?"

Draco didn't reply as he tugged Harry into his lap. Harry settled himself comfortable, straddling Draco legs. One thing that he didn't regret about their travels was dipping into their combined savings to afford them the privacy and luxuries that only money could buy. Draco 'knew a bloke' who had a disturbing knack for accessing their funds without being traced. The man was invaluable, in Harry's opinion.

"Does it actually worry you?" Draco asked, grazing his fingers through Harry's fringe. They were cool, as they'd been ever since they'd first encountered the southern heat. It was a product of his proper use of magic, Harry knew. He not-so-secretly approved of the fact. "What exactly will they do?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. I just want them to go away and leave me alone."

"And me. I was in the papers too."

"Briefly. You were an afterthought."

"I'm never an afterthought."

Harry smirked. "But of course, Your Majesty. How could I forget? You always deserve front and centre seating."

"Too right," Draco said, grinning back at him. Latching onto the back of Harry's head, he tugged him down towards him to all but swallow him in a kiss. Then he turned his head, kissing behind his ear and tracing the tattooed letters as he'd done so often since he'd found it.

"What does 'Abracadabra' mean?" he'd asked weeks before. "Is that a slap in the face of the Killing Curse?"

Harry had only snorted, shaking his head at Wizarding ignorance. "Sure. If you'd like."

"How morbid," Draco had replied, stroking the letters. "I love it."

And now it was A Thing. Whatever that meant. Harry found he quite liked it.

Though the Prophet still rested between them where Draco had propped it against his chest, Harry's appalling fourth-year photograph staring up at him, Harry ignored it. He lost himself for a time in Draco's mouth, leaning against him, into him, and closing his eyes to the glow of magic that flared brighter with each passing moment. When they finally drew apart, it was to Draco's murmur
against his lips. "Does it really bother you?"

"Surprisingly," Harry muttered back. "Probably more than it should."

"Then we'll go away," Draco said. "Far away. Where they won't be able to find us."

Harry smiled. He pressed his lips briefly against Draco's before meeting his gaze once more. "Where'd you have in mind?"

"I'm thinking… America's pretty far, right? Or perhaps Canada?"

Harry's smile widened. "You read my mind," he said, before drawing Draco into another kiss of the kind that quickly made the best use of their privacy.

It didn't truly matter where they went, so long as it was away. So long as it was just them. Maybe one day Harry would feel inclined to return to Britain; he'd come to quite like Blaise, and Pansy was a glorious bitch in her own right. But not yet. Not quite yet.

Right now, Harry was making the most of his freedom. No more ties. No more nagging ex-acquaintances. No more Dark Lords, or Horcruxes, or nagging ministry. He was free, and so long as he was with Draco, there wasn't truly anything more he could possibly want. Harry had considered for a long time that it would only take one particularly forceful nudge to push him off his teetering brink towards finally spit the Ministry of Magic in the face, give them the bird, and leave for good. Just one more nudge. He just hadn't imagined that such a nudge would be a happy one, and in the a peculiar form as a Malfoy.

And now, there was no turning back. It was finally done. Gone. Over.

*Serves you all bloody right. It's your turn. Take care of yourselves for a change. For better or worse, that was surely what the Wizarding world would do without him.*

Chapter End Notes

A/N: This is the end! Is it a bit sudden? Maybe. Possibly. But it felt like a pretty natural close, so I hope you liked it, my dear readers. Thank you so, so much for taking a chance with this story. And thank you especially to all of the wonderful commenters! I've loved each and every moment of it, and your words, regardless of how little or extensive, have been the best thing ever! Happy future reading, and thank you for sharing this story with me!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!